Remembering Ruffian: Horse won fans' hearts like no other

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Dinny Phipps is heading to a meeting, so maybe that explains his abrupt answer. Or maybe it's the line of questioning: about a horse, about a day, that might be the darkest in thoroughbred history.

"How many years ago was that?" Phipps said.

The literal answer is almost 32.

The better answer is not enough.

Ruffian. It hardly mattered whether you were deeply involved in horse racing - such as Palm Beach's Phipps, who was running Belmont Park and whose relatives owned the great filly - or if you barely cared about the sport. If you were old enough to understand what was happening on July 6, 1975, you recall the sense of grief when Ruffian fatally broke down in her battle-of-the-sexes match race against Foolish Pleasure at Belmont.

Seldom if ever has any sporting event, with so much circus-like hype and hope, ended so quickly, so horrifically, that decades later it's worthy of a made-for-TV movie debuting on ABC at 9 p.m. Saturday, based on a new book by famed turf writer William Nack titled *Ruffian: A Racetrack Romance* .

You recalled that distant tragedy in 2006 when another horse, Barbaro, galloped off in Ruffian's footsteps, toting not a jockey, but more broken hearts.

"I thought, 'Boy, I've been here before,"" said Nack, who was alongside Barbaro's owners, Roy and Gretchen Jackson, as they watched jockey Edgar Prado and emergency personnel scramble to save the horse's life.

For Nack, and possibly for Phipps, these are not places to revisit often. A journalist's shield offered no emotional protection for Nack, who already was deep into the Ruffian project when Barbaro broke down.

"It was not an easy place to go back to," Nack said of the Ruffian project. "It was a lot more raw than I thought it was going to be. There were days I had to kind of walk away from the manuscript and actually was kind of sorry at some points that I got involved in it."

Maybe this explains why Phipps is reluctant to recount those memories. Too long ago, he said.

What Phipps can't or won't say, history does. On a spool of microfilm, in harsh tones of black, white and little gray, is a column from *The New York Times* written the day after the match race, the same day Ruffian was buried near the finish line at Belmont Park. It says that at about 2 that morning, Phipps, then vice chairman of the New York Racing Association, emerged from the equine hospital where Ruffian had surgery. His eyes were red.

"I don't think anything's ever affected me so much in racing," Phipps said at the time. "We tried to do something exciting, something good for racing, and ... "

... And 32 years later, it's a sentence that, like the race, still cannot be completed.

A true people's champion

Miami's Jack Wilson, 73, called that day the most heartbreaking of all his 421/2 years at the *Daily Racing Form* . He especially remembers keeping a vigil in the press box past 9 that night.

"People were calling from all over the country," Wilson said. "I got women on the phone saying, 'I'll send you $5,000' or 'I'll send $10,000. Get a good doctor for the horse. Get the best doctors.' The phones were ringing off the wall at times, inquiring about her condition and trying to help if they could in any way.

"I've never seen anything around a track like it in all my life."

He'd also never seen anything like Ruffian. No one did.

At the *Daily Racing Form* Wilson was a chart-caller, someone who records the placement of every horse at key points in races to help future handicappers. Until the match race, Ruffian had raced 10 times, won 10 times - and never once trailed at any pole. To read her record is to submerge one's eyes in a shimmering sea of perfect "1s," something, Nack points out, not even Man o' War could match.

Everything about her said regal, from her striking appearance for a filly - she was bigger than Foolish Pleasure in most tale-of-the-tape measurements - to her grace around the barn. So who better to complement her than trainer Frank Whiteley, who offered abrupt answers to turf writers on rare days when he felt like being nice to them? Other times, their probes might be met with his well-aimed garden hose, informing them it was time to scoot.

Together, they won the filly version of the Triple Crown - Whiteley didn't want to run her against colts - and set or tied records in eight of nine stakes races. The only thing missing was a chance to prove herself against the guys. Ultimately, you might say, that's what took her life. Either that, or one other factor.

Her heart.

Ruffian survived delicate surgery on her broken sesamoid bones, but when she started to awaken from anesthesia, she began pumping her legs. A stroke with her front legs ... a stroke with her hind legs ... another stroke with her front legs.

In her mind, she wasn't smashing the one thing keeping her alive, her cast, but rather running away from the horse who had pushed her more than any other, Foolish Pleasure.

Ruffian was still trying to win the match race.

Whiteley and five others tried in vain to hold her steady, but her will to run was too great.

"Her temperament is what made her great and what made her die," Dr. Alex Harthill, one of her surgeons, told the *Chicago Tribune* in 1999.

Sign of the times

The '70s was a golden age for thoroughbreds, producing three Triple Crown champions, including Affirmed, still the most recent to sweep. The decade featured Secretariat, the 1973 Triple Crown champion often considered the greatest ever.

Yet five races, and five wins, into Ruffian's career, Lucien Laurin, Secretariat's trainer, said, "As God is my judge, she may even be better than Secretariat."

This was news involving any horse, let alone a filly. This was three years after Title IX jump-started women's athletics, two years after Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in another "battle of the sexes" and in the midst of the women's lib movement.

