



Marlon's race to repay gift of life

Brave recovery from kidney transplant and depression



Phil Rothfield
 Sports Editor-at-large

THE gates swing open just before 5am at Jack High Lodge, a small horse training complex on the outskirts of Port Macquarie.

Light rain is falling at what's become the backdrop to one of Australian sport's most courageous comeback attempts.

Jockey Marlon Dolendo pulls up in his old four-wheel drive. His smile says it all.

This is the remarkable return of a racing battler who nearly died, overcame a kidney transplant in August, battled depression, considered taking his life, and suffered severe financial hardship.

Marlon rode in his last race 12 months ago this week. That night he was rushed to hospital and this last year had been a nightmare.

No job, no income, little hope.

"I'd get up in the middle of the night and drive my car up to the Pacific Highway," he recalls.

"It was pitch black and I'd walk along the side of the road for kilometres, hoping a truck would hit me."

In the end it was his loving family, a retired old bus driver and the unwavering support from the racing industry that got him through.

Last ride

MARLON thought he was suffering from nothing more serious than flu. He went to his doctor, had blood tests, and kept riding.

At a Grafton meeting he felt so weak he had to ask ambulance officers for oxygen just to

get through to the last.

The next day, at a Port Macquarie meeting, was to be his final ride.

"I rode a winner but didn't even have the strength to pull my horse up over the line," he said.

"I felt that crook I had to get the clerk of the course to get me back to the enclosure. I honestly thought I was going to collapse and fall off.

"Bloody stupid. I could have killed myself or someone else. I had no idea how crook I was."

The diagnosis

WITH the blood results back, staff at the doctor's surgery had been trying urgently to contact Marlon that day, not knowing he was riding at the local races.

Jockeys can't use their mobile phones on track. He got home and the specialist rang late that night.

No wonder he felt so lousy - his kidneys were operating at less than 10 per cent and he was close to dying.

"I was told to get straight to hospital that night or I'm gone," he says.

The 40-year-old jockey, a father of three, was on a dialysis machine for four days every week until surgeons performed a kidney transplant at RPA.

The donor

MARLON could not bring himself to ask his family for help.

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"I have two sisters in Sydney but they're in their early 20s and were too young," Marlon said. "They've got to get married and have kids one day. It was out of the question.

"I've got another sister Marie who's 35 with two kids and has lived in Port Macquarie since I've been here.

"I just couldn't ask. She offered when my mum told her what had happened. I said 'are you sure - this is very serious.'

It wasn't just the medical and emotional impact on Marie's life.

"She's a single mum with two beautiful little kids of her own," Marlon said, "She couldn't work for a couple of months and it cost her lots of money.

"I want to ride again so I can pay her back. That's important to me. She's given me everything."

Financial struggle

COUNTRY jockeys generally survive on a week to week basis. This guy is no different.

If he had been hurt while riding, it wouldn't have been a problem because insurance kicks in.

But in this case, Marlon was left with no income, huge medical expenses, \$400-a-week rent and a family to feed.

The racing industry rallied. Late last year a golf day at Port Macquarie and an auction dinner hosted by TVN personality Richard Callander raised \$43,000.

"It was a bloody good effort considering we don't have a John Singleton or Gerry Harvey up our way," said his mate Garry Giles, who opened a trust account and was put in charge of paying the bills.

The money kept Marlon and his family going for 12 months but the account is now empty.

Racing NSW has been generous. They are paying his rent for another three months and giving his family Woolworths vouchers for the weekly shopping.

CEO Peter V'landys also paid for Marlon's aunt to fly out from the Philippines to look after the children while the jockey and his sister were undergoing the transplant and long recovery.

He is married to Grace and has three children - Hanz 14, Harvey 10 and Hailey 8 and Marlon is every bit the playful dad. Hanz is following in Dad's trail and has just started a stablehand apprenticeship, combining it with school.

Marlon adores the kids and they are what kept him going through the tougher days.

