

FOR A LITTLE BLOKE WHO SPENT PART OF his adolescence in a tough Brisbane boys' home, Keith Mahoney made a big impression. As a young jockey he adopted the nickname "Magic Mahoney" and cultivated a taste for flash jewellery and purple satin breeches. Even after he turned 40 and moved to Townsville, Mahoney would emerge from the jockeys' room immaculately groomed, his hair blow-waved, his satin jacket spotless. At day's end he'd climb into a Honda Integra with the word "MAGIC" stickered to the doors, roaring off with the sound system blasting a Reba McEntire country tune.

Behind the outré showmanship, however, Mahoney nursed an emotionally fragile nature, and by July 2004 he was at a low ebb. The move to Townsville after a quarter-century of riding meant that, at 42, his glory days were behind him. A series of suspensions for careless riding had blotted his year, and he had only been back racing a few weeks when he was again called into the stewards' room at Townsville racecourse on July 17 after his horse lurched into the path of two others during a race. Told he was being suspended for five weeks, on top of a five-week penalty he was still appealing, Mahoney knew he was out for the entire carnival and facing almost three months without an income.

That afternoon Mahoney drove home to his spartan rented flat in Townsville and packed away his gear. He was due in Brisbane the following day to stay with fellow jockey Neil Jolly, but he never turned up. Two days later police found his car at a remote spot near Mingela, 90km inland, with a hose running from the exhaust pipe. Mahoney was dead inside.

To those who knew "Magic", the tragedy was not necessarily a shock – he had predicted more than once that he wouldn't live into old age. And the tight-knit fraternity of Australian jockeys is no stranger to suicide. Four months before Mahoney died the former Queensland jockey Rodney Smyth had also ended his life. Less than five years earlier, champion rider Neil Williams and his former trackmate Ray Setches had killed themselves within a week of one another. Others – including Sydney's Arron Kennedy and Queensland's Ray Kliese – have killed themselves in recent years.

"Depression is prevalent in the jockeys' ranks," says Neil Jolly. "All those jockeys – Keith Mahoney, Neil Williams, Arron Kennedy, Rodney Smyth – they suffered the indignity of their careers stagnating after reaching great heights. They had a few personal problems but they never had anyone to turn to."

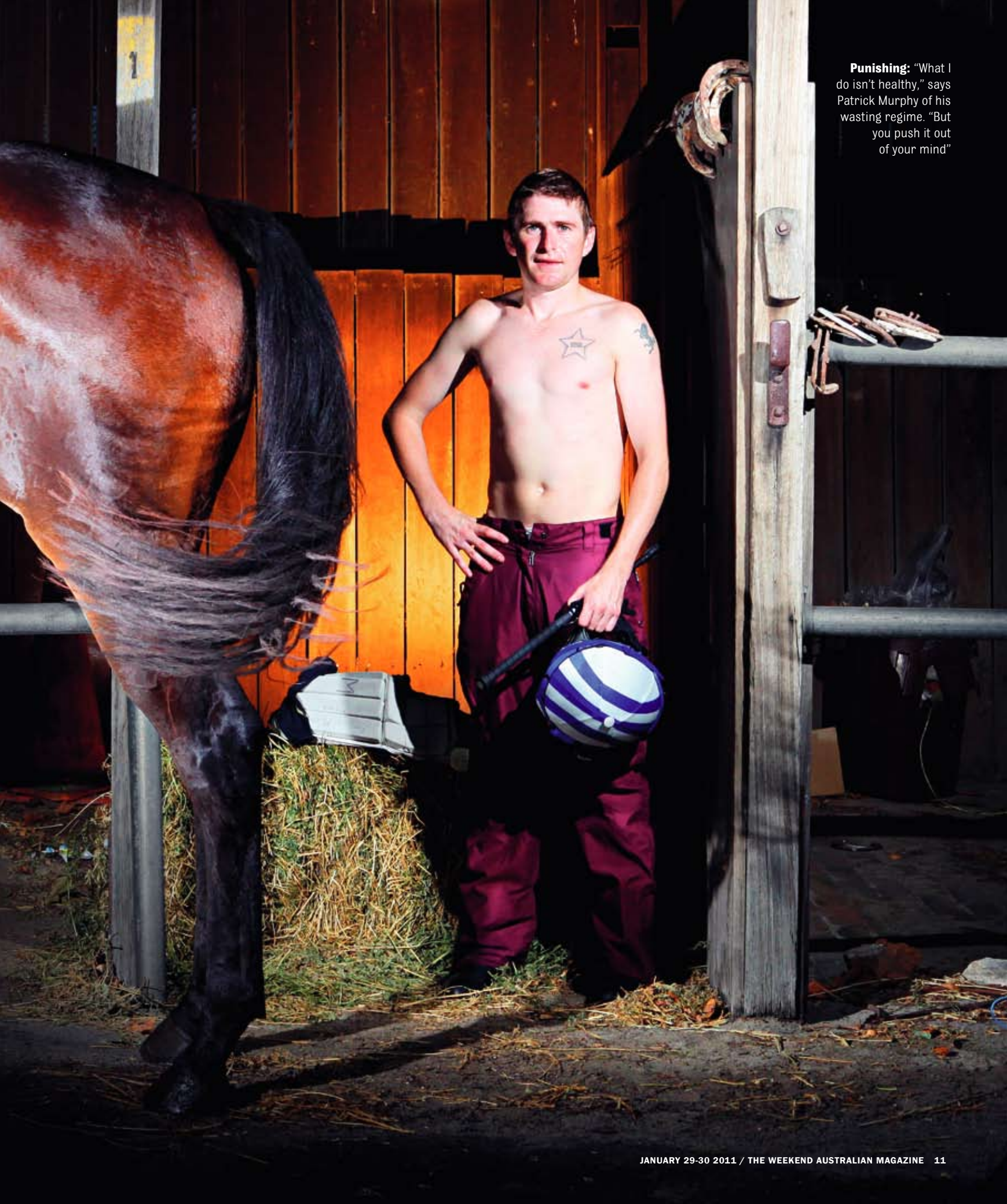
The "sport of kings" has long basked in its glamorous image, and for those jockeys who reach the pinnacle of their trade, the money and fame make for a heady ride. The exhilaration is



