

## **SKELTON: WILLIAM DAVID**

**Known as Bill**

**Born: 4 Sep 1931, Cobden, Greymouth, New Zealand.**

**Married: 13 Jun 1955, St Mary's Anglican Church, Geraldine,  
New Zealand**

**To: Emanuela (Nella) Valeria Macchi (1934 – present)**

**Lived in Levin: 1963 -2016**

**Died: 25 Nov 2016, Levin, New Zealand**

**Buried: Private Cremation**

### **Honours**

**Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), 1980**

**Elected to NZ Sports Hall of Fame, 1990**

**Elected to NZ Racing Hall of Fame, 2006**

### ***Bill's parents were:***

William George (1897-1975) & Gwendoline Emma (nee Baker) (1905-1988).

Bill was the oldest of 9 children.

All four of his brothers – Bob, Frank, Max and Errol - also became jockeys, with Bob the most successful, winning the 1976 Melbourne Cup.

### ***Bill and Nella have three children:***

Anthony: 1956 -

David: 1958 -

Maria: 1961 -

As a boy Bill enjoyed a busy and fun life. If not doing chores around the house he and brother Bob were labouring at a local farm for a bob a day. As kids they spent many a time at the beaches around Greymouth. Bill also had 3 fights as a boxer for a draw and two losses. He played halfback and captained the Cobden seven-a-side team. He also had a brief spell with the Boy Scouts.

At 13 he was approached by a man named Jack O'Donnell, who asked him if he was interested in becoming a jockey. He didn't know what a jockey was despite being around horses as they were a part of life at that time (1944).

After discussion with his family Bill signed up to be an apprentice jockey with Lionel Pratt at Orari (South Canterbury) on the 20 April 1945. He would finish his last year of school at Orari, during which he completed a 6 months

probationary period of his apprenticeship. He then signed up for 5 years and then a further 2 years.

His full jockey's licence was granted on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1951.

Bill's first ride was at Reefton in 1946, on a horse called Ohapi. They finished 4<sup>th</sup>. His first win was at Wingatui, (after 30 rides) in October 1947. He was on Boolamskee and it was a dead heat for first.

He was the leading apprentice in New Zealand for four consecutive years.

The horse Open Sky featured prominently in his early memories. He rode her to 15 of her 16 successes, but more importantly it cured him from betting. He was a notoriously luckless punter and one of his daughters has described him as a bad loser. He joked himself that every time he put a fiver on a horse it was a signal for that horse to get beaten. We can presume, then, that he never bet on Open Sky.

In 1952 he came close to a first start in the Melbourne Cup. A horse called Reformed, owned by the entrepreneur Joe Brown, ran in the Cup that year and Bill was asked to be the jockey. However, Lionel Pratt needed his services at home, so he was unable to go. Reformed placed 3<sup>rd</sup>!

The following year, 1953, he moved to the Bill Welton stables at Riccarton. With the large number of trainers based there he rode many more horses.

By this time, he was engaged to a girl he had got to know through working for Lionel Pratt. She was Nella (Emanuela) the step-daughter of Fred Pratt, Lionel's brother. Fred had met Nella's mother Maria, a war widow, while serving in Italy during World War II. When he returned to New Zealand, Maria and Nella came too, and Fred and Maria were married in 1946.

As a 12-year-old, Nella used to stay at her uncle Lionel's, where she would chase Bill round the yards. He thought she was a pretty girl. After Bill came out of his apprenticeship, he bought a car and travelled often to Arundel, where Nella lived. They became engaged in 1954, when Bill was 23, and married the following year in Geraldine. It was Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> of June 1955, but far from unlucky, and deliberately chosen, as 13 is a lucky number in Italy!

This relationship became significant in the future direction of Bill's career. Fred Pratt moved his training and racing base north to Levin, a much more central location. During the 1950s Bill made a number of trips to ride in the North Island, and at one point he was given the job of looking after Fred's team at Levin while Fred treated Maria to a trip home to Italy. A story from that time goes that when Fred arrived back, he wasn't pleased to discover that only two horses were still racing. All the others had been put out to rest as, apparently, Bill hadn't been happy with their form!

At this stage, Bill and Nella had bought their first house in Oamaru, where Bill had joined the Norman Dwyer stable. But he was increasingly attracted to the North Island as the place to be for ambitious jockeys. Already familiar with Levin, he bought a quarter-acre section here, and in 1963 they sold up in

Oamaru and came north. Now he would be based within comfortable driving distance from any racecourse in the lower North Island.

They sold the section on and purchased 8 ½ acres in Roslyn Rd. Without a house, Bill and Nella bunked down at Fred and Maria Pratt's place for 7 months, until the new home on their Roslyn Road block was completed. This was now the mid-1960s.

