



Charlie Leerhsen will always have yonkers!

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Charlie Leerhsen, an executive editor at Sports Illustrated, has a long, successful track record at a number of major magazines. Now, the man who fell in love with harness racing on his first trip to Yonkers as a boy is trying to bring Dan Patch back to life

There was a day, before the fascists told us everything except bean sprouts is a big no-no, when cigars and racetracks were inseparable. Throw in some alcohol and it was a veritable summit of sins in the days when men didnt change diapers. For Charlie Leerhsen, the cigar served as an introduction; or rather, an entry point by way of disguise.

Just before being pushed through the turnstiles at Yonkers Raceway, Leerhsens father unceremoniously stuffed a White Owl brand stogie, still wrapped in cellophane, into his preteen sons mouth as a way to get young Charlie past the age-checkers who banned kids at night in those days. That unlit cigar, on Leerhsens first trip to the track, proved to be a gateway drug to the hard stuff. I still remember walking down the apron and seeing the horses scoring and just the look of it. It was something Ive never quite gotten over, how beautiful it looked, Leerhsen said. Those were the days, he said, when going to the track was part of the air you breathed. You didnt even think about it. You didnt think of yourself as a racing fan because it wasnt a cause.

That was 45 years ago, give or take a year or two. Much has changed. Leerhsen, who will be 57 on March 21, grew up in a blue-collar home in the south Bronx. His mother was a waitress in a coffee shop in Manhattan. His father worked for the Mack Truck company.

Today, after stints at Newsweek, People and US weekly, he is among Manhattans magazine elite as one of three executive editors of Sports Illustrated (SI). More than just married to the job, Leerhsen is married to an executive at a large national magazine. In October of 2004, he wed Sarah Saffian, an author and editor at Entertainment Weekly. This month, Leerhsen will celebrate his fourth year with SI, where he is responsible for the front portion of the magazine that includes the Scorecard and Players features.

True, harness racing almost never makes it into Sports Illustrated (see sidebar p. 39). Leerhsen is loath to champion the sport in the SI boardroom lest it be seen as an abuse of power on behalf of something with limited mainstream appeal. But his unintentional contribution to what has become a cause for those who love it and want to save it may turn out to be a biggie. He is in the process of

writing a book about Dan Patch in the same vein as Laura Hillenbrands bestseller Seabiscuit, which became a popular movie nominated for the Academy Award for best picture in 2003. I think the book could be significant because it could be the best-written book on harness racing ever done, said Stan Bergstein, the man who gave Leerhsen his start in magazines. He is a supremely talented writer.

To be clear, Leerhsen isnt writing Dan Patchs story because he wants to give harness racing a boost. He thinks its a great tale of an outstanding horse that was once a pop culture icon and now no longer registers in Americas consciousness. Its always just inherently fascinating when a great animal comes along and changes peoples lives, Leerhsen said of the champion pacer who earned perhaps as much as \$1 million a year as the sun rose on the 1900s. He was the biggest sports celebrity of the first decade of the (20th) century... Ty Cobb was only making \$12,000 a year.

Leerhsen has written books with test pilot Chuck Yeager, successful television executive Brandon Tartikoff and business tycoon Donald Trump. On those projects he was mostly a literary mercenary. The Dan Patch project is more personal, because its something I picked and I pitched and I sold. Simon and Schuster was enthusiastic about it, he said. When I thought about what great untold stories there were, its really hard to find them in this day and age because every story has not just been told, but told five times, at least.

That Leerhsen started his magazine career at Hoof Beats, the association magazine of the United States Trotting Association (USTA), helps in terms of having the necessary cred, along with his writing chops, to pull off the Dan Patch project.