Dark Side of the Track

Shedding 2.5kg in six hours? It's part of the day job. As are the 4am starts, and the constant spectre of death and disability. It's no wonder so many jockeys are pushed over the edge, writes *Richard Guilliat*

PHOTOGRAPHY ADAM KNOTT



Punishing: "What I do isn't healthy," says Patrick Murphy of his wasting regime. "But you push it out of your mind"

made keener by the knowledge that no spectator sport is more dangerous: Caulfield Racecourse in Melbourne has a memorial to the more than 300 jockeys killed in Australia since 1847. There isn't, however, a memorial to the other fallen – those who have been crippled or taken their own lives.

For Jolly, the sudden death of his friend Stathi Katsidis in Brisbane last October was the latest chapter in a familiar, painful story. At 31, Katsidis had not long returned to racing after terrible injury and a nine-month suspension for testing positive to ecstasy, a drug he once admitted taking because it was “good for your weight”. This was not suicide – Katsidis died in his sleep after a night out with his mates, and it's widely assumed that drugs or alcohol were involved. But his fiancée, Melissa Jackson, who found his body, made an impassioned plea for more counselling for jockeys, saying that extreme dieting leaves them vulnerable to mental instability and drug and alcohol reactions.

Neil Jolly sounds weary as he discusses this latest premature death. “There are jockeys out there who'll be carrying a burden because of Stathi's death,” he says. “It preys on your mind. I've lost a lot of people.”

Sweating it out

IT'S EASY TO SPOT PATRICK MURPHY WORKING out in the heat room at Coogee Diggers gym in Sydney: he's the only guy wearing a hooded jacket over three layers of clothing. In the enveloping fug of the room, he doggedly thuds a punchbag as rivulets of perspiration drip from his nose. His outer clothes are dry, but only because there's a waterproof plastic bodysuit encasing him from neck to ankles underneath the jacket and thermal ski pants. A river of sweat is flowing straight down into his socks.

Murphy is 26 years old but his 1.65m frame is so light he could pass for someone a decade younger. Like many jockeys he exudes a preternaturally boyish energy, although by his own standards he's overweight right now – a rare hol-

Track record: jockeys who took their lives



Keith Mahoney: “I was always depressed and short-tempered,” he once said. “It makes it hard to keep a relationship when you're not eating...”



