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Blouse – *verb*: to defeat (a rival or rivals) by a very narrow margin.

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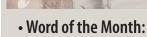
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Blouse

The story behind the Word of the Month

Blouse is a word of obscure French origin. For a borrowing from French into English, it is a surprising latecomer, first appearing in the early nineteenth century. It has been used of various loose upper garments, and now means 'a woman's upper garment, resembling a shirt, typically with a collar, buttons, and sleeves.' The word can also be used as a verb, meaning 'to make (a garment) hang in loose folds: *I bloused my trousers over my boots.*' In British English (and then in Australian English) the only significant development for the noun was a figurative transfer in the late 1960s, when the connotations of the female garment came to be applied to a certain kind of male: 'A person regarded as feeble, cowardly, or emotionally over-sensitive; an ineffectual or effeminate male; originally and chiefly in the phrase of *big girl's blouse*' (*OED*).

Something extra happened to the verb, however, in Australian English in the later 1980s. What would you make of these uses of **blouse**?

> Warwick Farm Form Guide: Mr Imperious... **Bloused** in last stride last start. Give another chance. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 February 1990).

> On the track Lonhro and Helenus magically **bloused** their way into history and J.B. Cummings will have a Cup runner on the featherweight of 49kg. (*Sunday Telegraph*, 3 November 2002).

Straight races are always tricky, but everything points to First Command. Comes off strong last start win at Caulfield and only **bloused** in final stride by All Slient in Gilgai (*Herald Sun*, 30 October 2009).

This Australian verb means 'to defeat a rival by a very narrow margin; to win a race narrowly'. Most of our evidence comes from horse racing, but this new sense of the verb can be transferred to other contexts, as in this reference to the second one-day cricket match between Australia and England in England in 1997, won by England with ten balls remaining:

> Four years ago at this ground - Mark Taylor's last one-day appearance for Australia - England smashed 4-253 to **blouse** Australia on a typically good batting strip. (*Herald Sun,* 22 June 2001).

How did this new sense develop in Australia? It must derive from the clothing that the jockeys wear in races. In Australia, jockeys are called *hoops*, because of the bands, in contrasting colours, that they wear on their **blouse**, sleeves, or cap. As soon as we see in this definition that the upper garment a jockey wears is commonly called a **blouse**, we have a clue about the origin of the Australian sense of the verb. A horse can win a race by a nose, head, a length, and so on, but it can also win a race by the typical width of a jockey's **blouse** - and thus '**blouse**' its rivals. This seems to be the origin of the Australian verb.

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