Depression

RACING was his life. Even during the EI crisis that stopped mainland racing in 2007, he moved to Tasmania to keep riding.

It was his only way to support the family.

One day he was the leading north coast jockey the next he had nothing.

He knew his trainer and friend Neil Godbolt would find a replacement easily enough.

"I thought I was finished," he explained, "My first doctor told me so. I couldn't cope. Even if I came back, Neil would have his new jockey.

"My specialist suggested I go and do a university course or get a job in an office. I said to him: 'I'm not as bright as you are mate.'

"I'm flat out writing and reading the paper. I'm telling you, I don't think my brain's all that big. I felt useless. All I've done for 20 years is ride horses. All I'm good at is riding and fishing.

"My temper and moods were bad. I'd blow up at little things. It got worse and worse."

It was during those darkest days Marlon more than once thought about taking his life.

He's telling his story as we're sitting in a coffee shop in Port Macquarie and his voice and Filipino accent begin to waver.

"I'd get up in the middle of the night and drive my car up to the Pacific Highway," he said, "It was pitch black and I'd walk along the side of the road for kilometres, hoping a truck would hit me.

"Every night I'd cry. I'd scream at my kids. I went crazy.

"One night I drove to Newcastle and back. I drove fast down a hill hoping it would end."

Support network

MARLON met retired bus driver Garry Giles 10

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years ago. They've travelled together to race meetings across the state ever since.

Giles is now a father figure. They're inseparable. Giles had his own health problems with cancer five years ago.

Marlon looked after his great mate back then and now Giles is returning the favour.

He helped organise the fundraiser, drove him to doctor's appointments, dropped the kids at school, paid the bills, took him fishing.

He's been there for absolutely anything Marlon needed.

So too has been local trainer Neil Godbolt at Jack High Lodge.

"He's a good jockey with a great work ethic," Godbolt said.

"He'd turn up on time every morning, ride 14 or 15 horses for me, then jump in his car and go and ride in Ballina. There's always a job for him in my stable."

The comeback

LAST month Marlon applied to Racing NSW to be registered as a stablehand.

After thorough medical assessments, it was approved last Friday. He went straight to Godbolt's Port Macquarie stables to jump on a horse again.

"I felt pretty sore afterwards," he said, "I've probably only got 70 per cent of my fitness back at this stage.

"It's still pretty tender where the operation was but my aim is to be fully fit and riding in races again by February. I know I can do it."

The Daily Telegraph watched his trackwork session on Monday morning. He arrived at 5am and was still exercising horses a couple of hours later.

"I'm very excited and can't wait."

Godbolt is determined not to rush it.

"The only thing that concerns me is Marlon

pushing it too quick," he said.

"He'll need six weeks work around the stables and a couple of barrier trials.

"When he's ready for his first meeting, we'll be putting him on something that's a good hope, that's for sure."

Weight has never been a problem. He'll return to riding at 49kg, even after a year off where the only form of exercise has been walking along the breakwall at Port Macquarie as often as possible to his favourite fishing spots.

Looking forward

MARLON has ridden almost 1500 winners over 20 years at tracks around the state from Randwick to Bowraville.

When he arrived from the Philippines, he rode for Pat Webster and then training legend TJ Smith in Sydney.

One day he rode a 100/1 winner for Smith but later fell out with a young Gai Waterhouse, who was running the stable.

