



Phar Lap

Phar Lap, a giant chestnut thoroughbred gelding, is considered by many to be Australia's and New Zealand's greatest racehorse, and is a much loved national icon in both countries. At the time of his death in 1932, Phar Lap was the third highest stake-winner in the world. At the height of his powers, bookmakers offered very short odds on him, even refusing to accept any bets on some races.

Phar Lap was foaled on 4 October 1926 in Timaru in the South Island of New Zealand. He was sired by Night Raid (b United Kingdom 1918) out of dam Entreaty (b New Zealand 1920). However, he never raced in New Zealand; following his purchase he was taken to Australia where he dominated the racing scene during a long and distinguished racing career.

Standing 17.1 hands, he was sometimes called "Australia's wonder horse" in that country. He was also called "The Red Terror" and "Big Red", the same nicknames given to two of the greatest US racehorses, Man o' War and Secretariat.

His mounted hide is displayed at the Melbourne Museum, his skeleton at Te Papa Tongarewa - New Zealand's National Museum - and his heart at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. The name Phar Lap derives from the shared Zhuang and Thai word for lightning (Thai: ฟาแลบ fáa lǎp, lit. 'sky flash').^[1]

According to the Museum Victoria, Aubrey Ping, studying medicine at the University of Sydney, had the track in Randwick as a regular haunt, and he often talked with riders and trainers. He had learned some Zhuang from his father, who migrated to Australia from southern China in the 19th century. He was the one who suggested "farlap" as the horse's name. Telford liked the name, but changed the F to a PH to create a seven letter word, and split it into two words, so as to replicate the dominant pattern set by Melbourne Cup winners.

Sydney trainer Harry Telford persuaded American-born sportsman David J. Davis to buy the colt at auction, based on his pedigree. Telford's brother Hugh, who lived in New Zealand, was asked to bid up to 190 guineas. When the horse was obtained for a mere 160 guineas, he thought the he was a great bargain - until the colt arrived in Australia. The horse was gangly, his face was covered with warts, and he had an awkward gait. Davis was furious when he saw the colt as well, and refused to pay to train the horse. Telford had not been particularly successful as a trainer, and Davis was one of his few remaining owners. To placate Davis, he agreed to train the horse for nothing, in exchange for a 2/3 share of the winnings - if any.

Although syndicating a winning racehorse can be quite lucrative, Telford gelded Phar Lap anyway, hoping that the colt would concentrate on racing.

Phar Lap came last in the first race he entered, and he did not place in his next three races. He won his first race on April 27, 1929, the Maiden Juvenile Handicap at Rosehill, ridden by Jack Baker of Armidale, a 17-year-old apprentice.^[2] The word *maiden* indicates that none of the horses in the race had won. They spelled the horse for several months, then entered him in a series of races in which he moved up in class. The horse took second in the Chelmsford Stakes at Randwick on September 14, 1929, and the racing community started treating the horse with respect.



Phar Lap winning the 1930 Melbourne Cup

In the four years of his racing career, Phar Lap won 37 of 51 races he entered, including the Melbourne Cup in 1930 with 9st 12lb (61.5kg). In that year and 1931, he won 14 races in a row. From his win as a three-year-old in the VRC St. Leger Stakes until his final race in Mexico, Phar Lap won 32 of 35 races. In the three races that he did not win, he ran second on two occasions, beaten by a short head and a neck, and in the 1931 Melbourne Cup he finished eighth when carrying 10 st 10 lb (68 kg).

In 1930, someone (alleged to have been a bookmaker losing vast amounts of money) tried to shoot the horse.

For his final race in 1932, Phar Lap's owner shipped him by boat to Agua Caliente Racetrack near Tijuana, Mexico, to compete in the Agua Caliente Handicap, which was offering the largest purse ever raced for in North America. Phar Lap won in track-record time while carrying 129 pounds (58.5 kg). From there, the horse was sent to a private ranch near Menlo Park, California, while his owner negotiated with racetrack officials for special race appearances.



Phar Lasp and friend (Tommy Woodcock)

Early on April 5, 1932, the horse's trainer for the North American visit, *Tommy Woodcock, (see notes at end) found him in severe pain and carrying a high temperature. Within a few hours, Phar Lap hemorrhaged to death. Much speculation ensued, and when a necropsy revealed that the horse's stomach and intestines were inflamed, many believed the horse had been deliberately poisoned. There have been alternative theories, including accidental poisoning from lead insecticide and a stomach condition.

In 2000, equine specialists studying the two necropsies concluded that Phar Lap probably died of duodenitis-proximal jejunitis, an acute bacterial gastroenteritis. It was not until the 1980s that the infection could be formally identified.

However, in 2006 Australian Synchrotron Research scientists said it was almost certain Phar Lap was poisoned with a large single dose of arsenic 35 hours before he died, supporting the theory that Phar Lap was killed on the orders of US gangsters, who feared the Melbourne-Cup-winning champion would inflict big losses on their illegal bookmakers.^[3]

Sydney veterinarian Dr Percy Sykes believes poisoning did not cause the death. He said "In those days, arsenic was quite a common tonic, usually given in the form of a solution (Fowler's Solution)," and suggests this was the cause of the high levels. "It was so common that I'd reckon 90 per cent of the horses had arsenic in their system."^[4] In December 2007 Phar Lap's mane was tested to find if he was given repeated doses of arsenic which, if found, would point to accidental poisoning.

Phar Lap never had the opportunity to confront the great Equipoise, called *Chocolate Soldier* by his fans, and the dominant American thoroughbred racehorse of the day (horse of the year in 1932 and 1933 and an exceptional performer in his own right).

Following his death, Phar Lap's heart was donated to the Institute of Anatomy in Canberra and his skeleton to the New Zealand National Museum in Wellington. After preparations of the hide by a New York City taxidermist, his stuffed body was placed in the Australia Gallery at Melbourne Museum.

Phar Lap's heart was remarkable for its size, weighing 6.2 kg, compared with a normal horse's heart at 3.2 kg. (In 1989 the famous Secretariat's heart was examined at a necropsy performed at his death. The veterinarian recorded the heart weight at an astonishing 9.6 kg — 21 pounds officially, though it was estimated at 21 to 22 pounds). Phar Lap's heart is now held at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. It is consistently the object visitors request to see most often.

When news of Phar Lap's death reached Australia thousands grieved. Many sporting champions paid tribute to the horse, including Australia's leading cyclist, Hubert Opperman. He said, "I am not a follower of horse-racing, but like every Australian with red blood in their veins, I have followed with close interest Phar Lap's gallop to world fame. Even during the Tour de France, I've had strangers ask after our champion racehorse, and had it been possible for him to visit the Continent, he would have been received with royal honours. He was truly a great boost for Australia and, like every other Australian, I mourn his passing. In my opinion, there is nothing maudlin in a nation mourning the loss of a racehorse when that horse is Phar Lap."



Tommy Woodcock leads Phar Lap, ridden by William Elliot (Billy Elliot), towards the floral presentation after winning the Agua Caliente Handicap in Mexico, on 20 March



Promotional poster from the 1983 *Phar Lap* film.

Several books and films have been written about the horse, including the 1983 movie *Phar Lap* or *Phar Lap: Heart of a Nation*. A song, "Phar Lap—Farewell To You", was also written.

Phar Lap was one of five inaugural inductees into the Australian Racing Hall of Fame, alongside other turf notables Carbine, Tulloch, Bernborough, and Kingston Town. In the *Blood-Horse* magazine ranking of the top 100 U.S. thoroughbred champions of the 20th century, Phar Lap was ranked no. 22.

*Tommy Woodcock.

Born in 1905, Tommy Woodcock was apprenticed as a jockey at twelve, and although he was lean enough, it was clear by his late teens that he was growing too tall. Instead, he applied his placid nature and natural affinity with horses to the business of caring for them. Tom spent his lifetime rising at four in the morning, mucking out stables and generally catering to the needs of the most pampered animals on the planet.

Woodcock's placid nature made horses relate to him well. It was not that he got on badly with people, but he loved horses and they loved him. Trainer Harry Telford recognised Tom's particular affinity with Phar Lap and asked him to work as strapper to the horse full-time. Woodcock disagreed with Telford's tough training regime, preferring a gentler approach. He and Phar Lap soon formed such a close relationship that Phar Lap would take food from no one else.

'Bobby', as Tom nicknamed Phar Lap, always came first. Life must have been difficult for Mrs Woodcock. Even when they married, Tom could take no more than four days off. Once, under pressure from his wife, he went to the opera; before long his dawn rising caught up with him and he was drowsy. By nine o'clock Tom had fallen asleep in his chair.

Phar Lap's trainer on the trip to America, Woodcock was heart-broken when the horse died. Returning to Australia, he was licensed as a horse trainer. He remained in this occupation until the age of 78. In 1979 Woodcock donated several of his own mementoes of Phar Lap to Museum Victoria. He died at Yarrowonga in 1985.



Tommy Woodcock leads Phar Lap, ridden by William Elliot (Billy Elliot), towards the floral presentation after winning the Aqua Caliente Handicap in Mexico, on 20 March