Neil Williams: After his suicide in 1999 his widow said he'd come to hate racing after a close friend had been killed in a race at Canterbury six years earlier

iday in Fiji has sent him up to 57.5kg. That means he has to shed 3.5kg over the next two days in order to make weight for the Saturday race at Newcastle. It's a target he can only reach by eating as little as possible and sweating himself thinner in the gym and in the bath at home.

“I've been wasting my whole life so I know my body inside out,” says Murphy, who gauges his rate of dehydration by wrapping finger and thumb around his wrist. Born into racing – his dad is a manager at Canterbury and Rosehill racecourses – he's been wasting two or three times a week since his career began eight years ago. “If you told me any other time that I had to lose two kilos in three hours, I wouldn't be able to do it,” he admits. “But the day of the race I somehow always manage to get there.”

Four years out from his apprenticeship, Murphy is typical of many young jockeys striving toward the big leagues. He's never ridden a Group One winner, and he's not contracted to any particular stable, so he spends a lot of early mornings at racecourses doing unpaid trackwork, running horses for trainers in order to pick up work and glean information about promising mounts. On race-days he's paid around \$160 a ride, and he aims for 8-10 rides a week. A win nets him a bonus of 5 per cent of the prize money. It can be a pretty good living; it can also be a lot of driving, a lot of pre-dawn wake-ups and a lot of punishing weight-loss.

Today he woke at 4am to drive through the darkness from his home in Sydney's inner-west to Randwick Racecourse. As we watch the first rays of sunlight play across the turf two hours later, his face is already glittering with beads of sweat – he's been wearing four layers of clothing since he left home. Still, he knows he has it easy compared to young jockeys just starting out. “Apprentices today are doing it harder – they're taller than me but they're riding at 52 kilos,” he says. “Their whole generation has grown; you just have to look at photos of Year 10 kids now compared to 20 years ago. They're monsters.”

The growth of humans over the past 50 years has sparked much debate about the artificially shrunken size of jockeys. A few years ago it was not uncommon to see whippet-thin 48kg jockeys riding in major races, until lobbying from jockeys prompted the industry to raise the minimum weight requirements in 2006. Still, just getting down to 54kg forces Murphy to push his body way below its normal range of 60-65kg.

One of the few long-term medical studies of jockeys, conducted in Ireland over recent years, has called for an urgent reassessment of weight

“There are jockeys out there who'll be carrying a burden because of Stathi's death. It preys on your mind”



Stathi Katsidis: The 31-year-old, who had battled drug and alcohol problems, died last October

Laffan Grainger; Barry Pascoe; Steve Pohlner; Cameron Laird

Russell Shakespeare



Ray Setches: He took his life in rural Victoria in 1999 only a week before his old friend and fellow jockey Neil Williams (left) died



Arron Kennedy: One of Sydney's most popular riders before drug problems took a toll on his career. Kennedy died in 2007, aged 34



Ray Kliese: His career was over before he ended his life; he'd been forced to quit as an apprentice when a fall damaged his spine in 1984

limits, pointing out that the average young trainee is 37 per cent heavier than 30 years ago. The study found that jockeys suffer low bone density from restricting their diets, making them more prone to fractures and osteoporosis. Most also suffer high levels of dehydration, which affects cognitive skills and mood.

Dr Helen O'Connor, a senior lecturer in nutrition at the University of Sydney who has studied jockeys, says there is surprisingly little research on them considering their relentless workload, constant weight-suppression and risk of injury. "We need more research on the impact this is having," she says. "It can be difficult to recruit them for studies because they work almost every day - there's probably been more research done on the horses."

Like a lot of jockeys, Patrick Murphy doesn't like to mull over the long-term effects of his wasting. "What I do isn't healthy," he admits. "The sauna and the sweating is going to be a part of my career to keep going on a competitive level, so that's why you really don't want to know. You push out of your mind the physical side of things." He has an annual medical, and he got free dietary advice courtesy of Racing NSW early in his career, but at the racetrack there are no team doctors to consult. Murphy learnt his limitations the hard way: last year he collapsed at home in the bathroom after sweating himself down to 53kg for a race in Goulburn.

Dehydration is the demon that all jockeys live with. Murphy is familiar with the excruciating thirst which on race day makes him avert his gaze from anything liquid. "You can't look at people drinking; even TV ads of people diving into a pool, you just can't watch."

