

Headache mare has turned the corner for Donnelly



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A surprise win last week suggests Dragonstone will be one of the horses to beat in Friday night's \$35,000 Join TAB Racing Club Metro Trotters Final at Alexandra Park.

The Cambridge mare was, by her trainer's admission, short of fitness after a chequered lead-up and six months away from the races.

"She was racing really well in the summer but needed to have a tooth surgically removed," Arna Donnelly told RaceForm.

"After time out from that, we brought her back, but a few things went wrong, and she ended up only having the one trial before last week. So it was a really good run fresh up, and it bodes well for this week."

Donnelly is frank in her admission that Dragonstone, a blueblood daughter of Father Patrick bred and owned by Breckon Farms, has caused her a few headaches along the way.

"She's the hardest horse I've ever had to train. She's tested my patience and been quite a handful for everyone in the stable. But I think we've found the key to her now."

Dragonstone is a daughter of Daenerys Targaryen, a stakes winner on both sides of the ditch for Mark Purdon, including the Gr. 1 Redwood Classic in Victoria.

Donnelly says Dragonstone is "very headstrong" but she hasn't had the body or frame to cope with the adrenalin with which she has tackled her training previously.

"To be fair, on race night she's pretty well behaved. If we can keep her level-headed from here on out, it will pay dividends in the long run."

This week she meets a quality field over distance - including last week's super impressive winner, Con Grazia Love - and goes back off 20 metres.

"She does step away quick, which should put her handy, but it's her first time over 2700 metres. For me, Zachary (Butcher, driver) sticking with her is a very good sign."

"She'll need to be better again this week, taking on Con Grazia Love and Pantani, who got home really well fresh up last week too."

In the night's other feature, the \$35,000 Join TAB Racing Club Metro Pacers Final, Donnelly has a trio of contenders that are all racing in fine fettle. Beta Prepare is joined by the three-year-olds, Ragnar Lothbrok and Final

Dragonstone, seen winning on resumption last week in the hands of Zachary Butcher, has tested the patience of her trainer, Arna Donnelly.

Change, to give her a strong hand in the race.

"Beta Prepare seems to step up all the time. If you look at his form, he's hardly ever out of the money even when he's racing up in grade. He's just a little EFTPOS card for his owners. Those few trips to 'Palmy' seem to have helped him mature mentally and physically."

"Ragnar Lothbrok got home in 54.9 and 26 and a tick last week, so he can't go much better."

"All three are racing good and are much of a muchness when it comes to my best chance. Probably Beta Prepare, as he's a year older and a bit more experienced."

Gwendoline Mary is first up for 16 months in the night's maiden pace, having joined Donnelly after starting her career with Todd Mitchell.

"She's only had two trials but was really good in both of them. The lack of hard fitness will count against her, but she's going good enough to win a maiden somewhere soon."

Thursday night on her home

track, Donnelly lines up five runners and she's especially confident with one of them.

"It's a big drop in grade for Rough And Ready; he's been racing well from bad draws at Auckland. Over 2700 this week, I think he's well-placed and it would be really nice to pick up win number 20 with him."

Joel Rock is in the same race but does not have a good record over distance or at Cambridge.

"She's been doing all her racing at Auckland, and it may have found the bottom of her. The 2700 isn't ideal but this could be a nice stepping stone back to form for her."

Trotters Makaku and Keep it Klassy represent the stable in the night's opening event, a handicap.

"Keep It Klassy is a funny wee thing. She does try her heart out and nine times out of 10 her manners are on point, so she has to be a top three show."

"The other guy needs to learn how to race. He's got all the ability; it's just a matter of putting the puzzle pieces together."

Baileys Pitch had his first run for the stable last week after being acquired from the Central Districts as a galloping pacemaker.

"We needed a new one and thought it would be good to get one that could race and give Kate a few extra drives so he's a bit of a stable horse. It was a quiet run from him last week, but I think he'll improve with it."

Donnelly confirmed stable star Jolimont was back in full work ahead of a spring racing, as are her trio of 'heat seekers'.

"He's been hopping for two or three weeks, along with Little Spike and The Surfer while Mako is a month behind them."

Little Spike dipped his hooves in top-level racing in the autumn and performed well, so Donnelly hopes he can take that next step in his upcoming campaign.

"I also really like The Surfer - he's a personal favourite of mine - because he's improved so much each time he comes back in."

"Little Spike did a great job when he wasn't quite ready for it and Mako comes back on a great rating, so there's lots to look forward to." 