

Steven Payne Melbourne Cup winning strapper

by Brad Thomas

The whole country, even the world, has been captivated by the events on that first Tuesday in November. Michelle Payne rode her horse, Prince of Penzance, to an unexpected Melbourne Cup victory. When she jumped from her mount the first person she embraced was her brother, Steven! We now know that Steven's story is one of total inclusion, the love of an amazing family and most of all his own incredible abilities.

Brad Thomas, from Down Syndrome Victoria, had spent time with Steven and Michelle just a few days before the race.

When jockey Michelle Payne is being saddled up on a horse led by her brother Steven, she knows she will be riding a calm animal.

On the eve of the 2015 Melbourne Cup, Michelle was most nervous about the patient Steven and mount Prince of Penzance holding the big field up in the mounting yard parade.

"There is no doubt that when Steve is leading a horse around they're more relaxed. There are times where I have to tell Steve to hurry up because he is holding up the other runners behind him," Michelle said.

On the first Tuesday in November, this sibling team won Australia's most famous horse race – the Melbourne Cup. A moment Michelle always believed was destined to happen. Even in primary school the driven youngest child of 10 declared she would win Australia's richest Group 1 race.

Steven and Michelle are the youngest of the Payne children and both wanted to be jockeys just like their older siblings. Although Michelle has become the first female jockey to win the Melbourne Cup, her older sisters Maree and Therese were part of the era that elevated the status of female jockeys.

Steven wanted to be riding the ponies too. However, with Down syndrome, he was unable to fulfil that goal. Instead, he worked in the stables of his trainer father Paddy. Steven would straddle the back of the couch in the family living room and emulate his idolised siblings.

Their mother, Mary Payne, died in a car accident in 1986, when Steven was one year old and Michelle a blossoming newborn. Michelle credits the presence of Steven as a major factor in the family thriving as a unit. As his siblings forged careers in the racing industry, Steven joined the stables of trainer Terry Kelly before joining forces with leading Victorian trainer Darren Weir eight years ago.

"He rides his scooter from his home to the stables and anytime you ask Stevie to do a job, all you get is 'no problem'," Weir said. Two years ago Steven celebrated his maiden Group 1 success with Platelet in Adelaide. He remains a favourite of Steven but the Prince has joined the ranks.

On the Saturday night before the Melbourne Cup, Steven drew barrier one after declaring that was what he wanted. When riding back to scale, Michelle said the win was only possible because of Steven selecting barrier one.

As for Steven's assessment of his sister – "that was a 10 out of 10 ride". He is very close to his sister, who he has purchased a property with, was closest to growing up with and he has watched her risk life and limb to build on the foundation for female riders laid by their older sisters.

The success in the Melbourne Cup has not come without setbacks for Michelle. In 2012, at Donald, Michelle fractured five vertebrae and broke five ribs, which had followed an earlier fall when she had bleeding on the brain. Even the 'never give up' attitude of father Paddy was tested, who begged Michelle to stop riding.

As always it is the drive of Steven that inspires Michelle. As Steven legged Michelle onto Prince of Penzance before the biggest race of their lives, Steven wished her luck but then added she to had win 'because I have backed him'.

A 100/1 winner - but the Paynes have been defying the odds well before the rest of Australia met the star siblings.

Even the next day when he was front page news, Steven was onto his scooter, working the horses in the stable and then off to the country races at Kyneton with boss Darren, other DK Weir Racing team members and sister Michelle riding the Cup fancy.

With the new celebrity status, a beaming Steven was asked whether he had a girlfriend: "I don't have time for one", he declared.

Photo credit: Darren McNamara, Racing Victoria



Steven and Michelle