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Superstar of the ragtime era

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Dan Patch was the Babe Ruth, the Wayne Gretzky, the Tiger Woods, the Richard Petty of his day. He was a Minnesota horse, and he achieved much of his fame right here - on the State Fairgrounds.

Yellowed and fading, the century-old photograph freezes a moment of the Minnesota State Fair's past: spoke-wheeled cars mingling uneasily with horse-drawn buggies in the infield of a mile-long oval track; the old wooden Grandstand in the background, jammed with people; a sense of anticipation on a brilliant September Saturday still vivid among the ladies in broad hats and stiff-collared men in derbies.

They're waiting for the first global superstar to arrive, an athlete whose feats are already peppered in myth. They're waiting for a horse: Dan Patch.

That fair crowd of 1906 lived in a United States in the throes of a kinetic adolescence. To the syncopated rhythm of the new ragtime music, their America was taking its first tottering steps as a world power, led by a young and blustery president, Theodore Roosevelt. In such a boisterous era of possibility, the nation needed a sports hero, and he ran on four legs.

In a culture still intimate with horses and with big-time pro sports still years from broad appeal, racing — especially harness racing — held center stage. It was spectacle, with the standard bred pacer from Minnesota its star player.

Dan Patch's appearance in 1906 was not his first at the State Fair — he had run there in 1903 and 1905 — but it was to be his most glorious. Crowd records were set each day he appeared on the track in those years (if estimates varying from 80,000 to 100,000 are accurate, they remain the largest crowds to witness a sporting event in Minnesota).

The crowd gathered on that sunny day had come to see history: Dan Patch's quest to break his own record for running a mile. For years, he had chipped away at the 2-minute mark. The crowd was hoping for the improbable: 1 minute, 55 seconds.

Two horses named Cobwebs and Trolly would run along to keep the star on pace while Dan Patch pulled a sulky — a small, two-wheeled cart. In breathless detail, a newspaper account of the day set the scene:

"It was a perfect day for a trial against time. The temperature was up near the nineties, there was only a slight breeze blowing across the track when the trial was made, and the track itself was never in better condition."

Born in Indiana

Rewind to 1896. Dan Patch's journey to the 1906 fair began that year, when he was born in Indiana to a mare owned by a country shopkeeper named Daniel Messner Jr. The colt's father was named Joe Patchen, so "Dan Patch" is derived from the names of his owner and father.

The horse began racing as a 4-year-old. He never lost. In 1902, he was sold for \$20,000. Eight months later, Minnesota entrepreneur Marion W. Savage bought Dan Patch for \$60,000 — the equivalent of \$1.3 million in today's dollars. It was the teaming of Savage and Dan Patch that made the horse a global household name.

"The trio came down the stretch in a swirling cloud of dust, a seeming incarnation of the spirit of speed. The thumping of the hoofs of the runners intermingling with the regular tattoo of those of the splendid pacer were the only sounds heard as the compact squad of record-breakers swept by the judges' stand.

"The watches clicked and the assault upon the world's record was on."

Fast-forward to 2005. The Razor's Edge hair salon in Savage, not far from Dan Patch Lanes bowling alley, is as much a friendly place to get your hair cut as it is a memento-crammed shrine to the horse that, like Redwing's pottery and Kensington's runestone, gave this city its identity.

Jens Bohn, the shop's owner, is president of the Dan Patch Historical Society. Along with George Augustinack, the group's vice president, and Will Williams, a member of the group who often shares Dan Patch's story with area school kids, they've gathered to discuss a favorite subject.

No competition

By the time Savage bought Dan Patch, Bohn said, no other horse was willing to go through the humiliation of competing against him — the challenge became topping his own record for running the mile. "He ran against the stopwatch," Bohn said. With each record that fell, tension mounted for the next race, which drew thousands.

"He was the world's most famous athlete," Bohn said. And Savage played no small part. A curious blend of high roller, P.T. Barnum and pious Methodist, he had already built a substantial financial empire around a flourishing animal feed and veterinary supply business.

He parlayed Dan Patch's popularity into an even broader array of businesses.

