

It Never Should Have Ended This Way

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PARIS, Ky. - The welcome sign at the edge of town gives away what this little slice of heaven located among the rolling hills and bluegrass fields of Bourbon County is all about: Horses, History and Hospitality.

Once Main Street unfolds before you like a red carpet, the final resting spot of one of this town's most famous residents is only a short drive away. Simply turn right on East 10th Street, go past Louie's Restaurant - the place with all the jockey silks plastered on the outside walls - and drive about a mile.

On the left, tucked behind shade trees and a stately stone wall that seems to stretch for miles, sits historic Claiborne Farm, one of Kentucky's most-treasured places and the burial ground of possibly the greatest racehorse of them all, 1973 Triple Crown winner Secretariat.

In a cemetery right outside Claiborne's main offices, the tombstones read like a who's who of the sport of kings: Secretariat, Mr. Prospector, Riva Ridge, Gallant Fox, Swale and the great stallion Nijinsky II, father of 1986 Kentucky Derby winner and 1987 Horse of the Year, Ferdinand.

Twenty years ago this week, Dell Hancock, whose family has owned Claiborne Farm for nearly a century, was at Churchill Downs when Ferdinand, under legendary jockey Bill Shoemaker, gave Hall of Fame trainer Charlie Whittingham his first Derby victory at age 73.

With Shoemaker draped in pink-and-blue silks, Ferdinand entered the stretch behind a wall of horses with what appeared a slim chance at victory. In a courageous move, Shoemaker pushed Ferdinand between horses, dropped him to the rail, and then urged him on to a 2 1/4 -length victory over runner-up Bold Arrangement.

"It was as good as it gets as far as a horse winning the Derby," said Hancock, who helped care for Ferdinand after he was born at Claiborne in 1983. "He was born and raised here. We were really proud."

But in July 2003, Hancock received a shocking telephone call from a Japan-based reporter with The Blood-Horse, a thoroughbred industry trade magazine. The reporter asked if Hancock had heard about Ferdinand being taken to a slaughterhouse in 2002, where he was apparently butchered for human food and ground up for pet food and other products.

Hancock was shocked and disturbed, questioning how such a beautiful and intelligent animal could end up being slaughtered.

"It shouldn't be an issue, but I know it is," Hancock said Thursday, two days before the 132nd running of America's most famous horse race. "I can't imagine any foals that we raise at Claiborne Farm coming to such an end. It just doesn't enter my mind. The thought that he was slaughtered kind of sickens you."

What happened?

In 1988, the year after Ferdinand was named Horse of the Year, he was retired to stud at Claiborne Farm - his initial stud fee was \$30,000 per live foal - by his owner, California oilman Howard Keck. However, after winning eight of 29 career starts and earning more than \$3.7 million on the racetrack, Ferdinand's career at stud was not nearly as successful.

REMEMBER FERDINAND

The chestnut colt with a white star between his eyes sired only five stakes winners in hundreds of breeding sessions from 1989 to 1994. He was eventually sold to the JS Company in Japan in 1994, where he fared little better as a stallion and fell out of favor.

When Keck's son inquired in late 2002 about possibly returning Ferdinand to the U.S. for his final years in retirement, that's when it was discovered Ferdinand was dead. According to reports, Ferdinand was removed from the Japanese Horse Registry on Sept. 10, 2002. He was 19 at the time of his death.

Yoskikazu Watanabe, Ferdinand's former owner in Japan, told The Blood-Horse that Ferdinand was "disposed of" after he gave him to a friend to use on a riding farm. In Japan, where there is a land shortage for horse farms, the term "disposed of" means to be sent to a slaughterhouse for what is often an inhumane death because of the methods used and nature of a horse's personality.

"They have been raised with lots of hands-on human attention," said Fred Winters, director of operations for the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation in Lexington. "It's a different way of being brought up to raise an animal for its meat. It's not so much the killing of the horse, but it's the torturous treatment he receives en route and at the slaughter facility."

Seeking A Solution

While lawmakers have no jurisdiction regarding horse laws overseas - other Derby winners currently at stud on foreign soil include War Emblem (Japan), Charismatic (Japan), Silver Charm (Japan), Sea Hero (Turkey) Strike the Gold (Turkey) and Alysheba (Saudi Arabia) - there is a movement to make horse slaughter extinct in the U.S. According to Department of Agriculture, about 50,000 horses are slaughtered in three foreign-owned slaughterhouses each year, two of them in Texas and one in Illinois.

Most of the meat is shipped to France, Belgium and other European countries for human consumption; most of the horses are purchased by "killer buyers" at various auctions around the country before being shipped in less-than-ideal conditions to Texas or Illinois.

In a media teleconference Wednesday, U.S. Rep. Ed Whitfield of Kentucky, co-sponsor of a bill that would essentially ban horse slaughter in America, tried to raise awareness of the issue.

"As the Derby approaches, we are stepping up our efforts to get it to go to the floor," Whitfield said. "Every owner of a Kentucky Derby winner and their family has signed letters supporting this legislation. I think within the next couple of weeks there are going to be some things come to a head."

Tampa resident and Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, who owned last year's Derby favorite Bellamy Road, has signed a letter supporting the bill.

Like Hancock, Whitfield was at Churchill Downs 20 years ago when Ferdinand won, and he keeps a commemorative plate in his Washington office as a reminder of that special day. His reaction to hearing of Ferdinand's death is common in and outside of the industry.

"I was really shocked and appalled," he said. "Here we are still slaughtering horses in the U.S. I wasn't aware of that and I don't think many people are aware."

"The bill would prohibit the shipping, transporting, moving, delivery, receiving, possessing, purchasing, selling or donation of a horse or other equine for slaughter for human consumption. Even if they were trying to move it to Mexico or Canada, it would be a violation of federal law."

REMEMBER FERDINAND

Proponents of the continuation of horse slaughter in the U.S. argue that most of the horses are sick or too old. However, Whitfield and others say that is not the case.

Kim Zito, wife of Hall of Fame trainer Nick Zito, is part of a group that announced Wednesday the forming of the Kentucky Equine Humane Center, a non-profit organization that hopes to help find adoptive homes for Kentucky horses before a humane euthanization is considered. Zito became more involved in the issue after hearing of Ferdinand's fate.

"I think the biggest problem is lack of knowledge about what's going on," Zito said. "People don't know. They don't know that all these killers are going to these auctions."

Ferdinand's Lasting Legacy

Back at Claiborne Farm, Dell Hancock is reminded often of Ferdinand. In a hallway that leads to her office, photos of every champion racehorse bred at Claiborne Farm hangs on the wall. The photos are of the horses as foals.

"The Hall of Champions," Hancock said. "I walk by Ferdinand every day. As far as my daily life goes, I don't look at one of these things and think that I need to save you from slaughter, because I can't imagine that they would end up there."

Yet they do, including champion thoroughbreds like Exceller, who was slaughtered in Sweden in 1997. Exceller remains the only horse to defeat two Triple Crown winners in a single race, beating Affirmed and Seattle Slew in the 1978 Jockey Club Gold Cup.

But if the new legislation passes, it will be against the law for an elite thoroughbred or a walking pony to be slaughtered in the U.S. for food or any other reason, a victory many in the industry consider more important than winning a race, even the Kentucky Derby.

"It's the entire basis for our existence," said Winters of the Retired Thoroughbred Foundation. "I think our horses are clearly raised for a totally distinct reason.

"There's only one Kentucky Derby winner a year. There are 30,000-plus others that are just as important for us. We don't want to serve any of them up for somebody's dinner."

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