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Glimpse Into PERFECTION

BY JUDY L. MARCHMAN

Secretariat's legend endures
40 years after Derby triumph

On the bright, sunny afternoon of May 5, 1973, a then-record crowd of 134,476 people filled Churchill Downs to witness Secretariat's attempt to claim the first jewel of racing's most-sought prize. The handsome red colt did not disappoint, winning the 99th Kentucky Derby with ease before adding milestone victories in the Preakness and Belmont stakes to secure a breathtaking Triple Crown. Forty years later Secretariat remains firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of horse racing fans the world over. Even people who have never followed Thoroughbred racing recognize Secretariat's name and hold him up as a paragon of excellence.

“He was an exceptionally strong and sound horse,” Penny Chenery recently said of her horse’s enduring appeal. Still spry at age 91, Secretariat’s owner is much beloved by racing fans in her own right. She has helped keep his legacy alive through countless appearances and interviews. “He loved to race against other horses. It was a joy for him. He was also a ham and loved attention. He was a unique competitor — the right horse for his role.”

“There’s something so pure and magical about him,” added Chenery’s daughter, Kate Tweedy. “He gave us a glimpse into perfection. There’s something spiritual about him. He stays in people’s hearts.”

Tweedy, who was 20 when Secretariat won the Derby, began accompa-



From left, Penny Chenery, actress Diane Lane, and Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear attend a *Secretariat* premiere.

nying her mother to fan appearances in the mid-2000s and saw for herself his fans’ devotion even some 20 years after Secretariat’s death. “People would stand in line for hours to get her signature. Many of them brought scrapbooks and photographs of Secretariat to show her.”

Tweedy credits YouTube with perpetuating Secretariat’s legacy by allowing the public easier access to his Triple Crown races. “I give talks all over the country and show those videos. People stand up and cheer. His races never fail to thrill.”

In 2010 Disney used movie magic to bring Secretariat and his Triple Crown to life, re-creating the Derby and Belmont on screen and showing actual footage from the Preakness. The movie, *Secretariat*, which earned \$60 million worldwide, introduced new fans to Big Red — and recaptured the hearts and imaginations of many who remember when he raced.

“I have been amazed at how his image has remained, even as the popularity of the sport has apparently been diminishing,” said author and

racing historian Edward L. Bowen. “You might say the movie is somewhat responsible, but I think it is the other way around. The movie probably would not have been produced had those in charge not recognized that millions still have him so close to their hearts.”

The movie, based in large part on sports-writer Bill Nack’s definitive account of Secretariat’s Triple Crown, *Secretariat: Making of*



a Champion (originally published as *Big Red of Meadow Stable*), portrayed the drama surrounding Secretariat in the lead up to the Kentucky Derby. Just two weeks before the big race, he had finished an unexpected third in his final prep race, the 1 1/8-mile Wood Memorial Stakes. The loss raised concerns about whether Secretariat could get the 1/4-mile Derby distance. He was a son of Bold Ruler, whose offspring were known more for their speed than their stamina. But Secretariat’s jockey, Ron Turcotte, had no doubts.

“I had been telling anyone who would listen that the distance was no problem for Big Red,” said Turcotte,

He was a unique competitor — the right horse for his role.

– Penny Chenery



An iconic image of the champion



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Penny Chenery and Lucien Laurin (center) exalt in Secretariat's Derby victory. Below, Claiborne Farm's Seth Hancock syndicated Secretariat in his first major stallion deal.

who partnered Secretariat for all but three of the horse's 21 starts. "I kept saying that he could run, and win, as far as they wrote races."

Added pressure on the Secretariat camp came from the decision earlier that year to syndicate the colt for future stud duty. He had been syndicated for a record \$6 million to offset estate taxes resulting from the death of Chenery's father, Christopher Chenery, the master of Meadow Stable. To broker the syndication, Penny worked with a young Seth Hancock, who recently had taken over as head of his family's Claiborne Farm in Paris, Ky., where Secretariat would eventually retire to stud. Expectations were high among shareholders, but the Wood Memorial loss had put a damper on the syndication.

"That Derby was one of my first big days in racing," said Hancock, who remembers feeling a bit of pressure leading up to the race, but "when you're 23, what do you know? The

Wood was obviously very disappointing, but the Derby got us back to where we hoped we could be."

Questions and pressures aside, Chenery remained confident in her horse and in trainer Lucien Laurin's ability to have him ready.

"I didn't lose faith in the horse at all," recalled Chenery. "I felt he was coming up to the race in good shape and that he could beat that field."

The Wednesday before the Derby,



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Laurin sent Secretariat out for a sharp five-furlong work. The move raised some eyebrows around the track, but Laurin knew his horse. "The harder Lucien worked him, the stronger he got," said Chenery.

All that hard work resulted in a history-making performance in the Kentucky Derby. Although Secretariat raced in last place in the early strides, he was just settling in for a big run. As he raced into the backstretch, the colt steadily built momentum, passing rival after rival.

"He moved so effortlessly," said Turcotte. "It was hard to judge speed with him, but the way we were passing horses I knew we had to be flying."

Big Red was indeed flying, running each successive quarter-mile faster than the previous one. He hit the wire in an astonishing 1:59.40, becoming the first horse to win the Kentucky Derby in under two minutes. The time still stands as a Derby record. Since then, only one other Derby winner — Monarchos — has come close, with a time of 1:59.97 in 2001.