He graduated from Fordham University in New York City in 1971 with a degree in creative writing. After brief stints working for a small book publisher called Jarrow Press and then for Pitney-Bowes public relations department, Leerhsen came across a copy of Hoof Beats at the track. I bought a copy of it. I was so thrilled there was a magazine about harness racing, because you couldnt buy it at the newsstand, he said. Soon after, Leerhsen pitched a story idea to Bergstein, then the editor of Hoof Beats. Bergstein said he hired Leerhsen on the strength of the introductory letter alone. It was life-changing in some ways every way except financially, Leerhsen said. (Stan) was only paying me \$50 a piece. But that first assignment transformed Leerhsen from a racing fan to someone with credentials able to access the backstretch and the back rooms.

Bergstein said he takes intense pride in discovering Leerhsen. I consider myself a talent scout, Bergstein said referring to a string of bright stars that began as his apprentices. After freelancing for Hoof Beats for a few years, Leerhsen was hired to work out of the USTAs New York publicity office based at Rockefeller Center and run by Hall of Fame racing public relations man Joe Goldstein. (Leerhsen) was a brilliant student at Fordham, Goldstein said. His writing ability even as a 20, 21-year-old was outstanding. He always had this fascination for harness racing... It wasnt addiction. There was an adoration, a love for harness racing, in all aspects.

Leerhsen also loved working for Goldstein. He remembers Goldstein cooking up numerous stunts, one of which involved publicizing the opening of the Meadowlands in 1976. To demonstrate how close the Big M is to Manhattan as the crow flies, Goldstein concocted a scheme to release carrier pigeons to fly from one point to the other. They virtually all got lost. I dont think one pigeon made it, Leerhsen said, chuckling. Being an utter debacle it got more publicity than it ever would have gotten than if all six pigeons just made it. Leerhsen said even the staid New York Times played up the lost pigeons story.

While working for Goldstein, Leerhsen was pitching, writing and selling harness racing stories on the side to publications outside the industry. A piece he wrote for Columbus Magazine on revelry in the backstretch at the Jug did little to amuse some at the USTA. Stan was my defender, Leerhsen said. Compounding Leerhsens trouble was the view that few at the USTA, save Bergstein, appreciated Leerhsens talents. Charlies writing is somewhat esoteric. Nobody at the USTA was esoteric, or knew what the word meant, Bergstein said.

Not long after Leerhsen raised the ire of his corporate masters over the Jug-as-a-drunken-orgy piece, Bergstein left the USTA in a dispute over his dual role as the co-host of the popular Racing at Roosevelt and Yonkers show on New York superstation WOR-TV. Around that time, the USTA closed its New York publicity office and offered Leerhsen a job if he moved to Columbus. The native New Yorker declined and Goldstein helped Leerhsen land a job at Newsweek. Im the only guy that ever went from Hoof Beats to Newsweek, Leerhsen said. I was replaced by a column called On Lameness, which I thought was interesting. Whats the matter? I wasnt lame enough for you?

Leerhsen became the assistant sports writer at Newsweek working for Goldsteins close friend, famed sportswriter Pete Axthelm. Leerhsen landed the job more than just as a favour to Goldstein. Axthelm liked Leerhsens work, Goldstein said, in particular stories Leerhsen had done for the now-defunct Inside Sports magazine. (Leerhsen) wrote some magnificent pieces for them, Goldstein said.

The transition from Hoof Beats to Newsweek was a difficult one. I was very intimidated, Leerhsen said. I remember (Axthelm) came in and he just kind of scared me. He took me out for a drink and he said, Maybe this isnt going to work out. That conversation terrified Leerhsen into action. His first story for Newsweek involved covering a boxing match in Atlantic City. That story later made it into a collection of the best sports stories of that year.

When Newsweek began doing fewer sports stories, Leerhsen switched to writing entertainment and general news pieces. It was a great job, Leerhsen said, detailing how he would come home from an assignment only to find he was being dispatched to another celebrities home.

One time, Leerhsen was sent to the Paris Air Show to interview Yeager, who had just released his life story, Yeager: An Autobiography. That assignment led Leerhsen to work with Yeager on the pilots second book.

