# AMERICAN Turf MAGAZINE

americanturf.com

September 2011

**CARRYOVERS**

*when you should and shouldn't play them*
pg.20

**HORSE OF THE MONTH**
pg.40

## AWESOME MARIA

americanturf.com

$4.95 U.S. / $5.95 CAN

*THE GREATEST RACEHORSE EVER* pg.17

## THE GREATEST RACEHORSE EVER?
# HERE'S OUR OPINION

### By Mark Shrager

A ND NOW, THE TIME FOR A DECISION IS at hand. Our 26 candidates for the title "America's Greatest Racehorse" produced seven Triple Crowns, 32 Horse of the Year titles, and 61 other championships, numbers that would be even higher were it not for the fact that three of them – Domino, Colin, and Man o' War – raced before the advent of official championships, and another, Phar Lap, raced only once in North America.

Collectively, our 26 honorees won 598, or just over two-thirds, of their 881 starts, and finished in the money another 188 times, for an in-the-money percentage of 89.2%. The Thoroughbred Racing Hall of Fame in Saratoga Springs, New York has plaques honoring 24 of the 25 American-bred runners in our study; the twenty-fifth, Zenyatta, will certainly be inducted at first eligibility. Phar Lap, the only one not honored in Saratoga Springs, is a member of both the New Zealand and Australian Halls of Fame.

Our runners possessed brilliance almost beyond imagining, so much so that it seemed nearly impossible to settle on a Top 10, or to determine "the greatest horse ever to look through a bridle," as conditioner Grover "Buddy" Delp described his superstar trainee, Spectacular Bid. Seeking to systematize the selection process as much as possible, we applied a number of criteria, criteria that we discussed at length in our Native Dancer article. To spare the reader the chore of referring back to that article, we'll repeat those criteria here:

- ◆ DID THE HORSE EXCEL AS A 2-YEAR-OLD, AS A 3-YEAR-OLD, AND BEYOND?
- ◆ COULD IT BOTH SPRINT AND ROUTE?
- ◆ DID IT WIN MAJOR RACES?
- ◆ DID IT CARRY HIGH WEIGHTS AND CONCEDE WEIGHT TO ITS BEATEN RIVALS?
- ◆ DID IT HANDLE VARIOUS TRACK CONDITIONS?
- ◆ DID CONTEMPORARY OBSERVERS CONSIDER IT TO BE OF CHAMPIONSHIP CALIBER?
- ◆ DID IT RUN FAST TIMES AND SET STAKES, TRACK, AND AMERICAN RECORDS?
- ◆ DID IT DEFEAT OTHER GREAT HORSES?
- ◆ ARE THERE OTHER FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED IN EVALUATING ITS CAREER?

Some of our runners met all of these criteria; others fell short in one or more areas. Forego and several others did not race at 2; Colin, Man o' War and Secretariat, among others, were unraced beyond age

3. Domino's amazing speed was usually decisive in sprints, but evaporated in races beyond one mile. Phar Lap died before he could compete in America's most important stakes.

The brilliant but tragic Ruffian, perhaps destined for the top of our list under different circumstances, never carried more than 122 pounds in a race. Seabiscuit humbled the great War Admiral, but could seldom handle a sloppy track. Whirlaway's inability to maintain a straight path led some horsemen to question whether he would ever reach his potential. Affirmed set only one track record during his 29-race career. Count Fleet faced weak wartime competition, never confronting a rival that anyone would describe as "great."

### EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES?

The question of other factors to be considered was a perplexing one. Even the best of thoroughbreds, flesh-and-blood creatures all, are imperfect. They possess flaws, they suffer losses. Their rare shortcomings are sometimes accompanied by valid extenuating circumstances: Secretariat couldn't resolve the financial difficulties that forced his early retirement, Whirlaway couldn't design the cut-out blinkers needed to straighten his meandering stretch runs, and Count Fleet certainly couldn't end World War II.

The problem is that we don't know every factor that might have impacted every thoroughbred's every race. No one does. All we can be certain of are the actual results:

> "Our runners possessed brilliance almost beyond imagining…"

who won, by how much. Who lost. And so we strove not to make excuses for our subjects. Our aim was to compare the actual accomplishments of great thoroughbreds, not to imagine the even more prodigious feats they might have accomplished, had the fates treated them more kindly.

With all of this in mind, and, hopefully, with the reader's understanding that comparing horses from different eras is a difficult and complicated task, here (in reverse order) are our choices as America's All-Time Top 10 Racehorses:

### 10. JOHN HENRY

This gallant warrior earned Horse of the Year titles in 1981 and 1984, and at his retirement was the sport's richest thoroughbred. John Henry won seven championships, adding four turf titles and a championship of the handicap ranks to his

two Horse of the Year trophies, and remains the only horse to win the Arlington Million twice. But it is his Horse of the Year title at age 9 – equivalent to winning, say, the Tour de France as a 50-year-old – that distinguishes John Henry's resumé from that of every other thoroughbred. John Henry was defeating stakes horses at an age when most thoroughbreds have long since left the track. He raced at a higher level, at a more advanced age, than any other horse in the sport's history.