Amid much prodding, Whiteley and Ruffian's owners, Stuart and Barbara Janney, Phipps' aunt, agreed to a match race against Foolish Pleasure, the Kentucky Derby champion, thanks to a $350,000 purse put up by CBS-TV, which televised the event.

To hype the "The Great Match Race," workers were hired to hand out buttons during the lunch hour in Manhattan. Women overwhelmingly donned buttons with Ruffian's image, but so did many men. Others wore buttons that said "HIM" or "HER," with no further explanation required.

As distasteful as Nack found the hype - he spent the week covering the Yankees to get away - even he wrote, "The Great Match Race has become a transcending event, national in scope, which has engaged and connected more people with thoroughbred racing than has happened at any time in the sport's history. Though it has nothing whatever to do with the women's movement, the match has come to resonate for many as a symbol of the struggle between the sexes; for millions of women, Ruffian has come to represent the newly ascendant female taking the fight to a male-dominated world."

The terms were set: 11/4 miles, the Derby distance, out of Belmont's seldom-used backstretch chute, on Sunday, July 6, with $225,000 to the winner and $125,000 to the loser.

"I obviously thought it was a good thing at the time," said Phipps, current chairman of The Jockey Club.

Speedy start, then tragedy

A crowd of 50,764 arrived on the festive day, with music playing and a reported 18 million watching on TV. Finally, shortly after 6 p.m., the gates opened.

Months of buildup, and it lasted 45 seconds:

Ruffian hits the gate as she breaks out. Foolish Pleasure takes a half-length lead. Perhaps aching from hitting the gate, Ruffian leans into the colt. Ruffian pulls even, then a head in front, tripping the Teletimer. The first quarter-mile: 221/5. Sizzling.

Ruffian extends the lead to a half-length and looks like she might make a move when grazing pigeons take flight in front of the horses.

Then, a snap.

Ruffian bears right, bumping into Foolish Pleasure, before stumbling for 40 yards, jockey Jacinto Vasquez fighting to pull her up the entire way. Finally coming to a halt, he leaps off and struggles to support her so she need not bear weight on her mangled leg.

The surreal was about to add a sublime subplot. Viewers of the movie will cringe at the sight of Nack's character, while charging across the track toward Ruffian, nearly getting run over by Foolish Pleasure. It's not Hollywood. That really did happen.

"I thought to myself at the time, 'You dummy,"" said Nack, a consultant on the film. "I can see it, almost flashing in front of you: 'Ruffian breaks down, reporter killed, Foolish Pleasure breaks shoulder.' Because he would have killed me. He was going 40 miles an hour. He galloped out a mile and a quarter in 2:02, which was about as fast as he won the Kentucky Derby. He weighed about 1,100 pounds. It would have been like getting hit by four Dick Butkuses going 40 miles an hour. You've heard the phrase, the hair stands up on the back of your neck? Well, it did that day."

What caused Ruffian's injury? Some blame the pigeons. Some blame the uneven surface from the chute to the main track. Others point to the stress the colt placed upon the filly. And still others point to Ruffian's breeding and that her mother, Shenanigans, and sire, Reviewer, suffered serious leg injuries.

Ruffian's survival was a long shot. The vigil was such for reporters that they determined it was precisely 105 running steps from the clinic to Esposito's bar near the track. It was last call, and then some, when word finally came at 2:20 a.m.

The great filly was no more.

Unfulfilled promise

Ruffian was buried the next day near the Belmont finish line she so fought to reach, even on her deathbed. A crane-operated clam shovel dug her grave, and headlights from vehicles illuminated the scene for the few allowed to attend. It was past 9 p.m., 24 hours after Wilson was fielding the last of the desperate offers to help save her life.

Ruffian was lowered into the ground. At Whiteley's request, two blankets were placed over her. A dozen roses were spread. Elsewhere in New York that night, a horseplayer celebrated his 27th birthday and told everyone he wanted his ashes spread on her grave someday. When he unexpectedly died nine years later, those wishes were honored.

Some who attended Ruffian's funeral then made the pilgrimage to Esposito's, where the somber discussion was how her tombstone should read.

"I'll tell you what I'd put," someone said. ""She died on the lead."" Ruffian didn't just lead every call in races she won; she also led at the final call before she broke down.

This Saturday, thousands will flock to Belmont Park for the 139th Belmont Stakes, many with newfound interest in the historic grave by the finish line.

The day essentially marked the end of match races in America; few have been been held since, none prominent.

"They often don't turn out the way they're supposed to be," Wilson said.

What if this one at least produced a true finish? Wilson points to the blazing fractions, including 443/5 for the half-mile and Foolish Pleasure's final time of 2:024/5 while leisurely circling the track uncontested.

"Look at the times he posted," Wilson said. "If they were going down, driving, it was going to be one of the fastest ever seen."

And if Ruffian had won?

"She would be in the stratosphere as far as reputation is concerned, if she could had gone any higher than she already was," Nack said. "She'd have probably gone on to win the Travers and other races like that and would have retired probably at the end of the year recognized widely as the greatest female racehorse that ever lived on either shore, England or here."

As it stands, Phipps said, "she was a great filly. An absolutely great filly."

But Phipps has little else to say.

Which, 32 years later, says more than anyone could. **R**