

Len Smith

.....THE INNOVATOR

By WG (Bill) WHITTAKER

Len Smith gained immortality in Australian harness racing when he decided the sport required a rich, feature sprint that would prove our pacers possessed world class speed.

He was confident we had the right horses; all he needed was a generous sponsor and, importantly, an original name.

Thus was born the Miracle Mile, an event that was to focus nationwide attention on harness racing and, yes, that our horses could smash the two-minute barrier on a half-mile track.

Robin Dundee (Robert Cameron), the crack New Zealand mare, won the first Miracle Mile in 1m 59s in March 1967; the first pacer in Australia to better two minutes for a mile in an actual race rather than against time and Smith's gamble on this bright new race was a run-away success.

The late Len Smith was a long-running, distinguished chief executive of the NSW Trotting Club.

Journalist for the Sydney 'Sun' in the late 1940s after his sudden, controversial retirement from Rugby League football at which he excelled as one of the all-time great NSW and Australian centre three-quarters.

The NSW Trotting Club appointed him as an 'assistant' steward under Bert Creagh in 1952 after Len had written many feature articles about football and trotting in 'Sporting Life,' a monthly magazine devoted to sport, produced by the "Sun" newspaper.

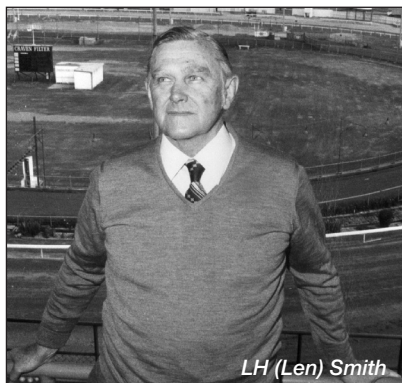
In the years to follow at Harold Park, he was to become Chairman of Stewards and Handicapper then Chief Executive officer.

Len Smith was conscientious, quiet, modest, unassuming, and always friendly.

He learned about trotting in the hard school of experience.

A good example of his clear thinking was that Smith actually devised a type of trial run for a Miracle Mile on September 30, 1966.

It was a race he called the 'Lightning Mile Invitation' restricted to six starters, all invited.



In the event, the top-class country mare Rachael McGregor (who was to die in the USA before she raced there) defeated Scottira, First Lee and Flaming Star in only 2m 4.4s but the track was badly affected by rain.

This race attracted much publicity and Smith knew Rachael McGregor would have given the two minute mile a serious nudge had the track been firm.

The six-starter Lightning Mile was a Miracle Mile test run by the ever cautious Smith.

Len Smith earned the respect of five NSW Trotting Club chairmen during his long stint at Harold Park: Bill Dunlop, Alton Cusick, Jim Reeves, Bill Rynan and Bill Treuer.

It was Smith who persuaded the ABC to provide television viewers with a direct telecast of the last three races from Harold Park, thus creating a sharp increase in TAB turnover which went beyond a million dollars. This was one of harness racing's brightest periods; a significant break-through and a coup for trotting generally.

The ABC also did special telecasts of the Miracle Mile at that time, the racing from HP looking spectacular under the bright lights in the recently introduced TV colour.

The star attractions were Paleface Adios and Hondo Grattan, the two super pacers who, via Channel 2, went into lounge rooms and the hearts and minds of people all over NSW. Thanks to the ABC coverage, they were almost certainly the two best-known horses in Australia.

After his retirement as NSWTC's CEO in 1982, Len continued to work for harness racing as a consultant and on various boards, his knowledge of the industry being second-to-none.

Smith always had a keen sense of his responsibilities and a determination to uphold the finest traditions of this sport.