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Dan Patch: The rags-to-riches story of the fastest horse you never knew

June 26, 2018 by Kim Simmonds



Weaving through the Minnesota State Fairgrounds, past Sweet Martha's Cookie Jar, the Grandstand, and the Corn Roast, is an avenue named after one of the biggest sports legends of the early 20th century: Dan Patch, the harness racehorse whose world record for fastest paced mile stood for 50 years.

When Dan Patch was born on April 29, 1896, his future looked anything but promising. The offspring of racehorse Joe Patchen and Zelica, a mare owned by Daniel Messner, Jr., the colt was born with

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crippled back legs; he couldn't even nurse on his own. The local veterinarian and everyone who had gathered for the horse's birth all agreed that Messner should cut his losses and euthanize the colt. Not convinced that the horse was beyond help, Messner instead rallied a group of friends to help him lift the newborn up. Together, they helped Dan Patch nurse.



Soon, the colt was healthy enough to be relocated from the veterinarian's office to Messner's farm. Under the care of his first trainer, John Wattles, his legs eventually straightened (mostly) and he grew into a strong horse, known for his pleasant disposition and intelligence. Wattles conditioned Dan Patch for harness racing, teaching him to pull a two-wheeled cart, called a sulky, and jockey behind him while pacing around the track—a gait requiring the horse to move the legs on the same side of their body in unison. At his inaugural harness race in August 1900 at a county fair in Indiana, Dan Patch won his first three heats, bringing home a purse of \$250—nearly \$7,500 today.

Dan Patch leading the race at an unknown location in 1905
Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Harness racing was a big deal in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Whereas many horse tracks were closed during this era due to the crime and gambling that surrounded them, harness racing was viewed as a tasteful alternative since the horses trotted at an even gait rather than racing at full speed. Additionally, these horses, also known as pacers, didn't need to be specially bred and trained—a farmer could take a horse from the field, race them around the track for a few hours, and then ride them home.

By the time Dan Patch started racing in the Grand Circuit in 1901, he had lost just one heat in his career. From July to October 1901, he won every race he entered, amassing an impressive \$24,600 (more than \$735,000 today) in prize money. And so it surprised everyone when Messner sold Dan Patch to Manley Sturgis on March 1, 1902, for \$20,000.

Sturgis, a professional gambler in Brooklyn, New York, made his money through betting and by rigging races and fights. Some reports say he strong-armed Messner into selling him the horse through threats; there was even suspicion Sturgis had something to do with the death of another one of Messner's horses. The change in ownership didn't seem to affect Dan Patch: he continued to win every race he entered in 1902.

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Dan Patch, left, with Marion Savage on the right // Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Meanwhile, in Minnesota, Marion Savage was making plans of his own for Dan Patch. Savage had been working as a clerk in a general store when, after observing farmers' purchasing habits, he decided to try his hand at the animal feed supplement business. He hired scientists to develop a blend of roots and herbs, and began shipping his supplement across the Midwest. He founded the International Stock Food Company in 1890 and created a grandiose marketing plan for his supplement, dubbing it "3 Feeds for One Cent" (meaning it was good for horses, cows, and hogs). The strategy worked and Savage was soon able to purchase a warehouse in downtown Minneapolis in order to continue to expand his company.

Beyond succeeding in business, Savage also aspired to be a well-known horseman. In the years leading

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up to 1902, he purchased three championship harness racers and built a world-class stable on the Minnesota River just south of the Twin Cities, near present-day Savage. He called it the International Stock Food Farm, but with beautiful domes reminiscent of the Taj Mahal, locals referred to it as “the Taj.”

Throughout 1902, Savage tried to convince Sturgis to sell him Dan Patch, going so far as to send Robert F. Jones, who was the secretary of the Minneapolis Riding and Driving Club, and Harry Hersey, who ran Savage’s stables, to New York to confirm that the racehorse would be a good purchase. Finally, in December of that year, Sturgis accepted Savage’s offer of \$60,000. The horse who could not lose was on his way to Minnesota.



A tobacco tin featuring imagery of Dan Patch, circa 1910s
Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Savage’s grand plan for Dan Patch involved branding as much as it did racing. Ahead of the horse’s arrival, Savage plastered billboards with pictures of the champion pacer and added his image to a range of International Stock Food products, from tobacco to pocket watches and washing machines. When he finally arrived on January 5, 1903, Dan Patch was celebrated with a parade down Nicollet Avenue in downtown Minneapolis. A band played while the horse, piled high with blankets to protect him against the cold, Savage, and Dan Patch’s new

trainer, Harry Hersey, strode proudly through the heart of the city.

Beyond using Dan Patch to advertise products, Savage also bred him and offered him up for photo opportunities. Because of the horse’s success at the track (in addition to winning every race he entered, he’d also tied the world record for the fastest mile), most owners by now refused to race their horses against him. Turning an obstacle into yet another money-making venture, Savage opted instead to have his horse race the clock.

The duo began traveling around the country, visiting state fairs, putting on exhibitions and attempting to beat records. On October 26, 1904, Dan Patch set the world record for a paced mile at 1:56:00. Then, on September 4, 1906, in front of 90,000 people at the Minnesota State Fair Grandstand, the horse broke his own world record for a paced mile, clocking in at 1:55:00.

A private car on the Dan Patch line stopped outside of the "Taj Mahal" in current day Savage, Minnesota. Dan Patch stands with workers in front of the car // Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

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The Dan Patch Private Car on the NorthWestern rail line stopped outside of the “Taj Mahal” in current day Savage, Minnesota. Dan Patch stands with workers in front of the car // Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society



Left: The sterling silver trophy, presented by the Kentucky Trotting Association, won by Dan Patch for setting the 1:55:25 world record on October 7, 1905. Center: A Dan Patch badge commemorating the world record mile time set at the Red Mile in Lexington, Kentucky in 1905. Right: The Dan Patch Loving Cup, presented by the Memphis Trotting Association for the world record set in Memphis, Tennessee in 1904 // Photos courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

In 1910, Savage retired Dan Patch. The now world-famous racehorse spent the rest of his days on Savage’s farm, save for an appearance at the Minnesota State Fair each year. His world record remained unbroken for over a half-century, until Adios Butler finished a paced mile in 1:54:03 in Lexington, Kentucky in 1960.

On July 11, 1916, 20-year-old Dan Patch collapsed and died of a massive heart attack; his heart was twice the size of a normal horse’s heart and had been weakened by years of racing. When Savage, who was in the hospital for a minor surgery, heard the news, he collapsed and died the following day.

Dan Patch’s legacy lives on in his adopted home state. This past March, Minnesota State Senator Dan Hall introduced a bill to name Dan Patch the state horse of Minnesota. (It passed the Senate, but never reached a final vote.) On June 24, 2018, the last day of Dan Patch Days in Savage, Minnesota, a bronzed statue of Marion W. Savage and Dan Patch was unveiled outside the Savage Library. And, of course, his story will forever be alive just outside the Grandstand at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds.