

Dan Patch Legend Lives On

Author Unknown , Approximately 1981

At the turn of the century, a big mahogany bay named Dan Patch outran anything on four legs to become one of the country's first sports heroes.

The horse—a superstar before the term was a household word—raced undefeated, set records and then bettered them, made big money and traveled regally in his personal railroad car.

Today, in an era of superstars, long-standing records and feats have been leapfrogged by the likes of Secretariat, Hank Aaron, and Mark Spitz.

But the Dan Patch legend remains untarnished. Perhaps, says his greatest fan, because a Dan Patch, like a Babe Ruth, is not easily forgotten.

THAT FAN is Harold Savage, son of M. W. (Will) Savage, the man who purchased the speedy standardbred pacer in 1902 for the then unheard of sum of \$60,000.

Now a successful businessman in his late 60s, Harold Savage grew up with the horse and cherishes his memory. But even he is amazed by the longevity of Dan Patch's fame.

"You think the name is gone, but it comes back again, reborn," Savage said. "With all the automobiles and people and new things today, it goes on. Even kids today, 10-12 years old, know of Dan Patch, he was that famous."

(A special Dan Patch pace is scheduled at Yonkers, N. Y., Raceway July 22 as part of the 75th Anniversary celebration of racing on the track formerly known as Empire City, where the super-horse appeared several times. Film clips and features on Dan Patch will be piped over the raceway's closed circuit TV during the entire week.)

DAN PATCH'S fame was the product of the horse's incredible speed and a flamboyant promotion job by Will Savage, who recently was elected to the Hall of Fame of the Trotter at Goshen, N.Y.

"No one could beat Dan," Savage said.

Foaled in Indiana in 1896 out of Zelica, a \$225 mare, by Joe Patchen, Dan stopped racing when he was 6 because owners would not run their horses against him for a sure defeat. The Patch lost only two preliminary heats in his career.

"But dad was looking for a world champion," Savage said. Therefore, the elder Savage immediately began using Dan in exhibitions, pitting him against his own world records.

Savage recalls two pacemakers, Mag the Rag and Cobweb, which ran while Dan paced to challenge him on to new speeds. "Even running horses couldn't keep up with him. And Dan never broke the pace."

ONE DAY, 103,000 persons turned up at the Minnesota State Fair to see Dan pace, Savage said. The biggest feat of his running career came Sept. 8, 1906, again at the Minnesota State Fair, when 90,000 frenzied fans watched Dan shatter the mile pacing record in 1:55.

Although not officially recognized, that feat stood for many years along with several of Dan's other records. His official record of a mile in 1:55 ¼ was set the year before in Lexington, KY.

He was the only harness horse in history to break the two-minute barrier 35 times, and "Dan still holds the pacing record of 1:57 ¼ pulling a four-wheel wagon," Savage said.

"That's still unbeaten and never will be, probably ... I hope."

Savage said harness racing tracks are considered 3-5 seconds faster today and, pointing out the unbeaten racing record and the many offspring sired by the Patch, he quipped, "Secretariat got beaten."

SO WILL Savage had a lot of speed and style to promote when he purchased Dan Patch. And he did a first class job.

Dubbed a "second P. T. Barnum," Savage coined the phrase "three feeds for one cent" to promote the food that Dan ate three times daily for his firm, the International Stock Food Co. Another product, "Dan Patch Super-Vita," is still on the market.

The town of Savage, Minn., which sports a water tower bearing the legend "The Home of Dan Patch," still celebrates annual Dan Patch Days, set Aug. 1-3 this year.

The Dan Patch name infiltrated songs, including "Trouble" from "The Music Man," movies, books, and every major newspaper. There were Dan Patch tobaccos, washing machines, hobbyhorses, sleds, and horse products, stopwatches — and here Harold Savage stops for breath.

"This horse got more publicity than any President of the United States," he said.

BESIDES THE speed and show, the horse's personality also endeared him to his fans, Savage said.

"He had absolutely perfect manners, he never got excited," Savage recalled. "When he was in front of a grandstand, he turned and stood proud while the people applauded-almost as if he appreciated their homage.

"You could put children on his back —he never got mean," added Savage, who exercised the powerful horse when he was a boy during the winters when Dan stayed with the family at their Minneapolis home during times he was not being used at stud.

When Savage was just old enough to handle a horse, he was allowed to hitch Dan to a light sleigh called a cutter one snowy Christmas Eve to deliver presents.

"There were real candles in the windows and Dan, hitched to that beautiful cutter, didn't make a sound as we went along in the snow. It was the most beautiful sight in the world."

ONCE A TEAM of veterinarians gave Dan up for dead when he was stricken with a stomach ailment in Topeka, Kansas.

While the world read headlines screaming, "Dan Patch is doomed," Savage went to work on the horse with his own tonics.

"Father spent the night in his stall giving him the tonic "and brought him thru," Savage said. "Dan went on to break another record a month later."

The proximity of the deaths of the super horse and super salesman has been romanticized considerably. According to the legend, Dan died at the age of 20 on July 11, 1916, and Will died 32 hours later of shock and grief.

However, Savage said both man and horse had been sick prior to their deaths and physical reasons—perhaps magnified by grief—were responsible for his father's demise.

Harold Savage was not with Dan Patch when he died. But he said the story that the old pro died pacing, lying on his side running an imaginary race, is no legend.

"There are some fine horses today," Savage admits, "but Dan Patch was the most beautiful horse that ever lived."