Among a long list of famous people, Leerhsen said he has interviewed such notables as Martin Short, Penn and Teller and several boxers, including Riddick Bowe and Mike Tyson, whom he profiled a number of times. Interviewing Tyson was a very weird experience for me, Leerhsen said, referring to a story that appeared in Rolling Stone in 1989. We were sitting in this house and it was getting darker and darker and he was making no moves to turn on any lights... He had this girlfriend or girl on his lap and it was dark. The room was totally dark at the end and I didnt want to say anything to destroy the mood. He was talking so well.

Another time, Leerhsen remembers Tyson admonishing another reporter at a post-fight press conference. Some guy steps up and says something like, Mike Jones, UPI and starts to ask a question and Tyson says to him, Im not going to talk to you Your truck killed my dog. There was a long pause and the guy said, No, Mike, UPI, not UPS. So, why Tyson would think UPS was covering his fight was an interesting thing.

Once, Leerhsen interviewed Robin Williams over lunch in New York and flew to California that same day and interviewed Jonathan Winters, who hid behind a couch and talked to Leerhsen with hand puppets. This is like a 70-year-old man. It was kind of scary, Leerhsen said. As if Williams stream-of-consciousness rant hadnt been taxing enough, Winters nearly put Leerhsen over the edge. Between the two of them, I was so exhausted, I drove a few blocks from Jonathan Winters house and pulled over into a parking lot and fell asleep, even though I had a fancy hotel room waiting for me in LA.

Leerhsens profile of Sylvester Stallone raised Rambos ire. Leerhsen made the observation that there were a lot of masochistic scenes involving Stallones characters in movies Stallone had written. He was always writing himself in scenes where hes having cattle prods stuck in him and pliers put up his rectum. I was talking to him about this at his house and then I went to the mens room and there were pictures of him in his own bathroom downstairs of him being tortured, electrocuted and things broken. Anyway, I worked that into the piece, Leerhsen said. He called me up and he wasnt sure, but he said, Were you making fun of me? Of course, I said, No. But I lied. I was.

Leerhsen worked at Newsweek 11 years before jumping to People magazine to become an editor in the early 1990s. He said he made the switch not only to see what life was like in the managerial meetings, but also so he could experience working for another company. Newsweek is owned and operated by the Washington Post Company. People is part of the Time, Inc. family that also owns Sports Illustrated. He stayed at People for six years, through the mid-1990s, and then jumped to US magazine (now US weekly) part of the Wenner Media group that runs Rolling Stone. I was running US for awhile and then when it became weekly, Terry McDonell came over from Mens Journal, right within the same company and we kind of launched it together, Leerhsen said. Four years ago, Leerhsen left US for Sports Illustrated. McDonell, SIs managing editor, tops the masthead.

I came over with Terry. He brought me over. I worked with Terry at Newsweek in the early-80s, Leerhsen said.

If anything, the success of Seabiscuits story has made the Dan Patch project more difficult for Leerhsen. The attitude after Seabiscuit in the book industry was, Weve already done Seabiscuit. Why do another book about it? Thats like saying, Well, a book about Babe Ruth sold, were not going to do a book about Lou Gehrig. It doesnt make any sense. Anyway, in this analogy, Dan Patch is Babe Ruth and Seabiscuit is Lou Gehrig, because Dan Patch is the bigger, more famous, more accomplished horse with a much better story, Leerhsen said. The story of Seabiscuit, he said, was overdramatized. Leerhsen said Seabiscuit didnt save America from the Depression. Dan Patch, in his day, was a much bigger deal.

At the turn of the 20th century, Dan Patchs name and image was virtually impossible to escape in America thanks to his owner, promotion guru Marion Willis (M.S.) Savage. The entrepreneur from Minneapolis splashed Dan Patchs name and portrait on everything from tobacco, cigars and whiskey to stoves, washing machines and cars. He was so popular that you could go to Maine or you could go to Alaska where his death was front-page news in one of the papers and say, Dan Patch and people might say, 1:55 or you could say, 1:55 and theyd say, Dan Patch. Everyone knew his name. Everyone talked about him, Leerhsen said. Harness racing, then, was the most popular sport in the country. It was more popular than thoroughbred racing, because it was like NASCAR in that it connected to what people had in their garage, so to speak.