"Mr. Savage was the first guy to successfully use the mass media with a popular sports star," Williams said. "He was almost 50, 60, 70 years ahead of his time."

"The quarter was reached in 0:28 ¼", the fastest quarter ever paced by Dan Patch in a winning performance. He was going in a 1:53" gait, and those who held watches began to hold their breath."

Rewind to 1906

Along with Dan Patch memorabilia, including hairs from his tail that sold for \$5 apiece and silver-plated horseshoes, the horse gave his name to such items as cigars, washing machines, children's toys, stoves and farm implements ordered by mail from Savage's company. It became so dominant that it led to a new name for the city, then called Hamilton.

"There was so much mail, and so much railroad freight and visitors and sportswriters that the railroad just decided: 'we're going to call this Savage,'" said Williams. It became official when the post office stamped its approval.

"They reached the half in 0:57", and the flag in the wigwag [message] tower near the barns dropped to notify [the driver and riders] that they were within their work, as planned."

"Into the headwind they came to the three-quarters and sped by the pole with the watches stopping at 1:26 ½"

Dan Patch trained at a luxurious barn at the edge of Savage dubbed the "Taj Mahal," for its opulent central turret. It included a mile-long oval track and a covered half-mile track for training.

The horse barnstormed in a custom-made railroad car designed as much for the horse's comfort as to add to the celebrity aura. A little boy named Harry Truman wrote him a fan letter, and young Dwight Eisenhower fondly remembered seeing him at the Kansas State Fair. The newspaper continued:

"The crowd came to its feet to a man, and the picture was the greatest ever seen on a race-course. The dust clouded behind the flying horses. The sun shone through a haze of dust and smoke, silhouetting the horses so that they formed the central point of the picture with everything else in the landscape blotted out."

Fast-forward to 1909. The two-tiered wooden Grandstand and surrounding paddocks in front of which Dan Patch raced, built in 1885, have been torn down. The brick structure so familiar to generations of fairgoers — where luminaries including Minnesotans Bob Dylan and Garrison Keillor would one day perform — is built in its place. Spurred by growing crowds, the old building had become obsolete.

"It's the house that Dan Patch built," Williams says. "That wouldn't be there if it weren't for Dan."

"They rushed down the stretch, an avalanche of speed and effort. As they neared the stand, the roll of the hoofs of the horses and the cries of the drivers added a new life, transforming the panorama into a living spectacle."

But even at the State Fair where Dan Patch reached his promise, horse racing and auto racing would soon share dates at the State Fair track.

By 1949, the last harness race was held there. Even auto races dwindled to a single day by 1985, and then disappeared in 2002.

Just the name endures

A continuing renovation of the Grandstand includes removal of the racetrack altogether. In homage to Dan Patch's achievements and his effect on the fair's growth, the street on which the Grandstand building is located, formerly known as Commonwealth Avenue, was redubbed Dan Patch Avenue in 1995.

"The crowd had watched the record trial in silence. After the horses had gone under the wire the silence remained unbroken. The official announcer raised his megaphone and shouted:

*"Dan Patch has paced the mile out in 1:55 flat, breaking the world's —'
"But he got no further. The vast throng rose to its feet in the great stand and pandemonium reigned. Hats were thrown in the air and trampled. Women waved handkerchiefs and Minnesota literally stood up and paid homage to her native son."*

Fast-forward to 1916. Basking in a contented retirement, Dan Patch becomes ill and dies in July. Savage, wrenched with grief, dies 32 hours later. The record Dan Patch set in 1906 won't be matched until 1938 and will stand unbroken for 54 years.

"Dan was escorted back to his stable in the midst of a mighty throng that crowded in on every side and totally overcame the gateman who attempted to hold it in check. Dan's tent was surrounded by a cheering, good-natured mob. They lingered long after sunset and had to be driven away when it came bedtime for the great flyer."

From a satellite image of Savage from high above Earth, you can still see a faded outline of the mile-long oval on the farm — long vanished — where Dan Patch trained, where he built his powerful heart.

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