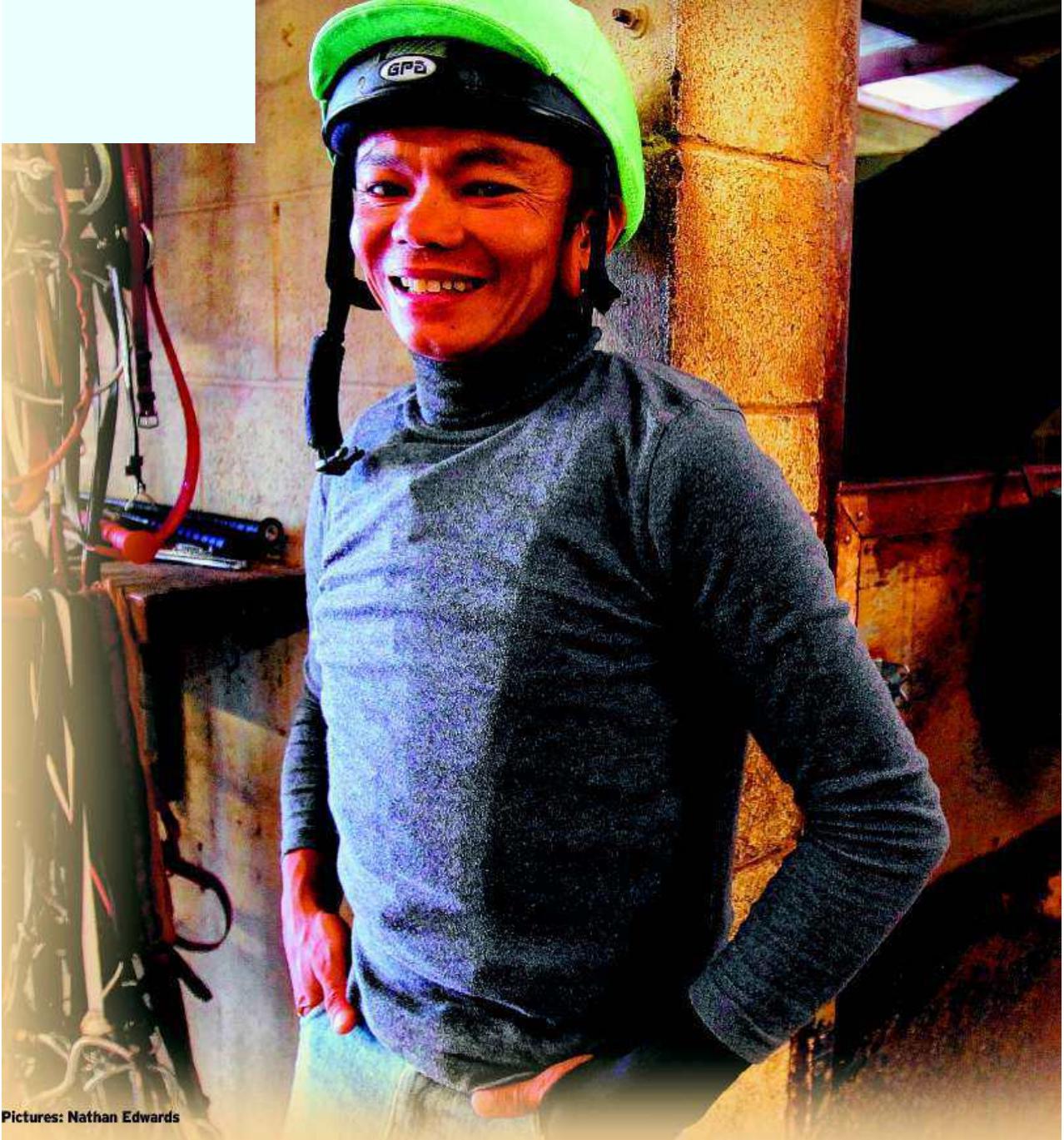
He moved to Brisbane for four years then settled in Port Macquarie with his young family.

This comeback is not just about money and the standard \$165 riding fee, although he's desperate for the cash.

