

THE NAME GAME

by Rommy Faversham

IT ONLY MAKES SENSE that if an important race is going to be named after a distinguished runner from the past, that individual should have been particularly adept at the conditions specific to the fixture. The most important issues become the distance and surface of the race, as well as the age range and gender of the participants. It would seem 'reasonable' then, that the celebrated runner should have clearly demonstrated the ability to win the annual contest named after him / her. The whole naming process becomes rather haphazard and misleading, otherwise.

Occasionally, track officials decide to alter the conditions of a race. Sometimes, as a consequence, the changes cause a famous horse to appear a lot less appropriate as the race's namesake.

Another source of inappropriate namesakes are racetracks, especially in the East who seem to have dubbed a number of important grass stakes events after well known runners who were, nonetheless, never known for their turf prowess. Currently, there are at least six different major racetracks running at least one graded turf race named after a famous horse who never even ran on grass!

Maybe this isn't racing's biggest problem. It does, however, point out a few discrepancies in a sport that claims such a close bond to its past. What's often happening is that a worthy recipient is getting the wrong award. More importantly, a misconception is created and then perpetuated.

An analogy would be if baseball had decided to annually present the Cy Young award to the league's best hitter just because he was a great former ball player. New fans couldn't be faulted in then assuming that Cy Young must have been primarily known as a great batter, and not the great pitcher that he actually was.

To make the point further, I offer the ten most inappropriate and, for comparison, appropriate racehorse namesakes currently used in American Graded Stakes races. The latter list gives prime examples where the honored individuals truly did embody the necessary characteristics for their named race. It shows how befitting testimonials can be when applied properly, and how the legacy of American horse racing deserves to be treated.

AMERICA'S TEN MOST INAPPROPRIATE RACEHORSE NAMESAKES CURRENTLY USED IN GRADED STAKES RACES

The **MAN O'WAR** Stakes at Belmont Park [Grade One for 3 YOs and up, going 1 3/8 mi., **on the turf**]

Man O'War (1917) was the Babe Ruth of horse racing, but, of course, never a grass champion. Actually, there was no turf racing at all in America during the Man O' War era. A truly poorly chosen tribute to a great horse.

The **COUNT FLEET** Sprint Hcp. at Oaklawn Park [Grade Three for **4 YOs and up, going 6 furlongs**, on the dirt]

Sure, Count Fleet (1940) had a ton of speed when going a distance of ground, but, by no means, was he a sprinter. He was ten for ten in routes, including the Triple Crown. Sprinting, he was 6 for 11. If that's not enough, the Count never appeared at Oaklawn and also never ran after his Belmont Stakes triumph, halfway through his sophomore year. A most inappropriate designation.

The **BEWITCH** Stakes at Keeneland [Grade Three for 4 YOs and up, F&M, **going 1 1/2 miles, on the turf**]

Calumet Farm's Hall of Fame filly, Bewitch (1945) was best of her generation at ages 2 and 4. As good as she was, however, she never won beyond 9 furlongs and she never raced on grass. Originally, this race was written for juvenile fillies at four furlongs on the dirt. During the forty of years of the Bewitch Stakes, the conditions have often been modified only to become even less in common with the types of events that Bewitch was actually best at.

The **VAGRANCY** Hcp. at Belmont Park [Grade Three for 3 YOs and up, F&M, **going 6.5 furlongs**, on the dirt]

As a 3 YO, Vagrancy (1939) was America's best distaffer. But, at no point, was sprinting her forte. The race was originally written for the much more appropriate 1 1/16 mile distance in 1948, but was changed to 7 furlongs, five years later. In 1998, it was shortened further. At this point, the race has little connection to its namesake.

The **AFFECTIONATELY** Hcp. at Aqueduct [Grade Three for 3 YOs and up, F&M, **going 1 1/16 mi.**, on the dirt]

Affectionately (1960) was a champion sprinter. She outsprinted girls. She outsprinted the boys. Under a mile, her record was 27 for 42. At two turns, she was 1 for 10. Most of her top performances were at Aqueduct (20 wins). The least they could have done is name a nice sprint race after her.

The **FOREGO** Handicap at Saratoga [Grade One for 3 YOs and up, **going 6.5 furlongs**, on the dirt]

Why on earth would Saratoga name their premiere sprint event after Forego? He only appeared twice at the Spa and ran unusually poorly both times. Three time Horse of the Year, Forego (1970) won a total of 24 graded stakes. Only three were at a sprint distance. This race was certainly not the correct opportunity to honor him.

The **GAMELY** Breeders' Cup Hcp. at Hollywood Park [Grade 1 for 3 YOs and up, F&M, going 1 1/8 mi., **on the turf**]

Gamely (1964) was a champion at ages 3, 4 & 5, but she didn't get to the Hall of Fame by running on grass. Actually, she was well beaten in all three attempts over the sod. This one looks like the most obvious misdeed from the West Coast.

The **KELSO** Handicap at Belmont Park [Grade Two for 3 YOs and up, **going 1 mile, on the turf**]

A mile on the grass is hardly the way to remember the only five time Horse of the Year in history, a feat that will probably never be approached again. During his long and magnificent career, Kelso (1957) won a total of thirty important stakes. Only one of these was on the turf, the 1964 Washington D.C. International at a mile and a half. It was a race he had run second in the three previous years. Originally, the Kelso Handicap was run at two miles on the main track. Now that was a race Kelso could dominate as well as embody. Not this one.

