



DEDICATED FOLLOWERS OF FASHION

Richard Shaw meets the dedicated globetrotting fashionistas who chase Fashions on the Field glory at every major racing carnival and discovers the stakes are high.

Every year, Angela Menz clocks up nearly 20,000 kilometres travelling from Canberra to Australia's major horseracing carnivals. Melbourne's Caulfield Cup, Cox Plate and Melbourne Cup, Sydney's AJC Derby and Golden Slipper, Brisbane's Stradbroke Handicap, the Adelaide Cup and several country carnivals are all on her annual hit list.

The 26-year-old openly admits it's not the horses that bring her through the turnstiles each year. She is a racing-fashion junkie whose passion for frocks on the field stretches beyond that of your average Spring Carnival racegoer.

Fashion and style have long enjoyed an indelible link with the 'sport of kings' for Europe's upper classes. In Australia, this phenomenon spread to the masses when fashion competitions started appearing on major racecourses in the early 1960s. Today, fashion's allure is undeniable.

In recent years, more than 700,000 racegoers have attended the major days of Victoria's Spring Racing Carnival. Half of them are women, so that's a lot of frocks and fascinators on our racetracks. "Girls love any excuse to dress up and the races is the perfect opportunity to show your own sense of style," Menz says.

Like Menz, Lisa Tan dedicates a sizeable chunk of her time to travelling and dressing up for big race meetings. "The fact that a place still exists where I can dress up to the nines, wear a hat and feel like a proper lady is incredibly enticing," says the 27-year-old from Perth. "In a world dominated by jeans, it's refreshing to wear something beautiful and special."

For most women, going to the races is about dressing up and having fun. There's certainly an element of that for Menz, Tan and 25-year-old Melburnian Laura Gleich, but for them the stakes are a little higher as they traverse the country, aiming to win the judges over at each Fashions on the Field (FOTF) competition.

Since its inception nearly 50 years ago, FOTF has been integral to the phenomenal success of Australia's major racing carnivals. Each year, an increasing number of women, and even men, are entering categories such as 'Ladies Classic Racewear' or 'Men's Signature Style', respectively. In Melbourne, thousands of dedicated fashionistas line up for FOTF competitions each Spring Carnival. Even in remote towns such as Broken Hill, where FOTF entrants vie for more than \$20,000 in prizes at St Patrick's >



Opposite: Serial FOTF entrant Angela Menz (top left); Menz with Lisa Tan and Laura Gleich (bottom left). Above right: There are no false starts among these stallions.

Race Club, FOTF arguably rivals the action on the racetrack. With a combined total of more than \$700,000 in prizes on offer at major FOTF competitions around the country, it's no surprise that competition for those prizes can get hot. Winners take home new cars, luxury overseas holidays, jewellery, shopping vouchers and scores of other prizes. The booty that podiatrist and model Gleich has scored from her numerous FOTF triumphs would make anyone envious: a Saab car, trips to Dubai and Ireland, more than \$20,000 in shopping vouchers and much more.

Menz says these prizes are certainly a motivating force, but simply lining up among some of the nation's best-dressed women, and the sheer elation of winning, are what ultimately drive her to compete. "Making the finals is a buzz, but being named 'best dressed' is the most incredible thrill," she says.

As well as attending Queensland's major race days, 26-year-old Brisbane Lauren Walker religiously heads south each spring, seeking FOTF glory. "I love being able to construct an outfit from scratch," she says. "You just never know what the outfit is really like or how it will fare until the day, when you see what everyone else is wearing."

Each year, Menz, a fashion graduate of the Canberra Institute of Technology, attends more than 20 major race days around Australia, painstakingly planning

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and making an outfit for each one. This infatuation began when her father introduced her to horseracing at a young age. "I think he hoped I would fall in love with racing, but my interest quickly drifted towards the fashion stakes rather than the track," she says. After winning the first FOTF competition she entered, at the Queanbeyan Cup in 2003, the seed was sown for her obsession.

All four women source their own materials and make their own outfits for FOTF competitions. Tan says the inspiration for an outfit can come from anywhere. "Fashion magazines, fabrics, seeing a great neckline on a dress while shopping, movies, books, TV shows... I'm constantly looking out for things that could be appropriated for a racing outfit."

Based in London for the past two years, Tan used her FOTF prowess to claim the major fashion prize of a new car at last

FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

Experienced Fashions on the Field (FOTF) contenders Laura Gleich, Lisa Tan and Angela Menz offer the following tips for impressing the judges:

- "Dress to suit your physique," says Gleich. "Don't wear anything too short and do wear a smile."
- If you're buying off the rack, customise your outfit so it has a touch of difference, or have a milliner make a hat to match your outfit, says Tan.
- Don't be afraid to take a risk. "My biggest pay-offs have come from daring to wear something out of the ordinary," says Menz.

If you think your race wear cuts it with the best, check out these Spring Racing Carnival FOTF competitions.

• 11 September, Theo Marks Stakes Day Rosehill Gardens Racecourse, Sydney

This is one of Sydney's biggest spring race meetings. The Myer FOTF winner will represent New South Wales in the Australian national final on Oaks Day at the Melbourne Cup Carnival at Flemington. Visit www.theraces.com.au.



Above left: Angela Menz (on the right) and a fellow fashionista wear winning smiles. Above right: Menz's father, Lloyd, shares her passion for fashion.

year's Epsom Oaks Day in the UK, one of the world's oldest and most prestigious racing events. Gleich, who is currently living in France, scored the major prize this year, a luxury holiday to Ireland. "I'm sure the

Brits can't be too happy that we've beaten them on their home turf," Tan quips. "One day our accents might start to go against us, but in the meantime we'll just continue upping the game and showing them how we do it."