Leerhsen said there are numerous plot points about the Dan Patch story to enrich the narrative. Along with Dan Patch's 1:55 world record, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this summer, the horse amassed a racing empire that grew to include a huge heated barn shaped like the Taj Mahal at a world class training centre that had both a mile track and a covered half-mile track. It all fell apart shortly after the horse's death in 1916, which was followed only 31-and-a-half hours later by Savage's death.

The story also includes plenty of colourful characters, a tale of the attempted murder of Dan Patch and the fact that as many as 110,000 people were reported to have shown up just to watch Dan Patch race the clock. If you forgive me, I don't want to talk about too much of the story, Leerhsen said. It's not so much I want to save it, but when you are writing a book you kind of want to keep it contained in your head a little bit.

Leerhsen said the book is due about a year from now. He's still in the research phase of the project, which has included pouring over publications from the era only a couple of moving picture clips of Dan Patch exist and at least a half-dozen reconnaissance trips to the midwest. On one trip, Leerhsen went on a mission to find the pacer's unmarked grave. There are only a couple of people that claim to know exactly where he's buried. One of them won't tell me, because the guy that told him died right after he said it, so he's afraid it's a curse to say something, Leerhsen said. That didn't stop the writer from trespassing on the site of Dan Patch's former training centre, a piece of property along the Minnesota River near Savage, MN now owned by the Cargill agricultural company. You can see the spot where it's been cleared, where a track was, a mile track, but there's no more track visible, even from the air, I'm told. You can walk around and pick up pieces of painted lumber that are still on the grounds that must have been part of the barns. I found them just kicking around in the weeds after all these years, Leerhsen said.

Researching the book has had its challenges; most notably the fact Leerhsen hasn't found anyone alive who had any kind of meaningful contact with Dan Patch. Leerhsen said the challenges haven't deterred him from telling the pacer's story. I think every author at some point mixes elation with despair, but I don't regret it at all, because it's been a fascinating detective story, he said.

He realizes there are major challenges to selling a book about a harness horse. It's a concern Bergstein shares. It depends on how well it's received and whether it's sold as a movie. It will have a limited audience as a book, I imagine. But because of his writing skills, he intends to expand it beyond just the story of Dan Patch, Bergstein said. Goldstein said he thinks Leerhsen's book will help harness racing's troubled image, but he said it's a shame the story is so dated.

Imagine, Goldstein said. We have to go back to the turn of the century to get a boost for harness racing.

Leerhsen said everything except the research and writing are out of his hands. I have faith in the story. It's more than a harness racing story; it's an American story. It's a story of what happened in America at that time and what was happening with the car and all sports.

The success of Seabiscuit, while making Leerhsen's job selling the Dan Patch book more difficult, in some ways also provides some hope the project can be a success. I would have been the first to say, Who's going to read a book about an old, dead horse? Leerhsen said. (Seabiscuit) somehow became a woman's book.

Seabiscuit was something of a blue-bred, but Dan Patch was born crippled and had to be held up to nurse. It makes him the ultimate underdog, something that appeals greatly to Leerhsen. His love of harness racing and others among the downtrodden, such as the New York Mets traces back to going to the track with his father. Leerhsens dad was a fan of both horse breeds, but young Charlie gravitated more toward standardbreds. I think as I detected that there was a little bit of a hierarchy and the thoroughbreds were the sport of kings, I went for the other one, he said. There's a certain personality type that always goes for the underdog, always maybe wants to be in a position of being in second place and complaining about it.

That first trip to Yonkers is as much a part of Leerhsens DNA as New York City, his love of writing and magazines. To this day, he can vividly remember when black and white TV images and newspaper photos of horse racing first exploded into colour. The grass looked twice as green as any other grass you'd ever seen, Leerhsen said. Here (horse racing) was in living colour and moving.

Dorothy had Oz. Leerhsen had Yonkers. Strong stuff, those cigars.