"The Derby record is one of the greatest records in sports," said 2012 Eclipse Award-winning trainer Dale Romans, who was just 6 when Secretariat won. "A lot of good horses have won the Derby since Secretariat. It's amazing it still stands after 40 years."

In the Preakness, Secretariat zoomed by his competitors on the first

I kept saying that he could run, and win, as far as they wrote races.

— Ron Turcotte

turn in a dazzling display of speed and won well in hand in record time (although it took 39 years for that record to become official). His otherworldly Belmont performance — “moving like a tremendous machine” to win the 1½-mile race by 31 lengths in world-record time — elevated him to the status of national hero.

“Secretariat still holds the records in all three Triple Crown races,” said Nack. “How rare is that in the history of this sport in America? In any sport? He was a transcendent animal. As Charlie Hatton [a renowned *Daily Racing Form* columnist] said at the time, ‘His only point of reference is himself.’

“The best of athletes of all time, like Babe Ruth, Muhammed Ali, or Michael Jordan, were so exceptional that people think of them with an



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Penny Chenery and trainer Lucien Laurin had remained confident in Secretariat’s ability to win the Kentucky Derby.

enormous cultural affection and admiration. Secretariat has achieved that

same kind of belovedness.”
During his Triple Crown, Secretar-



Lawrin

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Winning Colors

KINETIC



Funny Cide

MIKE CORRADO

100th Anniversary — Donerail

One hundred years after he won the 1913 Kentucky Derby, Donerail still holds the records for longest odds and highest payoff. Bred, owned, and trained by Thomas P. Hayes, Donerail went off at odds of 91-1 and paid \$184.90. Mine That Bird has come closest to the record when he won the 2009 Derby at 50-1 odds and paid \$103.20. Donerail, a son of McGee (also the sire of 1915 Derby winner Exterminator), never again achieved the heights of his Derby victory, ending his career with 10 wins and 21 placings in 62 starts, including a win in the Hamilton Cup at 4. With his payoff record seemingly secure, Donerail remains a cherished part of Kentucky Derby lore.

Other significant Kentucky Derby anniversaries this year include:

- » 75th — Lawrin (1938) — Owned by Woolford Farm, Lawrin became the first of a record six Derby winners trained by Ben A. Jones, whose other five winners were for the famed Calumet Farm.
- » 50th — Chateaugay (1963) — The son of 1955 Derby winner Swaps made an impressive drive under jockey Braulio Baeza to become the first Derby winner for John W. Galbreath’s Darby Dan Farm.
- » 25th — Winning Colors (1988) — The big, gray filly wowed the racing world with her front-running Derby victory and became only the third filly to win the Run for the Roses (following Regret, 1915; and Genuine Risk, 1980).
- » 10th — Funny Cide (2003) — Owned by a group of old high school friends from Sackets Harbor, N.Y., the popular chestnut became the first gelding to win the Derby since Clyde Van Dusen in 1929.

It's hard to imagine in humankind the specialness that Secretariat seems to possess.

— Wayne Dementi

iat's image graced the covers of *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, further capturing the public's imagination. Beginning with Nack's story (a new edition was published in 2010 as a movie tie-in), a number of books have been published about Big Red to give fans a more in-depth look at their idol. More recent titles include *Secretariat*, a coffee table book of photographs by Raymond Woolfe Jr., and *The Horse That God Built* by Lawrence Scanlan, which tells Secretariat's story through the eyes of his beloved groom Eddie Sweat.

In 2010, *Secretariat's Meadow* came out. Co-authored by Tweedy and Leeanne Ladin, the book traces Tweedy's family and their time at The Meadow, Secretariat's birthplace in Virginia. Publisher Wayne Dementi said that in working with Tweedy and her mother on the book he was able to experience firsthand the impact Secretariat has had on others. "It is far more wide-reaching than I ever thought," he said.

Leonard Lusky, who for the last 12 years has worked with Chenery and Turcotte, on public appearances and through the website Secretariat.com to promote Big Red to fans, new and old alike, called Secretariat's influence "broad-based."

"We've had people bring winner's circle photos to signings. They tell how he has impacted their life or how they own a great-grandson of his," he said.

Lusky was excited about the various events to honor the



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Secretariat continued to inspire legions of fans well after his racing career ended. Below, Penny Chenery shared a special moment with her champion.

40th anniversary of Secretariat's Triple Crown. To kick things off, a special birthday celebration co-sponsored by Secretariat.com and the Commonwealth Fairs & Events of Virginia was held in late March at The Meadow, where fans had the opportunity to meet Chenery, Tweedy, Turcotte, and Charlie Davis, Secretariat's exercise rider. A portion of the proceeds went to the preservation of the historic barns at The Meadow, now owned by CF&E and the Virginia Farm Bureau and the site of the Virginia State Fair.

"When I think about a birthday party for a horse that draws some 2,000 people," said Dementi, "there's obviously something richer and deeper going on ... It's hard to imagine in humankind the specialness Secretariat seems to possess."

Other 40th anniversary events include the Secretariat Festival in Paris, Ky., in the fall.

As new generations discover Secretariat, no doubt they too will fall under his spell.

"It's hard to explain, but it's real," said Hancock. "He's more than a cultural phenomenon. He's an icon." **KD**



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