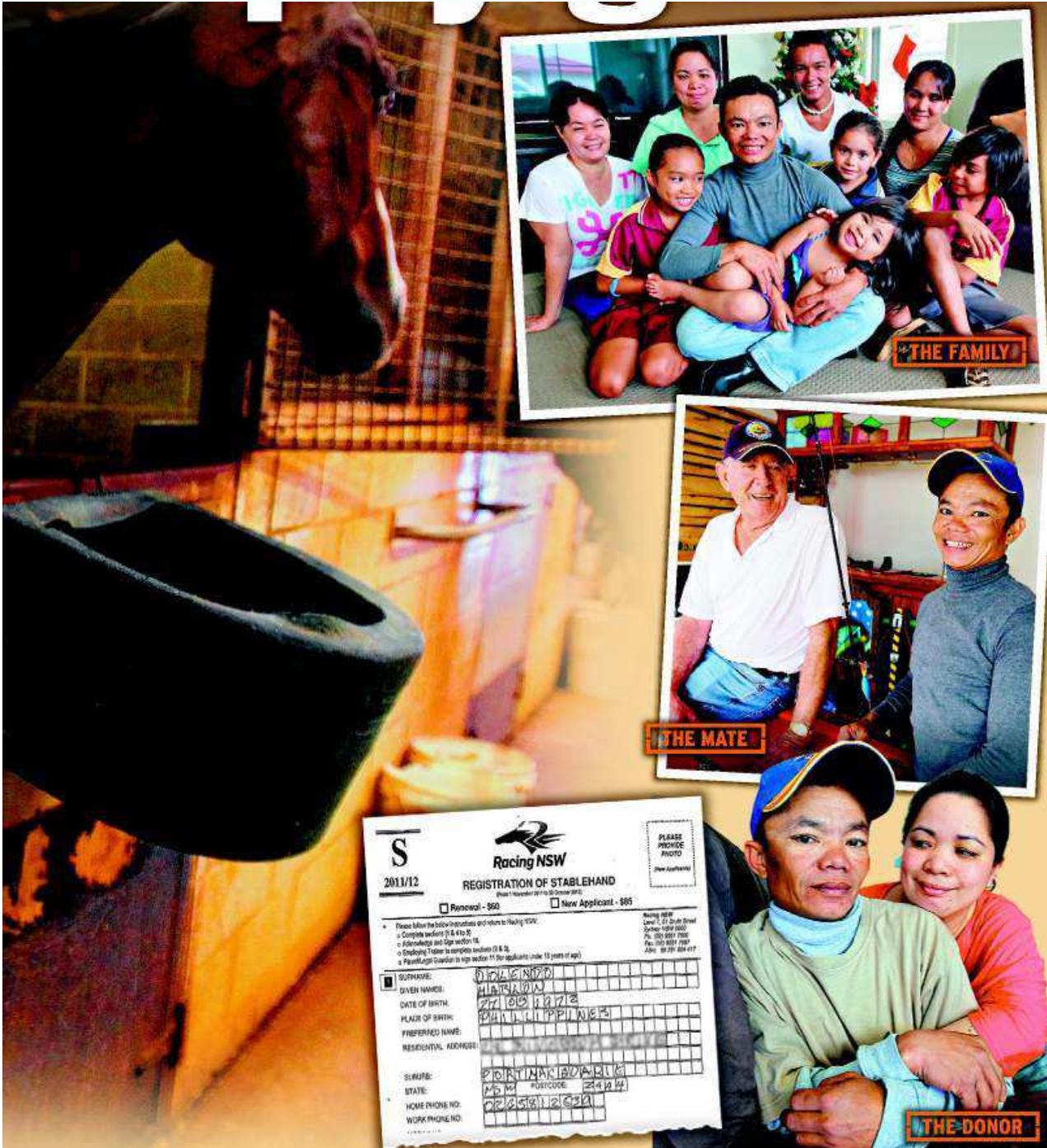
There's his sister, his family, his mate Garry and all those in racing who have kept him alive.

"I just can't wait," he says, "And I can show other transplant patients and depression sufferers what can be done."

I could have killed myself or someone else. I had no idea how crook I was



Pictures: Nathan Edwards



S
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REGISTRATION OF STABLEHAND
(Must be under 21 on 31 December 2012)

Renewal - \$60 New Applicant - \$65

Please follow the below instructions and return to Racing NSW:
 • Complete sections 1 & 4 to 6
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PLEASE PROVIDE PHOTO
 (New Applicants)

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