## 9. SPECTACULAR BID

But for a bizarre and ill-timed stable accident, the 1980 Horse of the Year might have become the third Triple Crown winner in as many seasons. Spectacular Bid posted 26 wins in 30 starts; his winning percentage, 86.7% is the highest we've been able to find for a horse that faced the starter as many as 30 times. His record for 1 ¼ miles, a 1:57 4/5 clocking posted at Santa Anita in 1980, has remained on the books for more than three decades without being seriously threatened. Spectacular Bid

faced, from a foal crop consisting of just 1,680 animals, was exceedingly suspect, and his greatest victories were achieved in match races, where his monumental speed advantage led to an average victory margin of more than 25 lengths. Man o' War was far less dominant in his non-match race victories, which averaged just 2.64 lengths.

Man o' War's lone victory over an older horse, a 7-length win versus Sir Barton, was achieved under match race conditions that favored the faster horse and amid rumors that Sir Barton might be unsound; his famous "100-length win" in the 1920 Lawrence Realization was at the expense of the lowly Hoodwink, which according to the official chart never even attempted to match strides with the champion. Man o' War never faced – and his owner, Samuel Doyle Riddle, reportedly wanted no part of – the best older horse of his era, the great gelding Exterminator. We believe that Man o' War was a racehorse of outstanding excellence, but find that others achieved more against far more worthy opposition.

leading money-winner.

## 6. ZENYATTA

This California-based mare won her first 19 races, equaling the sport's all-time record winning streak, and concluded her career as the leading money earner among fillies and mares with a bankroll in excess of $7.3 million. She won the 2009 Breeders' Cup Classic against male rivals, and nearly repeated the feat in 2010, losing by a head to Blame after falling sixteen lengths behind early. Zenyatta was Horse of the Year for 2010, and was recognized as top older filly/mare for three consecutive years, 2008 through 2010. She narrowly lost the 2009 Horse of the Year trophy to Rachel Alexandra after the 3-year-old filly, in the course of her own undefeated season, had defeated male rivals in the Preakness, Haskell, and Woodward. A charismatic and hugely popular thoroughbred, Zenyatta drew countless new fans to a sport much in need of them.

## 5. CITATION

The 1948 Triple Crown winner and Horse of the Year concluded his career as the first equine millionaire. He won 19 times in 20 starts at age three, just one victory shy of Man o' War's career totals, and

> ## "All we can be certain of are the actual results: who won, by how much."

carried as much as 132 pounds to victory, and often won by enormous margins. His rating might have been higher but for his failure to win at 1 ½ miles, a distance he tried twice without success.

## 8. MAN O' WAR

For two years, 1919 and 1920, Man o' War dominated American racing as it had never been dominated before. He would unquestionably have been named Horse of the Year for his undefeated 1920 campaign and been the champion juvenile of 1919, had the awards existed at the time. Man o' War won 20 of his 21 starts, set numerous time records, carried with impunity weights that might have flattened lesser horses, and earned not merely the accolades but the worshipful awe of the horsemen of his day.

Man o' War falls short of our Top 5 for a variety of reasons. The competition he

## 7. AFFIRMED

Affirmed was legendary for his gameness, won championships every year he raced, and earned two Horse of the Year titles. His 1978 Triple Crown may well have been the most impressive ever, because in all three races he defeated Alydar, history's most daunting Triple Crown runner-up. Altogether, Affirmed defeated Alydar seven times in their ten meetings, often by a whisker. Had Affirmed not been foaled in the same year, this series would almost certainly have included an entry for Triple Crown winner Alydar.

Affirmed won races from California to New York, at distances from 5 ½ furlongs to 1 ½ miles, carrying up to 132 pounds. He climaxed his career by defeating Spectacular Bid and that one's Belmont Stakes conqueror, Coastal, in the Jockey Club Gold Cup, retiring as the sport's all-time

won 29 of his first 31 races. Citation faced Hall of Fame caliber competition in Armed, Bewitch, Coaltown, Noor, and Two Lea, but never won carrying more than 130 pounds, almost certainly a consequence of the devastating medical condition that afflicted him following his 3-year-old season. Had Citation avoided the osselets that sidelined him for more than a year, and returned at age four with the quality he'd shown in his first two seasons, it is possible he would be adjudged the greatest racehorse of all-time.

