The Thoroughbred: Stuff of Dreams and Legends

By Kate O'Hare

In his 1952 book, *Fabulous Bawd: The Story of Saratoga* (New York: Henry Holt), Mel Hemier described a morning workout at the race course thus:

"[Sportswriter Frank] Graham likely was thinking of the quiet hours just after dawn at the track on Union Avenue, when the swipes lead out the sets of colts and fillies for workouts—everyone of them, God help us, carved in chocolate or chestnut or ebony, like the most beautiful living statue ever built—and the exercise boys canter them along for a furlong or two and then break them off suddenly at the three-eights pole with a scream, 'Come on, now!' or 'Eee-yah!' and the early souls sitting on the clubhouse porch lay their forks and butter knives down for a magic moment and hold their breath and just watch the sight, the Thoroughbred flying, stretching, straining, flowing down the home stretch, his hoofs roaring rhythmically and the morning sunlight picking him up like a gallery spotlight, holding him for a moment, and losing him reluctantly as he bends his way around the turn and slowly, easily runs down to a gallop, a canter, a trot, a walk...and then standing proudly, silently in the morning air, his muscles quivering, his ears pricked, his rider reaching out and patting him along the neck."



A Thoroughbred gives it his all during his morning workout at Saratoga. Photo by Karen Preston.

In the long history of man and horse, few breeds have inspired as much love, adulation, excitement, greed, and sheer insanity as has the Thoroughbred. This is a horse to immortalize in art, to wax rhapsodic about in newspaper columns the day after the big race, to recall in fond and inflated memory years down the line in smoky bars and along the backstretch rail. This is a horse to grant your dreams or leave them torn into little pieces by the grandstand gate.

But the Thoroughbred is more than this, is greater than the sum of the parts assembled by seventeenth English nobles in search of the perfect running horse or foxhunting steed. Partially by design and partially by happy accident, they produced an animal of superb conformation and blazing speed paired with great endurance, courage, and versatility. Today, the Thoroughbred is the most valuable breed in the world. His blood runs in the veins of almost every European sport horse; he is part of the foundation stock of both the Quarter Horse and the Standardbred; Thoroughbreds and part-Thoroughbreds excel in almost every equine discipline. But he is also a troubled animal who walks under a cloud of problems with temperament, soundness, and overall health. The Thoroughbred's thrilling speed and quick maturity have made him a priceless commodity, which has in turn led to inbreeding and overbreeding. The same animal that fetched thousands at a yearling auction can sometimes be had for a few dollars, if he survives the rigors of the track at all.

But first, some history. Beginning with Henry VII, Britain's monarchs, nobles, and landed gentry set about to create a new breed of horse by breeding Oriental stallions to their native mares. Some say the foundation stallions...were pure Arabian; others argue for infusions of Barb and Andalusian blood. But what has come down in history are three horses whose origins were clouded but whose progeny were mighty. All came from the Middle East into British hands. Captain Robert Byerly captured the Byerly Turk in war at the Battle of Buda and rode him in Ireland at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. In 1704, a Thomas Darley bought a horse in Syria that became known as the Darley Arabian. Some 25 years after that, the Godolphin Barb (or Arabian—his pedigree is much a mystery) arrived and eventually stood at stud for the Earl of Godolphin, but not before leading a life of Dickensian proportions. Supposedly he was sold by a North African caliph to the King of France, but his bad temperament lost him that lofty position and he is said to have wound up pulling a cart in Paris. As the story goes, he was bought by Englishman Edward Coke, then was willed to a friend of Coke's, who traded him to the Earl. The legends goes on to say that the Barb broke loose and covered a prize mare, and the product of that accidental union was so extraordinary that it convinced the Earl of the Barb's value as a sire. To this day, the legend of the Godolphin Barb cannot be entirely proved or disproved.

These three sires are direct ancestors of three stallions to whom all modern Thoroughbreds can trace their ancestry: Matchem, a grandson of the Godolphin, foaled in 1748; Herod, a great-grandson of the Byerly Turk, foaled in 1758; and Eclipse, a great-great-grandson of the Darley Arabian, foaled in 1764.

In the period after the Revolutionary War, the destroyed racing industry in America began to recover with the arrival of some extraordinary sires, including Diomed (sire of leading racehorse and sire Sir Archy) and Messenger, also an ancestor of the great Standardbred Hambletonian.

It can be said that the history of Thoroughbred racing is one vast, very expensive experiment in equine genetics. Many horseman believe that good training cannot add a great deal to a horse's natural ability and will to win (although bad training can certainly detract from it); the basic equipment must be present at birth. With so much riding on the hopes and dreams of speed, there is almost as much handicapping in the breeding shed as on the track. As the saying goes, "Breed the best to the best and hope for the best." Sometimes a good racehorse, such as Mr. Prospector, can turn out to be a sire of extraordinary sons who themselves are extraordinary sires. Sometimes, as with Secretariat, there are some good sons but the greatness seems to pass primarily through the female line. And then there is 1995's likely horse of the year, Cigar, a five-year-old bay stallion who, in defiance of his turf breeding, has turned out to be unbeatable on the dirt.

Today's Thoroughbred is bred all over the U.S. and the world (all through live cover for racehorses—no artificial insemination allowed), with racing in such diverse locations as Japan, Hong Kong, Australia, Dubai, Europe, and North, Central, and South America.

The Jockey Club oversees American racing and registers all racing Thoroughbreds. The names of the great racehorses come down through history: Flying Childers, Eclipse, Glencoe, Ben Brush, Man O'War, Exterminator, Native Dancer, Kelso, Forego, Secretariat, John Henry, Ruffian, Genuine Risk, Seattle Slew, Alydar, Affirmed, Spectacular Bid, Holy Bull, and Cigar to name just the tiniest percentage.

There is a world of Thoroughbreds who will never make that list, but their accomplishments shine just as bright. Hitch'n Celebrate, Another Guy, Stillaspill—ring any bells? No? Try For The Moment, Irish, and Touch of Class. These three unheralded racehorses went on to become stars in the show-jumping ring. And, of course, there are Thoroughbreds who are bred specifically for performance disciplines. Thorough-breds also excel in the dressage ring and the three-day event, as polo ponies, as steeplechasers, and, with proper training, as pleasure horses. In recent years, the Jockey Club established the Performance Horse Registry (PHR), a wholly owned subsidiary that is creating a central database to relate the performances of Thoroughbreds and half-Thoroughbreds in non-racing events to their pedigrees. The PHR's aims are to stimulate interest in the breed (especially the off-track horse) as a performance horse and to help the U.S. performance-horse industry improve its record-keeping process.

In 1940, the Jockey Club established the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation Inc.; in 1989, its resources were combined with the Jockey Club Research Foundation. The purpose of the foundation is to promote and fund equine veterinary research; in 1994 the Foundation distributed a record $597,000 for eighteen projects at eight North American universities. All breeds can benefit from the work being done to understand the physiology of the equine athlete.

Bred as a toy of the rich, the Thoroughbred has become an integral part of the horse world. His stamp is found wherever equine athletes compete; his courage and physical prowess are the stuff of tall tales and legends. And no matter how shady the owner, how seedy the bettors or how bush-league the track, the Thoroughbred retains an undeniable nobility.

In his dedication for *Fabulous Bawd*, Heimer wrote: "This is dedicated to the horses who, alone in Saratoga over the years, have remained honest."