

COUNTRY LIFE

SUITS BULLOCK JUST FINE

HAVING ESTABLISHED HIMSELF AS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S BEST JOCKEYS, AARON BULLOCK IS CONTENT WITH LIVING LIFE AWAY FROM THE BRIGHT CITY LIGHTS

WORDS: RAY HICKSON IMAGES: BRADLEY PHOTOGRAPHERS



Aaron Bullock: "I was born and bred in the country and I want to own a farm one day"

Few things give Aaron Bullock more pleasure than to look over on the drive home from a country race meeting and see a Country Cup or Country Championships trophy sitting on the passenger's seat.

So it's a little surprising to learn that the popular 34-year-old doesn't particularly covet the biggest trophies in country racing – the \$1 million Newhaven Park Country Championships Final or the \$2m The Kosciuszko.

Don't misunderstand, when given the opportunity to win one he jumps at it, but a lesson learned eight years ago has shaped his outlook on racing and he says it's for the better.

We'll get to that shortly.

Bullock has made a habit of qualifying horses for both the Country Championships and the Provincial (and the now Provincial-Midway) Championships since their inception.

Yet he's never won either Final. But it's booking a place for as many horses on the big day that's the most important thing to him in the months of February and March.

"For me, I love getting the job done for trainers who support me," Bullock said.

"I'm in it for the long game. It's about qualifying the horses, that's what I get the biggest thrill out of.

"It's a great initiative, the Country Championships, it's helped a good calibre of horse stay in the bush.

I look forward to the Championships every year.

"I ride competitively, but sometimes I push the limits here and there. Coming to the Championships I can't get suspended because it's a really good couple of months for me and I'd hate to miss out on it."

Of the nine Country Championships Finals to date, Bullock has ridden in three and on horses he qualified – he ran eighth in 2016 on Something Borrowed, 10th in 2022 on Edit, and eighth last year on Akasawa.

He also rode the latter in The Kosciuszko, his only ride in the rich Everest Day country feature.

When asked if he'd be disappointed if finished his career without a Country Championships Final win, given he's already won a national title and is building a prolific country record, he said "honestly it doesn't bother me".

"If I ever was to win one I'll win one," he said. "If a trainer wants to use me they'll use me and if they don't, they don't.

"The only person you're hurting by getting upset about it is yourself. I'll just concentrate on the horses I'm riding."

That's where Bullock's great lesson learned, stemming from the 2016 Country Championships series, comes into the story.

It surrounds a horse called Pera Pera, winner of the Central Districts Championships that year at Wellington and eventual runner-up to Clearly Innocent in the Final at Randwick.

He rode the Mack Griffith-trained gelding to four wins from as many rides leading into the race but took his replacement for Hugh Bowman quite hard.

"I got on a roll and he was a horse I became attached to more than I probably should have," Bullock said.

"He got my career going and I've never looked back. At the time I'd won everything on him.

"I broke my collarbone and clavicle in a fall in the Mudgee Cup in 2015. I rushed to get back in six weeks and the doctor didn't want to sign me off but I said, 'I've got a horse to ride'.

"There was a race at Dubbo in the lead up to the Championships and I thought I was right to come back and I remember I couldn't pull the whip, I'm a left hand rider and I broke my left clavicle, but he knew and we won.

"I wasn't ready to come back and he did the job for me.

"When I lost that ride after I qualified him it got to me a little bit. But it hardened me to the fact that these things happened.

"It didn't affect Gooree [Stud-owners], it didn't affect Hugh Bowman, it didn't affect anyone but myself.

"I did that to myself; it was me getting disappointed. That's racing.

"Unfortunately, it will happen again and it will happen not just to myself but many others.

"At the end of the day we don't have a right to feel entitled they are our horses to ride. I just feel privileged to qualify them and ride them."

A recent example that stands out to Bullock is 2024 Provincial-Midway Championships big gun Tavi Time.

He scored what he describes as the easiest win of his career in last year's Mudgee Cup, which made the gelding eligible for the \$3m Big Dance, and his Qualifier win at Newcastle would probably be the second easiest.

But he's no guarantee of being in the saddle at Royal Randwick.

"I feel privileged to qualify him for the Big Dance and for the (Provincial-Midway) Championships and if they happen to want to keep me on him then so be it," he said.



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Bullock in action on the unbeaten Know Thyself at Scone

"If not, they didn't have to put me on him to start with."

Back to those Country Cups. Bullock can rattle off a list of those he's won and those he wants to add to the collection at the drop of a hat.

Here's a sample: "I really enjoy Country Cups, it's a passion of mine, it's so good," he said.

"I've got Coonamble, Dubbo, Mudjee, Tamworth, haven't got a Muswellbrook yet, haven't got a Scone one yet.

"I've got Coffs Harbour, Taree, haven't got a Port (Macquarie) one yet but I remember them off the top of my head.

"My passion is the country. I live in Newcastle but I was born and bred in the country and I want to own a farm one day."

One of the most surprising things about Bullock is that he says he was never a "natural" when it came to riding horses.

It's surprising because he's now close to 1000 career wins and in 2022/23 he rode 207.5 winners, at a strike rate of 26% to win the national jockeys title.

It's an achievement he's proud of as much for realising a goal he set for himself as for winning that Australian premiership.

He may not try to win it again, as it did take a toll, but that doesn't mean he has nothing left to prove to himself.

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"I lost my mind and body there a little bit," he said. "The last two months I didn't even know myself, I was that in the zone to get it done.

"I was riding every day which I didn't like, and I didn't like it because I have to rip weight every day.

"A bit of competition always helps. I love going to the next level, I love getting better.

"I was never a natural at riding and I spent years mastering it. It's not all about the riding, it's about having the race brain.

"I see kids come through now and some will get it and some will never get it.

"I feel I'm only getting better at it but I reckon I'm still not where I need to be.

"I think that's what makes me better and better because I'm never content with where I'm at." **RNSW**