



Stuart McCormick

**Keayang Zahara (Jason Lee) winning the Vicbred Super Series final for 3-year-old trotting fillies on Sept. 14 at Melton Park.**



## THE DOWN UNDER DIARY

with ADAM HAMILTON

# Undefeated Keayang Zahara may be best 3-year-old filly trotter ever Down Under

by Adam Hamilton

Perfection is unfolding Down Under.

In the words of Australia's voice of harness racing, race caller Dan Mielicki, the unbeaten Keayang Zahara is the "best 3-year-old filly trotter I think I've seen."

The daughter of Volstead effortlessly stretched her unbeaten record to 10 races – four of them at Group 1 level – in a heat of the Victoria Trotters' Derby against the boys at Maryborough in country Victoria last Sunday (Oct. 20).

Keayang Zahara looks to have the \$75,000 Derby final – and a fifth Group 1 win – at her mercy this Sunday (Oct. 27).

Of her rivals, top driver Nathan Jack has chased Keayang Zahara more than most.

Jack, one of Australia's most experienced and successful feature race drivers, is spellbound, like most.

"I've been lucky enough to drive a few Derby winners and a few really good juveniles, but she's the best I've ever seen I think," Jack told [thetrots.com.au](http://thetrots.com.au) last week. "That's compared to horses like Cravache Dor and Dance Craze – we're talking good horses – but I think if she raced the free-for-allers tomorrow, she would probably beat them in my opinion. That's how good I think she is."

In her 10 wins, Keayang Zahara is yet to be extended.

"She's basically been in second gear every time, despite running some unbelievable times and winning by margins in many of them," leading Aussie harness media man Ryan Phelan said. "She's just something else."

Keayang Zahara's aggregate winning margin is 136.1 meters. That's almost 14 meters – or about four lengths – per win.

The times she goes are certainly comparable with the open-older free-for-all class.

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~ Nathan Jack

Two starts back in the Group 1 Victoria Oaks final at Melton on Oct. 12, Keayang Zahara trotted home her last half in :55.2. Her last quarter was :26.6.

If you had a pacer go that fast, you would be thrilled.

Go back to the Group 1 Vicbred on Sept. 14 and Keayang Zahara smashed the clock – and the 3-year-old record – winning by 13 meters in a 1:56.8 mile rate for 2240 meters. It was just 1.4 seconds outside the all-aged track record.

The challenges will continue – and get bigger – for Keayang Zahara after Sunday’s Derby final.

She has landed a slot in the inaugural \$500,000 The Ascent, at the Addington track in Christchurch, NZ, on Nov. 15.

She is booked on a four-hour flight “across the ditch” to New Zealand on Nov. 5.

If she delivers as the betting suggests in The Ascent – Keayang Zahara is a \$1.60 favorite (for a \$1 bet) – she will stay in NZ for the \$140,000 Group 1 NZ Trotting Oaks (Nov. 29) and the \$200,000 NZ Trotting Derby (Dec. 6).

If the streak continues, she could finish her 3-year-old season unbeaten in 14 starts, seven of them at Group 1 level.

What’s even more remarkable is that Keayang Zahara didn’t race at 2. Her first start was at Maryborough on April 3. In just her third start she won the Group 1 NSW Trotters’ Oaks and in her following start, the NSW Derby.

All this from a homebred filly, who is trained more than three hours from Melbourne at Ecklin South, in the western districts of Victoria.

And she is trained by Marg Lee and her son, Paddy. And driven by another son, Jason.

It’s a beautiful story.

The Lee clan, who have enjoyed tremendous success in the game, not only bred Keayang Zahara, but her mother, Keayang Yankee, too. She won nine of her 19 starts.

Most of the family’s early success came with pacers, none better than the brilliant Jilliby Kung Fu, who won the 2018 Group 1 Chariots Of Fire and was second in the Miracle Mile a week later.

Marg has always put Jilliby Kung Fu on a pedestal, but she now concedes Keayang Zahara is rivalling him as the best horse they have trained.

Jason agreed: “Kung Fu was a star and cut down in his prime, but on sheer ability this girl is right up there with him.”

The early focus on pacers has changed a bit with 10 of the 30 horses the Lees have in work being trotters.

“The pacers are still a big part of what we do, but yes we did consciously decide to put more of a focus on buying some well-bred trotters and breeding some of our own a few years back now,” Jason said. “It is so hard to compete with the Emma [Stewart] and Clayton [Tonkin] stable in the biggest juvenile pacing races [in Victoria], but they don’t have many trotters, so we thought there was an opportunity.”

Jason said his brother, Paddy, who is a backbone of the family training operation, was the first to get excited about Keayang Zahara last year.

“I was telling mum [Marg] how I liked one of the baby trotters and Paddy jumped in and said, ‘No, Strawberry (Keayang Zahara’s stable name) is clearly the best of them,’” Jason said. “I drove her a week later and quickly agreed.”

“She didn’t race at 2 for a few reasons, but mainly because we weren’t in a rush. She had a bit of soreness and was still growing, and we were re-building our [training] track at home, too. She could’ve raced, but when you own them yourselves, you can have the luxury of waiting.”