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Blind-Cided

by Dennis G. Hogan

FUNNY CIDE-- Reminiscences in two articles

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"Everyone thought there was going to be a Triple Crown horse this year, but nobody thought it could be Funny Cide!"

*-Jack Knowlton
Pimlico Race Track
May 17th, 2003*

And Jack was right. Nobody expected Funny Cide to win the Derby, certainly not against the heavily favored Empire Maker. But the New York-bred gelding had the last laugh. Few others gave him a chance to take the Preakness, especially with the kind of ease that he did - he simply ran away from the field. For Jack and his associates from Sacket's Harbor, NY, this was no joke - their horse was poised to capture the Triple Crown but a few short weeks later.



Heading out for The Belmont, 2003



And they're off!

I was at Belmont that day, and felt confident that the 3-year-old over-achieving son of Distorted Humor would prevail. It was an awful day. The skies opened up and you would have sworn they'd never close - by Belmont time the track was awash. Yet despite the downpour the stands were full; attendance surged to 102,000 that day. I watched through the mist and haze as Jose Santos had his charge ready to make his move entering the far turn. But Jerry Bailey had plans of his own. He sat chilly on Empire Maker for most of the race then at his leisure swept past a tiring Funny Cide, who had been battling on the front-end throughout. At the top of the stretch you knew the outcome. Jerry may have brought home the most unpopular Belmont winner ever. As he returned to the winner's circle a chorus of boos greeted him. Standing in the irons he looked apologetically up into the crowd, shook his head and pointed down at Empire Maker, as if to say, "It wasn't me! I swear - it was the horse!" I left Belmont that day in the black, yet what I and the rest of New York really wanted - to witness a Triple Crown celebration, was not to be.

During the summer of '04, I was in Saratoga. August mornings at the Spa are always special but this day would exceed expectations. Mary Ryan's a.m. workout play-by-play was high-lighted by the appearance of the big chestnut. "There in the yellow jacket is Edgar Prado and New York's very own Funny Cide!" Caught completely off-guard I wheeled around and hastily squeezed off a few shots. They weren't great but it was a thrill to know I had photographed a Derby winner.



Morning work. Saratoga '04



The next time I saw him would be years later, again at Saratoga. I was on the backstretch and all the talk was about how Funny Cide was now Barclay Tagg's stable pony. Wow I thought, wouldn't it be cool if I saw him again? And minutes later he appeared. "Mr. Tagg, is that Funny Cide?" I asked. With serendipity in his voice Barclay answered, "Yesss it is!" Fumbling for the shutter release I captured this profile view. Again he had taken me by surprise, and again the big chestnut had made my day.

This past August I met Marilyn Lane in Saratoga. I was the guest of ThoroFan, and Marilyn would accompany me into the backstretch - she had the credentials and I had the cameras. Marilyn has known Barclay for many years so she suggested we head back toward his barns. As we wound through the maze of green and white shed rows suddenly she said, "there's Funny Cide right there." I looked over and saw him. He was tied to a telephone pole, calmly munching his morning hay. I felt as if I was in the presence of royalty. Soon Barclay arrived, untied him, jumped on and headed out toward the track. It was yet another pleasant surprise, and one I'll not forget.



Barclay Tagg and Funny Cide

And so our game of Peek-a-boo continued. I guess Funny Cide was just born to surprise people. He's such an unassuming horse. Back in his day he looked every bit the champion, but when I first saw him with Barclay, he appeared calm and reserved - not at all average, yet somehow he blended in - like one of the guys. Now Funny Cide's duties as Barclay's stable pony have come to an end and he'll spend the rest of his days at The Kentucky Horse Park. I can only imagine that many others will respond as I have upon seeing him: with surprise, wonder and glee.

I had the opportunity to speak with Funny Cide's owner Jack Knowlton as he headed off to Kentucky for the ceremonies at the Horse Park. Unlike myself, Jack's gotten used to seeing him around, but that's all about to change.

"It's a bittersweet moment. I'll no longer be able to see him as often and I'm going to miss that. But I'm also excited as this is the premier spot for him to spend his retirement." Jack went on to discuss how the decision was made to retire FC and how the arrangement with the Kentucky Horse Park came about. "Barclay just felt it was time. Funny Cide's back has been a bit tender since he was injured as a five-year-old. Barclay could sense that he was in some discomfort at times and that it was time for the second phase of his career to come to an end. We thought about sending him to WinStar (Versailles, KY), where his sire Distorted Humor stands, but they only allow visitors a few days a week. The Horse Park was very interested in acquiring him and we are very happy that he's headed there. Now all his fans will have the opportunity to see him." And what is Jack's favorite memory of Funny Cide? "Oh, most definitely, winning The Kentucky Derby - nothing can compare to that. It's the greatest race in the world and to stand in the winner's circle on the first Saturday in May is what dreams are made of."

Indeed, there's something special about all horses, yet there's something magical about the ones that have achieved racing's highest honors. New York's loss is Kentucky's gain. So the next time you're in Lexington - don't say I didn't warn you if all of a sudden you turn around and find yourself in the presence of greatness. And have your cameras ready - because it just might be Funny Cide.



Funny Cide arrives at The Kentucky Horse Park

Post Script: You can read all about Funny Cide and his connections in *Funny Cide & The Funny Cide Team*, with Sally Jenkins, 2004. This book and other great tales of racing can be found through Lyrical Ballad Bookstore, of Saratoga Springs, NY. email: lballad@nycap.rr.com
Lyrical Ballad offers a discount for ThoroFan members.

Dennis G. Hogan is a writer and equine photographer living in Ulster County, NY. He may be reached at comments@dghphoto.com