As far as injuries go, Murphy considers himself lucky - he once went six years without mis-

hap, and his worst fall, during his apprenticeship, put him in a coma but caused no serious fractures. Still, the spectre of a catastrophic fall seems to hover over jockeys. As we walk away from Randwick after his trackwork ends, Murphy mentions that his manager, Paul Goode, is a paraplegic, crippled after being thrown off a horse at Queanbeyan 18 months ago. Murphy was in that race and saw Goode go over the rails. "It shakes you up a bit," he admits. "With falls, it's not 'if', it's 'when'. It's just a question of how bad it will be." A few minutes later, as we wait to cross the road outside the racetrack, a voice calls out from a balcony across the street. It's another jockey, Adam Hieronymus. "He's off at the moment, injured his neck," says Murphy. "Not too badly, but he did a vertebrae, so he'll be off for two to three months."

Two days later, Murphy is at Broadmeadow Racecourse in Newcastle, 3.5kg lighter. After eating "a fraction of food" for dinner the night before, he'd woken at 3.30am, donned four layers of clothing and driven out to Warwick Farm for several hours of pre-race trackwork and sweating. Returning home, he'd stepped on the scales to discover he was still 2.5kg overweight, with only six hours before his race. He lost it by sitting in a hot bath for three hours straight.

On the two-hour drive to Newcastle Murphy recalls feeling rock-bottom, thinking of little but his weight and his insatiable thirst. He's riding the three-year-old mare Bradbury's Choice in the third race, and by the time he mounts the horse just before 2pm he's in a blur from "the rush of making weight". He's come in just on 54kg by wearing his lightest gear and dispensing with extra saddle padding.

Bradbury's Choice rockets out of the barrier and never looks like losing. She thunders over

the line in first place 51 seconds later, which is when Murphy's adrenalin ebbs away and he realises he's almost fainting in the saddle. As the horse comes to a halt he is dry-retching, and it takes him a few seconds to gather his wits enough to get down. He is too woozy to ride the horse back to the enclosure. "It knocked me about a fair bit," he admits later. But the win is sweet.

The sweetest rush

ALL ELITE SPORTSMEN KNOW THERE'S A PRICE to be paid for the risks they take. Even so, Neil Jolly looks back on his career with some disbelief. "I was a lunatic when I was a jockey," says Jolly, who retired in 2009 aged 35 due to injury and the punishing effects of dieting. "I stopped eating on Wednesday and I wouldn't start eating again until Saturday night. That's what you have to put your body through. It plays tricks with your mind." What compelled him to keep going, he recalls, was an addiction to the rush of the race. "People have to understand that for a jockey, every ride could be his last. That's a lot of pressure to contend with, but it's like a drug. When you're winning, there is no better feeling in the world. You're out there galloping at 60km/h astride a 500kg thoroughbred horse and you're risking everything to get to the finish line in front. It's an adrenalin rush you can't replicate in day-to-day life."

Keith Mahoney tasted the same highs and, like many jockeys, struggled to get out of their grip. A pint-sized working-class kid with an unhappy family background, he first took up riding at the Boys' Town home for wayward youths in the Gold Coast hinterland, where he was sent for a year after getting caught shoplifting at 14. As an 18-year-old apprentice he still weighed only 33kg and wore children's sizes -

“a little brat of a kid with long hair,” recalls one of his oldest jockey friends, Cyril Small.

Behind the glamorous image he created for himself, Mahoney nursed some deep psychological scars. He was estranged from his parents, and spoke of a brother who died young. He had many girlfriends but never married or had children, and his fastidious grooming sparked more than a few jokes about his sexuality. By 1990 he was one of Queensland’s best jockeys, but his aggressive riding style and short fuse led to constant run-ins with stewards.

Extreme dieting and wasting added to his volatility – Mahoney once acknowledged that in his late 20s he drank 15 coffees a day and stopped eating six days before a race, a regimen that triggered wild mood swings. “I was always depressed and short-tempered,” he remarked. “It makes it hard to keep a relationship when you’re not eating... The doctor told me he would either put me in a coffin or on a diet.”

After winning the Ansett Cup in Brisbane in 1991 Mahoney moved to Sydney in pursuit of the big time, but he struggled to get work and returned to Queensland five months later. Then came a string of falls and injuries – a broken collarbone, a damaged nerve in his elbow and multiple operations on his shoulder. He moved to Townsville in 2003 after winning the Townsville Cup two years in a row, vowing to keep riding into his 50s. But “Magic” never had a retirement plan, and the suspensions that dogged him through 2004 were more than just a nuisance – they left him scrabbling for money. On that final day at the Townsville track, after copping another five-week suspension, his last remark to the stewards was that he couldn’t be any more broke than he was.