International success aside, Tan and Gleich agree the *crème de la crème* of FOTF competitions is undoubtedly Australia's Spring Racing Carnival, with Tan ritually coming home for this time-honoured event. Returning home for Christmas is often the done thing for many people living abroad, but Tan says she times her yearly visits to coincide with one of the world's biggest FOTF competitions, the Melbourne Cup Carnival. "I have friends in Australia who are also racing-fashion fans, so it's a fantastic way for us to catch up."

Having won the top prize at Flemington's Derby Day in 2005, Gleich knows how hot the Melbourne Cup FOTF competition is. "People come from all over Australia, and the number of entrants and the seriousness with which some people take the competition are amazing," she says. This seriousness means that Gleich, Menz, Tan and Walker, who have all become good friends since



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meeting at FOTF competitions, invest an enormous amount of time in dressing up for the big racing carnivals.

Menz, who juggles a budding career as a milliner and designer while working in fashion retail, says her passion for fashion extends well beyond the racetrack. "I'm obsessed with fashion, so my everyday look is usually very dressy," she says. "I love to dress up and I wear heels a lot."

This year Menz has around eight outfits planned for Spring Carnival FOTF competitions. She says preparations can range from months to just days before a major race. "It's always in the back of my mind, but I often leave it quite late so I can check the weather forecast," she explains. This can mean lots of late nights, trying to pull every last detail together. Menz rates a magenta dress with feathers around the collar and a big multicoloured fan hat, which she wore to the 2008 Melbourne

• 9 October, Mimiki Foundation Raceday Eagle Farm Racecourse, Brisbane

The winner of the Myer FOTF will represent Queensland in the Australian national final on Oaks Day at the Melbourne Cup Carnival at Flemington. Visit www.brc.com.au.

• 9, 13 and 16 October, Caulfield Spring Racing Carnival Caulfield Racecourse, Melbourne

This carnival includes the Caulfield Guineas and Caulfield Cup and features the Chadstone Fashion Stakes with a prize total of about \$70,000. Visit www.melbourne.racingclub.net.au.

• 16 October, Northerly Stakes Day Ascot Racecourse, Perth

The start of Perth's Spring/Summer Racing Carnival is an opportunity to win the Myer FOTF and then represent Western Australia in the Australian national final on Oaks Day at the Melbourne Cup Carnival at Flemington. Visit www.perthtracing.com.au.

• 23 October, Cox Plate Moonee Valley Racing Club, Melbourne

Offering about \$120,000 in prizes, the David Jones FOFT has four categories: Head Turning Hats, Men's Signature Style, Ladies Classic Racewear and Young Contemporary. Visit www.coxplate.com.au.



Above left: This fashionista wore a colour to stop traffic for the race that stops a nation. **Above right:** Lisa Tan's \$60 ensemble was a winner at the Melbourne Cup.

Cup, as her favourite FOTF outfit so far.

"I'm a notorious late finisher," laughs Tan. "I'll often be putting the finishing touches on a hat or sewing on buttons the night before a race."

Tan is most fond of the navy waistcoat and skirt with red polka dot blouse and matching hat that saw her claim runner-up at the 2007 Melbourne Cup. She says the clothes took two weeks and only \$60 to make. "The most expensive parts of the outfit were the Mimco clutch bag and Marc by Marc Jacobs shoes," she says.

Richard Nylon, celebrity milliner and veteran judge at the Melbourne Cup Carnival FOTF since 2001, says it's often unique personal touches and accessories that set contestants apart. "Some competitors are too 'matchy', resembling walking three-piece lounge suites with their hat, handbag, shoes and umbrella in the same fabric as their dress," he says. Nylon certainly notices serial FOTF entrants such as Menz and company. "You have to admire their dedication and their belief in the fabulousness that is FOTF."

Such dedication often means these carefully constructed outfits are worn just once. Tan admits the back of her wardrobe is full of 'retired' racing outfits. Menz says sometimes she'll rework or wear an outfit to another racecourse, but most are never worn twice.

So, how much does this fetish for finery cost these race carnival fashionistas?

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Walker, who runs her own fashion store, Joli Boutique, in the Brisbane suburb of Ascot, estimates you could spend up to \$10,000 a year when you factor in designer handbags, shoes, fabric, hair, make-up and travel costs. "It's not a cheap hobby but if you win it's all worth it," she says.

Having your photo plastered in the newspapers and on websites during Australia's major racing carnivals is par for the course for FOTF competitors. Having become one of the most recognisable faces in Australian FOTF competitions, Menz says the paparazzi-like attention is exciting. Tan adds that it can also have professional advantages, helping to kickstart her and Menz's design careers. "Getting press has always been quite important when you work in fashion and design your own outfits," she explains. "Having a good picture in the paper can be almost as important as winning." 

• **30 October, 2, 4 and 6 November, Melbourne Cup Carnival, Flemington Racecourse, Melbourne**

This year, the 150th Melbourne Cup Carnival is complemented by Australia's most prestigious FOTF competition. Men's Racewear is judged on Derby Day (30 October) while the Women's Racewear category runs over the carnival's first three days and culminates on Oaks Day (4 November), when the Australian national final is held. The winner takes home around \$100,000 in prizes. Visit www.melbourncup.com.

• **19 March 2011, St Patrick's Races, St Patrick's Race Club, Broken Hill**

The Outback Cup's popular FOTF has around \$20,000 in prizes up for grabs for categories such as Most Stylish Lady, Most Debonair Gent, Miss Teenager, Junior Colleen and Junior Patrick. Visit www.stpatricks.org.au.