

SAVAGE Pacer



Author hopes to breathe new life into ‘greatest’ horse story

By Ruth Anne Maddox; Staff Writer; Savage Pacer; Friday, September 23, 2005

In the spirit of Seabiscuit, a New York author is working on a book about Dan Patch that will put the world-record setting pacer into perspective.

Charles Leerhsen, an executive editor at Sports Illustrated, said his goal is to make Dan Patch's name familiar again – "to get him back up on the pedestal he deserves."

While the 100th anniversary of Dan Patch pacing a 1:55 mile at the Minnesota State Fair is just around the corner, Leerhsen said that his book won't be out in time to help commemorate the event during summer 2006.



Charles Leerhsen

anything to most people."

I got started too late," Leerhsen said of his proposal for the book that will be published 12 to 18 months from now by Simon & Schuster Inc.

Leerhsen said readers can expect a story full of mystery, intrigue and drama.

"It's my mission to tell the untold story and bring alive the sense of the sports world at that time," Leerhsen said. And, the book will be for a wider audience than "Dan Patch nerds like me," he said. "It's kind of like Seabiscuit, in a way, but the Dan Patch story is a better story because Dan Patch was much more popular."

Leerhsen said that the famous Seabiscuit race was attended by an estimated 27,000 people while 90,000 people came to the Minnesota State Fair to just watch Dan Patch go against the clock.

"I wish that event resonated more with society in general," Leerhsen said, "A large percentage of the people who read this book won't know who Dan Patch is. The name doesn't mean

He's hoping his book will change that and he's excited each time he finds new information about the horse.

Leerhsen said there are historical remnants in the barn where Dan Patch was taken shortly after his birth in 1896 in Oxford, Ind. Leerhsen said he stood on a rickety table in the barn to look into the stall "and it was like peering into the previous century and beyond."

He said that Dan Patch's story is one of a horse that was born crippled and had to be held up to his mother to feed. Dan then went on to make a million dollars a year for a stretch of time when the highest-paid baseball player was drawing \$12,000 a year.

"There was the attempted murder of Dan Patch ... the interesting circumstances of his death and how he was followed in death by the owner, Mr. Savage," Leerhsen said.

There's also the fact that Dan Patch was the best-known and most-loved athlete, human or equine, of his time. Many products sold by Mr. Savage bore Dan's name or likeness and are now among today's most sought after collectibles.

Leerhsen said that new books about sporting legends such as Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig are continually being turned out. He believes that it's time to tell the story of the greatest sporting figure of the 20th century.

This is his first book about a celebrity that isn't an "as told to by" story, although "I wish Dan was still around to tell it to me," Leerhsen said with a chuckle. Leerhsen has written several best-selling books about the likes of Donald Trump, famed test pilot Chuck Yeager and former NBC president Brandon Tartikoff.

Without a voice from his subject, Leerhsen must create the story from information gleaned from people related to those who knew or worked with the horse – relatives of the owners, grooms, horse shoers or any other "family" references he can turn up.

He's been to Savage and plans a few more trips here, as well as visiting Oxford, Ind. Both towns figure prominently into the book – Oxford for Dan Patch's "humble beginnings" and Savage for his "glory days."

He is also talking to people around the country who collect Dan Patch memorabilia, some of whom are interested in the history of the horse. "Little by little, you tease the ghosts out of the walls," he said.

The story also will include horse and harness racing in the context of sports history.

Leerhsen is no stranger to the horseracing world. He not only grew up the son of a horse player in the New York area, but he also started his writing career as a freelancer for the Harness Tracks of America newsletter of the U.S. Trotting Association before joining Sports Illustrated. Along the way, Leerhsen made career stops at Newsweek, People and Us magazines and freelanced for various publications.

Remembering his early exposure to horseracing, Leerhsen said his father used to bring him along to the racetrack at a time when it was frowned upon to have children in places where gambling was taking place.

"He'd stick a cigar in my mouth and a hat on my head and push me through the turnstile," Leerhsen said.

Leerhsen said he's always been aware of Dan Patch from his work with harness racing "and I knew he was one of the immortals."

Now he's even more interested in the history and he's working his "Dan Patch life" around his "other life," which includes a wife and three grown daughters who did not catch the horseracing bug.

"My daughters think I'm crazy, probably," Leerhsen said of his traipsing around the country to research a horse, "but they thought that already."

And Leerhsen doesn't want to make this journey on his own. His research involves a lot of legwork, but he's also interested in hearing from people who had some sort of connection to Dan Patch. Anyone who has information or memorabilia they would like to share can contact Leerhsen at charlie_leerhsen@hotmail.com.

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