The **MY CHARMER** Handicap at Calder [Grade Three for 3 YOs and up, F&M, going 1 1/8 mi., **on the turf**]

To start with, it seems rather odd, with so many more worthy candidates, that My Charmer (1969) would even have a graded stakes named after her. Maybe it helped that Seattle Slew called her 'Mom'. Six for 32 lifetime, My Charmer captured just one important race, the Fair Grounds Oaks and it was on dirt. Another head scratcher.

The **SABIN** Handicap at Gulfstream Park [Grade Three for 3 YOs and up, F&M, going 1 1/16 mi., **on the dirt**]

It makes even less sense when you take a dyed-in-the-wool grass horse like Sabin (1980) and name an important race on the main track after her. This one seems particularly hard to justify.

AMERICA'S TEN MOST APPROPRIATE RACEHORSE NAMESAKES CURRENTLY USED IN GRADED STAKES RACES

The **CIGAR** Mile Handicap at Aqueduct [Grade One for 3 YOs and up, going 1 mile, on the dirt]

Sure he could go longer, and usually did, but Cigar (1990) was a great miler, as well. It was, in fact, this race, when it was called the NYRA Mile, that Cigar won by seven lengths. It was his first major victory on the way to a sixteen race win streak. A very apt assignment.

The **DAVONA DALE** Stakes at Gulfstream Park [Grade Two for 3 YO fillies, going 1 1/16 miles, on the dirt]

Davona Dale (1976) was Calumet Farm's best ever filly. Soon after the start of her three year old season, she went on an eight race win streak that culminated with the Filly Triple Crown. Four of these major races were at 1 1/16 miles, including the Kentucky Oaks (G1) and the Black-Eyed Susan (G2). The streak was started at Gulfstream. Another appointment that makes total sense.

The **GALLANT FOX** Handicap at Aqueduct [Grade Three for 3 YOs and up, going 1 5/8 miles, on the dirt]

American racing's second Triple Crown winner, Gallant Fox (1927) would have loved this race. At age 3, he easily beat his elders at fourteen and sixteen furlongs. None of the big races, unfortunately, are written for those distances any longer, so going the uncommon thirteen furlongs would be the next best thing. The Fox was undefeated at Aqueduct too. A well suited choice.

The **CICADA** Stakes at Aqueduct [Grade Three for 3 YO fillies, going 7 furlongs, on the dirt]

Cicada (1959) did a lot of things well. She was a champion at 2, 3 & 4. But she was almost unstoppable at seven furlongs and Aqueduct was one of her favorite stomping grounds. Alive today, she'd still be tough to beat in this race.

The **SALVATOR** Mile Handicap at Monmouth Park [Grade Three for 3 YOs and up, going 1 mile, on the dirt]

One of the best American runners of the eighteenth century, Salvator (1886) was Horse of the Year at age 3 and 4. On July 4, 1890, on opening day at the newly re-built Monmouth Park, Salvator, in his final career appearance, ran one mile in 1:35 1/2, breaking the existing American and world record by nearly four full seconds. Salvator's mile record, which came in a race against time, would not be broken for 28 years. Excellent designation.

The **MR. PROSPECTOR** Hcp. at Gulfstream Park [Grade Three for 3 YOs and up, going 6 furlongs, on the dirt]

While Mr. Prospector (1970) never stayed sound long enough to become a sprint champion, his six furlong track record at Gulfstream still stands twenty years later. Additionally, Mr. Prospector had a most remarkable career at stud siring some of America's fastest horses for almost two decades. He's certainly earned this particular recognition.

The **LANDALUCE** Stakes at Hollywood Park [Grade Three for 2 YO fillies, going 6 furlongs, on the dirt]

D. Wayne Lukas' brilliant undefeated lass, who tragically succumbed to a mystery virus in the fall of her juvenile season, Landaluce (1980) won this race when it was called the Hollywood Lassie by twenty-one lengths. The clear choice of a namesake for this contest.

The **STYMIE** Handicap at Aqueduct [Grade Three for 3 YOs and up, going 1 1/8 miles, on the dirt]

One of the most famous handicap horses in American history, Stymie (1941) won 35 races at distances from six furlongs to two and one half miles. Some of his best work was at nine furlongs and/or at Aqueduct. A come-from-behind, crowd pleaser, Stymie would, indeed, have figured prominently in most runnings of this race.

The **GO FOR WAND** Handicap at Saratoga [Grade One for 3 YOs and up, F&M, going 1 1/8 miles, on the dirt]

A brilliant champion at 2 & 3, Go For Wand (1987) swept past all of her sophomore peers at Saratoga before trouncing her elders at nine furlongs in the Beldame. She then lost her life in tragic fashion at the Breeders' Cup Distaff while fighting for the victory. This race is a perfect venue to remember her name.

The **SEABISCUIT** Handicap at Bay Meadows [Grade Three for 3 YOs and up, going 1 1/16 miles, on the dirt]

With all the publicity from the best selling book and upcoming movie, it's satisfying to note that Seabiscuit (1933) has the right graded stakes race named after him. Starting this year the race, formerly known as the All American Handicap, now honors 'The Biscuit'. And appropriately so. He toyed with the competition in all four of the Bay Meadows stakes he ran in, breaking track records at eight and nine furlongs. As described in Laura Hillenbrand's book, San Francisco adored him. Nice move.
