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Left, Genuine Reward with the lead rope in his mouth to keep his young male mind occupied. Right, Cigar looks out on the world from his stall. Photos by Karen Preston.

What makes a horse a hero?

SARATOGA SPRINGS, NY — On August 21, the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame in Saratoga Springs held its last roundtable discussion of the Thoroughbred-racing meet. The topic was "On a Pedestal: What Makes a Horse a Hero?" On hand were Martha Gerry, owner of the great gelding Forego, horse of the year in 1974-76; jockey Jean Cruguet, who rode Seattle Slew to his Triple Crown victory; Bill Mott, trainer of the five-year-old handicap champion Cigar; Leo O'Brien, trainer of Fourstardave; and John Henderson, a New Jersey lobbyist who is president of the Fourstardave Fan Club.

The question of horses as heroes is not limited to Thoroughbred racing; although racing, unlike some other horse sports, must appeal to a mass audience to survive. All the horse lovers and horse bettors put together wouldn't make a blip in the ABC ratings on Kentucky Derby Day. The sport must draw in those who don't know the difference between a croup and a hock or a trifecta and an exacta.

As issues such as restructuring races, getting more TV time, and promoting the sport were discussed, one thing became clear: it's often one horse that draws a person in. *New York Daily News* turf writer Bill Finley, who moderated the discussion, recalled how as a kid in 1972 he first saw a big chestnut two-year-old named Secretariat and instantly became a lifelong racing fan. There are undoubtedly millions who can tell the same story (the writer included). Secretariat, the Triple Crown champion of 1973, was arguably the last great superstar horse. Although there were other Triple Crown winners in that amazing decade—Seattle Slew in 1977 and Affirmed the very next year—neither achieved the adulation and admiration that the American public had for "Big Red." His fame hearkened back to the horse who first bore that nickname, the great Man O' War.

On the distaff side, fillies such as Regret, Ruffian, Genuine Risk, and Go for Wand seized the public imagination, Ruffian and Go for Wand as much for the tragedy of their untimely deaths as for their courage and speed on the track.

Heroic equines not limited to racing

The "hero" phenomenon isn't limited to racing. How many show-jumping fans were first captured by the high-spirited bucking of Gem Twist on his way to winning a silver medal in the 1988 Seoul Olympics? Michael Golden's gray Thoroughbred gelding and his handsome rider, Greg Best, became show jumping's matinee idols until an injury sidelined Best in 1992. With rider Leslie Burr (then Lenehan), Gem went on to be named Horse of the Year an unprecedented third time by the American Grandprix Association. Unlike in Canada, where Ian Millar and Big Ben are household names, American show jumping—indeed, all horse sports—must compete for attention and air time with the titans of baseball, football, basketball, and even hockey.

Equine stars like Gem Twist are hard to come by, but they do exist. The eventual retirement of Lisa Jacquin's 21-year-old Thoroughbred gelding For the Moment, affectionately known as "Fred," will leave a huge hole on the Grand Prix show-jumping scene. What a story it will be if Michael Matz's gallant French horse Rhum IV, who has battled back from illness and injury, makes it to next year's Olympics. And on the dressage side, anyone who knows how long and brilliantly Gifted has competed cannot help but cheer when he and rider Carol Lavell enter the ring to show the youngsters how it's done. Although racing gets more press, the Olympic disciplines do have one advantage: their stars burn a lot longer, if not quite so bright.

In the 1980s, stallion prices and stud fees jumped so sharply that many owners could not afford to keep their horses campaigning after their third or fourth years. One after another they blazed across the racing scene only to disappear into the breeding shed. There were exceptions, like the gelding John Henry, whose fans turned out year after year to see him. The same can be said of the chestnut gelding Fourstardave, the so-called "Sultan of Saratoga," whose fame barely stretches beyond the fence of the racetrack where he has had his greatest triumphs. On closing day of this year's meet, ten-year-old "Dave" took his last gallop down the stretch with jockey Richard Migliore aboard. He had won a race every year at the Spa for eight straight years but broke an ankle in 1994. Running this year with pins in the ankle, Dave wasn't quite himself and was 0-3. Leo O'Brien and the horse's breeder/co-owner Richard Bomze and his partner, Bernard Connaughton, decided to retire the gelding after his hundredth race, in which he finished out of the money. Dave's career included thirteen stakes wins and $1,636,737 in earnings, but his biggest accomplishment was the love of his devoted fans. The alley that leads to Siro's Restaurant next to the track (where Dave was given a party last year) was renamed Fourstardave Way this season.

Can you make an equine hero, or do they just happen? Especially in racing, the crapshoot that is genetics makes a huge difference. All the pedigree in the world counts for naught if the speed or stamina aren't there. Case in point is Genuine Reward, the first foal of Kentucky Derby winner Genuine Risk at the ripe old age of sixteen. The then-unnamed colt made the cover of *The Blood-Horse* when he was barely two weeks old and again when he reached his first official birthday. Richard Stone Reeves painted a portrait of "Jenny" and her chestnut son by Rahy. The baby barely survived a rough last week of gestation, which ended when labor was induced. He then had surgery to remove two colon impactions in his first week of life.

This summer, two-year-old Genuine Reward was in training at Bill Mott's barn at the bucolic Greentree training facility on the backstretch. As the meet drew to a close, he was about to be sent back to owner Bertram Firestone's arm without having raced at the Spa. Said assistant trainer Dave Wallace, "He's good, growing a lot. He needs time to grow." But one of the exercise riders scoffed, "Why don't you take a picture of a good horse? He hasn't showed nothing yet." Genuine Reward's time may come, but his illustrious mother is no guarantee of racing success.

In the same barn, only a few stalls away, was the five-year-old stallion Cigar, who probably will take on three-year-old Thunder Gulch in the mile-and-a-quarter Classic on Breeder's Cup Day at Belmont on October 28. Cigar is as good a handicap horse as they come—with, at this writing, a perfect 7-7 record and winnings of $2,509,800—but he's not well-known outside racing circles. He's been on national television only once, and that matters a lot. A win at the Breeder's Cup, set to be televised on NBC, could make the dark brown Cigar a star. At the round-table, one fan suggested enlisting the help of cigar smoker David Letterman in promoting the horse, but Mott didn't seem too enthusiastic about the idea. Roundtable attendee Whitney Tower pointed out the promotional value of great rivalries, such as Affirmed and Alydar. The Cigar/Thunder Gulch match-up could be just what the doctor ordered. To add extra interest, Mott indicated that if Cigar stays sound, he could run as a six-year-old next year.

In a world in which athletes are as much in the news for scandals as for scores, there is a refreshing purity about the equine competitors. They run or jump or piaffe for a bucket of oats, a carrot, the love of their riders, or just because it's their job. They don't take bribes (at least not monetary ones), they don't take drugs (voluntarily), and they don't get drunk and break up hotel rooms (just stalls, on a bad day). They offer their bodies and their lives for our entertainment and profit and receive our care and love in return, or at least the lucky ones do. The more fans know about the horses they watch, the more they care; and that's a good way to keep all horse sports honest. In our multichannel world, it takes a compelling personality, human or equine, to get viewers to take their fingers off the remote control—or better yet, to leave the house and attend an equestrian event. That's where the stars really shine.

By Kate O'Hare