

Little Spike continues to surprise Arna Donnelly

Arna Donnelly half expected to win Monday's \$20,000 Dinny Johnston Memorial and she did. Just, not with the horse she thought.

Little Spike caused a boilder in the seven-horse field when, in the hands of stable junior Zev Meredith, he sprinted and nosed out better-fancied stablemate, The Surfer, in the shadows of the post.

Paying better than \$20 on the tote, it was a bloody nose for bookies but a pleasant surprise for Donnelly.

"I probably didn't think he could win it because he hadn't raced for seven weeks," she told the Xpress.

"He'd had a foot abscess which led to a couple of weeks off and he'd only had one trial to prepare for it."

It was tidy field that included progressive types like Christopher Dance, In Excess and Kashkeeper, but Little Spike was able to capitalise on his run in the trail to usurp them all.

"To run those sorts of sectionals against those horses, I was quite impressed."

Donnelly says she took over training Little Spike, a son of Terror To Love, in November 2022, what would have been early in his two-year-old season in the old terms.

"I was quite lucky to get him and a big thanks goes to Terry Chmiel.

"When Terry was moving to Aussie, he needed a new trainer and because of the connection I had with the owners, Terry suggested sending him up to me.

"I've had him for about 14 months. He was always quite a nice wee horse, just a bit weak and in need of more time to develop.

"But it's fair to say he's been a bit of a surprise package on what he's done to date."

Little Spike was bred by the late Ken Piercy and his wife Audrey, who lived in Timaru until Ken passed in 2021 aged 94.

Donnelly had previously trained No Way Else (eight wins) for the Piercys and another stable favourite in New York Minute (15 wins) is still raced by Audrey, who has moved to Wellington to be closer to family.

"Audrey is about 91 or 92 and is in a rest home but she really loves the horses.

"It gives her something to look forward to and she's got a cell phone so I can ring her with updates all the time.

"She was telling me the other day that this horse is named after Ken because his friends used to call him little Spike when he was younger."

The Terror To Love stock are not common in the north, mainly because he largely served mares on farm only in Canterbury, but Donnelly is keen to get her hands on a few more.

"He's my first one and on what I've seen of him, I couldn't say no if another one was offered to me."

Being a homebred, the Harness Million on February 16 at Alexandra Park is out of the question for Little Spike.

"We might just go around next week at Auckland in a three-year-old race and see how he measures up there.

"Then maybe we'll have a look at the Northern Derby because he gets around the Auckland way good."

One horse that will be going to the Harness Million is The Surfer.

"I was still really happy with him; he got in a little bit and cost himself the race but it was only his second run back.

"He's another one that is a bit better right-handed, too."

Donnelly's three stable stars – Kango, Le Major and Jolimont - are at varying stages of a return to the track.

"Le Major went a nice trial at Pukekohe yesterday. He'll go around in Auckland next week and then on to the Harness Million on the 16th.

"Kango had a good spell after Cup Week – I think everything caught up with him after the Aussie trip and the return to Canterbury.

"It was nice to be able to give him a good break and he's just started doing a little strong work this week.

"He won't be seen until the end of February, I'd say."

"And Jolimont is just back in too after running fourth in the New Zealand Derby and then having a break.

"I'm probably going to target a few country cups with him and get a penalty-free win.

"He came a long way in that last prep and it seemed like he just got better and better.

"I'd like to think in 12 months' time, he's taken that step up to the top level." – by Garrick Knight