But, to backtrack a little in his career, 1959 was the year Bill made his first overseas trip to ride, in Australia. There he had to contend with the criticism of his brother Bob's riding style and the Australian jockeys who didn't like upstart New Zealand jockeys taking rides and wins from them. In that first year his major victory was in the Wollongong Cup, riding On Parade.

In New Zealand, Bill would go on to become champion jockey seven times, and was outside the top four of the premiership only 4 times between 1947 & 1979.

He rode a record 124 winners in the 1967-68 season.

In May 1980 he became the first New Zealand jockey to ride 2,000 winners. He eventually finished with 2,179.

With this tally, he remains the most successful jockey of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in New Zealand.

According to Bill, the best horse he rode was Daryl's Joy, a champion 2-year-old in 1968 in New Zealand, then a champion 3-year-old, racing exclusively in Australia, in 1969. In that year, with Bill in the saddle, Daryl's Joy won both the WS Cox Plate & the Victoria Derby.

He was certain 1969 would be his year to win the Melbourne Cup. But before that premier race at Flemington in November, he was incredulous to discover Daryl's Joy had been sold. An American buyer was taking the thoroughbred to the USA, where he would go on to win 6 races from 11 starts.

Bill's big 2-mile victories in New Zealand included:

Auckland Cup on Lucky Son (1965), which he also trained;  
New Zealand Cup on Foglia D'Ora (1959) & Noir Filou (1968);  
Wellington Cup on Loofah (1968).

Other overseas major race wins were:

Caulfield Stakes on 'Hamua' - 1969  
Thousand Guineas on 'Wood Court Inn' - 1969  
The Jockey's Invitation Plate (Hong Kong) on 'Money First' - 1975

Over the period of his riding Bill suffered a number of injuries:

1951 Fractured collarbone  
1956 Strained back  
1956 Fractured foot bone  
1965 Concussion  
1966 Injury to neck  
1966 Bruising to right shoulder  
1970 Bruising  
1972 Eye injury  
1972 Dislocated right shoulder

This last one was the worst as it put him out of racing for 7 months.

In 1985, at the age of 53, Bill retired as a jockey and began training horses with Nella on their Roslyn Road property. Many people spoke of his ability to nurture horses with his soft-touch approach.

Four years later, in 1989, they purchased a 4-acre block on Mako Mako Road, right beside Levin Racecourse, where Bill had a new house built and new stables from which to continue his training (the stables were where there are dog kennels now).

Cruelly, his activities became severely restricted after suffering a stroke in 1994 that inhibited both his speech and movements. He spent several months in hospital and rehabilitation. After recovering he returned to the racetrack frequently as a spectator, and continued to attend racing functions. While unable to communicate verbally he remained mentally agile, recognised everyone and read the papers daily to keep up with events.

This took him through to 2012 when he contracted pneumonia. He now required permanent hospital care and was moved into the Masonic village in Queen Street East where he passed away in 2016, aged 85.

At his funeral Nella remarked: "At the beginning he used to give me a smile or two, but three or four years later he had a different look in his eyes. He gave me three lovely children, three lovely homes. No wife could ask for more. He was a real champion."

After his death a minute's silence & a memorial race was held at the Saturday Christmas races at Trentham.

The family's connection to local racing and the Levin Race Track remains to this day (2021). When the Mako Mako Road property was sold in 2013, Nella moved into the Trackside Villas complex at the north-eastern corner of the racecourse, where she remains. And Bill and Nella's youngest daughter Maria works six mornings a week at the Track Training Centre where she monitors and notes all the activities taking place to assist training to proceed safely.

#### Bill's Racing Record

No of Winning Rides by Season:

1947/48                      30

1948/49	32	
1949/50	40	
1950/51	38	
1951/52	36	
1952/53	64	
1953/54	33	
1954/55	47	
1955/56	45	
1956/57	67	
1957/58	89	
1958/59	66	
1959/60	40	plus 3 in Australia
1960/61	80	
1961/62	63	
1962/63	68	
1963/64	66	
1964/65	63	
1965/66	69	plus 4 in Australia
1966/67	84	
1967/68	124	
1968/69	65	
1969/70	66	plus 6 in Australia
1970/71	53	plus 1 in Australia
1971/72	71	
1972/73	33	
1973/74	81	
1974/75	78	
1975/76	62	plus 1 in Hong Kong
1976/77	82	
1977/78	72	
1978/79	44	
1979/80	40	
1980/81	38	
1981/82	36	
1982/83	43	
1983/84	31	
1984/85	18	
	2,157	plus 15 overseas

A biography was published in 1976, "*The Bill Skelton Story*"  
by Bill Skelton with Tony Hilton