How many jockeys have grappled with the same demons is a contentious issue in racing. One of the country’s best-known riders, Darren Beadman, has said depression is widespread and admitted he contemplated suicide himself during a low ebb in his career. A Victoria University study four years ago found that more than three-quarters of jockeys suffered mood swings caused by fasting and wasting.

“I do think the pressures of the job, the wasting and the depression it causes, have a significant effect on them,” says Paul Innes, chief executive of the Australian Jockeys’ Association. “Personally I don’t know why you would risk your neck the way they do for \$150 a ride. People see the glitz and glamour; they don’t see the darker side. And the industry has been pretty good at hiding the darker side, in my view.”

For many riders, depression comes late in their careers, or after they retire. Neil Williams was 35 when he gassed himself in his car at home on the Gold Coast in November 1999. A week earlier his old friend and fellow jockey Ray Setches had taken the same drastic step in rural Victoria. Williams’s wife Yvette said later that her husband had come to hate racing after another close friend, Ken Russell, was killed in a race at Canterbury in 1993.

Few suicides have a simple explanation, of



“Keith used to confide in me at times. He’d say, ‘How’re you handling it?’ I think for him it was a way of measuring whatever he was going through against me”

Former jockey Bill Goodwin, left paraplegic by a fall

course. Williams was having marital difficulties, and Setches had suffered sexual abuse at the hands of Catholic schoolteachers, according to his brother. When Rodney Smyth and Ray Kliese killed themselves, their jockeying careers were already over – Smyth was working as a trainer, and Kliese had been forced to quit as an apprentice when a fall damaged his spine in 1984.

Innes sees a pattern in all this. “The industry encourages these kids to come in at 14 or 15 and effectively forgo any education. They don’t eat properly, stunting their body growth,” he says. “At 18 or 19, they’re entering million-dollar races where the prizemoney is extraordinary. At some stage in their career they’re likely to have a nasty fall, and for some that results in permanent disability and their world comes crashing down.”

But the chief executive of Racing NSW, Peter V’landys, flatly rejects the notion that jockeys are susceptible to depression. “There is no evidence that we have seen whatsoever that suggests we are outside the norm of the general population,” he says. Racing Queensland’s Director of Integrity Operations, Jamie Orchard, concurs.

Change comes slowly to racing, in part because the competing state organisations that run it can be reluctant to work in tandem. It wasn’t until 2008 that the industry agreed to create a national insurance scheme covering jockeys for accidents and public liability. Until then many jockeys simply couldn’t afford accident insurance – more than half of them earn less than \$50,000 a year, according to the Australian

Jockeys’ Association. After much lobbying from the association, the industry now channels one per cent of its \$400 million annual prizemoney into the insurance scheme.

Innes is now lobbying the state racing bodies to emulate Racing Victoria, which has hired a full-time sports psychologist, Lisa Stevens, to provide 24-hour counselling for jockeys. Racing NSW says it will soon follow suit, but the subject of depression among jockeys is so touchy that Stevens refused to discuss it for this article.

Whether Keith Mahoney could have been coaxed back from the brink by a counsellor will never be known. Jockeys are stoic by nature, and for all his emotionalism, Mahoney was no different. He left no note, and gave no hint that he was planning to take his own life. “Keith committed suicide on a Saturday; he was due at my place on Sunday,” recalls Neil Jolly. “You ask me why he did it. I can’t even answer that question.”

A week before he died, Mahoney had called his old mate Bill Goodwin on the Sunshine Coast. Goodwin’s racing career ended 16 years ago, at 32, when he was speared headlong into the turf at a country racetrack outside Brisbane, breaking his neck. He has been a paraplegic ever since, and over the years has grown accustomed to phone calls from other jockeys. “Keith used to confide in me at times,” Goodwin recalls. “He would say, ‘How’re you handling it?’ I’d say, ‘I’m not bad Keith – I’m good’. I think for him it was a way of measuring whatever he was going through against me.” In that last conversation, Mahoney sounded down. Goodwin had no intimation of what was coming, but he’d always known that for “Magic” a life without racing was difficult to face. “Riding was everything to him, absolutely everything,” he says. “He deserved better than he got, I tell you.”

For 24-hour crisis support, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or go to www.beyondblue.org.au