## 4. SEATTLE SLEW

The 1977 Horse of the Year won his first nine races, including the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont Stakes, to become America's only undefeated Triple Crown winner. A champion every year he raced, Seattle Slew could sprint or route, and won under imposts as high as 134

pounds. Seattle Slew took the measure of fellow Triple Crown winner Affirmed in the Marlboro Cup – the first-ever meeting of two Triple Crown winners. He won 14 of 17 overall, and his loss to distance specialist Exceller in the 1 ½-mile Jockey Club Gold Cup, by a scant nose after a stretch-long battle, remains one of racing's classic demonstrations of thoroughbred gameness. After his racing days, Seattle Slew extended his influence on the sport by siring a remarkable parade of classic-winning thoroughbreds.

### 3. SECRETARIAT

The only 2-year-old Horse of the Year to repeat at age 3, Secretariat's 31-length Belmont Stakes triumph clinched the first Triple Crown sweep in 25 years, with a clocking, 2:24, likely to remain on the record books forever. Secretariat proved himself sprinting and routing, dominated an outstanding 3-year-old crop, and then humbled some of the nation's best older horses. He was perhaps the most versatile thoroughbred ever: he won the Kentucky Derby from dead last, the Preakness by dashing past the entire field on the clubhouse turn, the Belmont Stakes in virtually wire-to-wire fashion.

Secretariat was a phenomenon on dirt, then concluded his career defeating the sport's best grass specialists, winning 1973's turf championship. He was retired prior to his 4-year-old season and therefore never carried more than 126 pounds in a race, but this remains the only smudge on his career. Few thoroughbreds are sufficiently charismatic to inspire catch phrases, but race caller Chic Anderson's exultant Belmont Stakes exclamation, "He is moving like a tremendous machine!", will forever be associated with Secretariat.

### 2. KELSO

Thoroughbred racing's only 5-time Horse of the Year won a record 10 championships, capturing 3-year-old honors in 1960 and the championship of the handicap ranks every year from 1961 through 1964. He might have won another Horse of the Year trophy at age 8 but for an errant dirt clod, kicked back at him during the early stages of a race, which badly damaged the gelding's eye. Kelso is the only thoroughbred to have won five consecutive renewals of a major race, monopolizing the two-mile Jockey Club Gold Cup from 1960 through 1964.

Kelso met and disposed of the nation's best thoroughbreds for five generations: Carry Back, T.V. Lark, Jaipur, Never Bend, Mongo, Beau Purple, Roman Brother and Gun Bow, among others. His 3:19 1/5 clocking for two miles, established in the 1964 Jockey Club Gold Cup, is almost certain to remain the standard for the distance forever.

Like all thoroughbreds, Kelso had imperfections. He was not a proficient sprinter, and was a good but not great turf horse, winning just once in five stakes efforts over the lawn. In every other aspect, however, Kelso was as good as they came. His greatness extended for a longer stretch of years than any other horse of our time.

### 1. DR. FAGER

There were seemingly only two ways to defeat this force of nature: you could enter a "rabbit" with your chosen winner to force him into a suicidal speed duel, or you could hope that Dr. Fager's fiery intensity might overwhelm his talent.

At times, these strategies were successful: A rank Dr. Fager lost the Champagne Stakes and the juvenile championship to Successor when challenged early by the winner's speedy stablemate Great White Way and the front-running Bold Hour and Diplomat Way; he lost the Jersey Derby by disqualification when he impulsively bore in on In Reality; he lost the 1967 Woodward when trainers Frank Whiteley and Eddie Neloy employed speed horses Hedevar and Great Power as tag-team partners for Damascus and Buckpasser; he lost the 1968 Brooklyn when double-teamed again by Damascus and Hedevar.

We don't claim to know everything there is to know about thoroughbred racing, but we do know this: any horse that Damascus and Buckpasser couldn't handle one-on-one must have been a very special horse indeed.

Dr. Fager was likely the best sprinter since Man o' War, if not a better one, and could also outrun the best horses of his era at 1 ¼ miles. He carried crushing weights to amazing victories, lugging 139 pounds while erasing a full second from Belmont's 7-furlong track record, eclipsing the world's mile record in a 10-length romp under 134 pounds, and equaling Aqueduct's mile-and-a-quarter record with a 1:59 3/5 clocking while lugging 132. Track surface was a non-issue for Dr. Fager. He won the sloppy 1967 Arlington Classic by 10 lengths, and, just because he could, added the 1968 turf championship to his resumé, giving Fort Marcy sixteen pounds and a resounding beating in the United Nations Handicap.

There have been many remarkable thoroughbreds in the history of this great sport, but Dr. Fager, one-on-one, may have been more racehorse than any other could handle.



**The Great Secretariat**

Photo by Bob Coglianese