

Sixth Annual Joint Meeting of HTA and TRA

Tuesday, February 19, 2008

10:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

Ghost Stories

- Charles Leerhsen, Sports Illustrated, author of Crazy Good

Stan Bergstein: Our next speaker will entertain you for the half hour that he is going to be up on the podium. Here's Charlie Leerhsen.

Charles Leerhsen: I thought I'd tell you about my experience with my book which comes out in June from Simon & Schuster. It's called Crazy Good: the True Story of Dan Patch, the Most Famous Horse in America. I'll tell you a little bit about my experiences in putting it together. The first call I made when I was doing my Dan Patch research, this was about 2 and a half or 3 years ago, was to a very nice person who listened to my plea for cooperation and information and my fervent request to be true to historical facts and they sighed and said "You know, don't you think people are sick of Dan Patch? Why don't you write about some other horse?" I've got to tell you, in three years that was the only person I ever met who thought people were sick of Dan Patch. Everyone else I spoke to in that interim had never heard of the horse. Since the fall of 2005 when I started working on Crazy Good, I had run the idea of Dan Patch by friends, acquaintances, colleagues, relatives, cab drivers, yoga teachers—I live in Brooklyn. Outside Oxford, Indiana where the horse was born and Savage, Minnesota where he spent most of his life, all I got were blank stares. People in New York City, where I live, were particularly clueless. A couple came right back to me with that line from *The Music Man*, "Like to see some stuck-up jockey boy sitting on Dan Patch? Make your blood boil, I should say," but they admitted they were speaking phonetically, they had no idea what the words meant, they might as well have been reciting the lyrics to Louie Louie. Of the handful of New Yorkers who claimed they did recognize the name, one person identified Dan as an 1890s baseball player, another had him confused with a certain two-legged, bridge-jumping daredevil named Sam Patch, and still another said "Isn't Dan Patch the devil?" All I could think of is he was thinking of Old Scratch, which was once a common nickname for Satan. I hang out with a classy group of people, I tell you. It can be discouraging to see the reactions of people when you tell them you're going to

blow the lid off something that they had never even heard of in the first place. So that was my challenge I think. Who the hell is Dan Patch? Now some people here, at this gathering of horse racing experts may think they know, there's a sort of fortune cookie sized biography of the horse that people, especially in the harness industry, carry around in their brain I learned, and it goes something like this: He was an incredibly fast pacer and owned by a marketing genius from Minnesota. How half-right and how boring that is. The truth is a lot more interesting. Here in a nutshell, let me give you the 10-cent history right here. Dan Patch was a mahogany based, standardbred stallion, foaled in Oxford, Indiana in 1896. He was born crippled, his left hind leg had been wrapped the wrong way in the womb and he was unable to stand up and nurse without human assistance. After figuring out how to gain his balance, Dan impressed people around town with his good looks, his charming personality and his natural ability to pace, despite that bad leg. For a while he pulled a grocer's cart around Oxford, Indiana. When, at the age of four, he was entered in a race at the county fair he won easily in straight heats. Taken to the next level fair in Lafayette, Indiana, he won easily again. By the next year, now this is 1901, he was on the Grand Circuit and still winning. By 1902 he ran out of opponents and started racing against the clock. Because he had twice been stiffed by his driver, his record was not perfect but it was remarkable nonetheless. Dan was 19 and 0 in terms of races and 54 for 56 in terms of heats. In speed shows, Dan first broke the two-minute barrier then tied Star Pointer's world record of one fifty-nine and a quarter. Then in 1903 he lowered the record to 1:59 at Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. Eventually he would lower it, unofficially but indelibly to 1:55, a record that would stand for 32 years. Often he would come back to the grandstand after his time trial, stop and take a long look at the crowd, then, with no prompting from his driver, he would bow and the fans would go wild often pouring down onto the grandstand and mobbing him on the track. Yes, Dan Patch, now so utterly forgotten or at best, as Roger Clemens would say, misremembered. He was not just the most famous horse in America in the first decade of the 20th century, but also the most beloved pop cultural figure. It's really hard to believe this, and when I worked on this book I thought I was dealing with events that had happened on another planet because they seemed so separated from us and so far away and so radical. Children sent Dan Patch 50 thousand fan letters a year. He endorsed, as I'm sure some of you know, hundreds of products: cigars, sleds, washing machines, breakfast cereals, pancake syrups, lox, shaving razors, pocket watches, there was even Dan Patch real estate and the Dan Patch stallion shields to prevent the family carriage

horse from masturbating. He inspired hit songs: the Dan Patch two-step and the Dan Patch march. I found in an inventory of items that President Theodore Roosevelt kept in his Oyster Bay, Long Island home a reference to a framed Dan Patch horseshoe, which Roosevelt brags in his autobiography was a gift from the owner from the race in which he broke the two-minute mile. Dan Patch wrote his own autobiography and it sold very well, though after reading it I have to say he wasn't a very good writer. I say Dan Patch was beloved and I mean it. In a copy of the Harness Horse magazine from the 1930s I found this testimonial from John Hervey, who is probably the preeminent turf rider of the 20th century, this is John Hervey on Dan Patch, "A kinder, a wiser, a finer dispositioned spirit in equine form never lived. He was goodness personified and wisdom. That he knew more than most men of the earth was a firm conviction of those who knew him. It was almost unbelievable that a horse with so mighty a heart, so dauntless a courage, such endlessness masculine resolution, strength and power could at the same time be so mild, so docile, so teachable, so controllable, so loveable. Those constantly with him, worshiped him, would have died for him, I believe, had it been necessary." Dan Patch was a different kind of horse. He was different to a degree, in fact, that experienced horse handlers found amazing and some even hateful, jealousy being a big part of the racing game. For example, those stallions can be skittish, lashing out with teeth and hooves at the slightest provocation, Dan Patch exuded calm, allowing strangers to approach him and small children to run back and forth beneath his belly. As for racing and touring, he seemed to get it. He seemed to understand that his job was to be this new thing in America, a superstar. Whenever he saw a camera, he stopped. One evening in Lexington, Dan Patch was led into the lobby of the Phoenix hotel where happy drunks patted his nose and perfumed women wanted a nuzzle. Whatever he was thinking down deep when people pressed around him, Dan remained charming and affable. Fans sometimes pulled hairs from his tail to twist into key chains and put into lockets. In such cases, Dan might spin his handsome head around and cast a sharp glance, but he never kicked. He had an admirable sense of his own might and others' vulnerability. The only person Dan ever bit was a young Minnesota boy named Fred Sasse who would grow up to write an appallingly bad book about him. You just had to love a horse like this, and people did. They turned out to see him, 80 thousand, 90 thousand, 100 thousand strong, and this was in an era when major league baseball games routinely drew 1,300 people and World Series games drew 6,500 people. 100 thousand people, on more than one occasion, turned out to see Dan Patch race against the

clock. Dan made \$1 million a year at the time when the highest paid baseball player, Ty Cobb of the Tigers, was making \$12 thousand. I had three main sources of information for my book Crazy Good. One was the newspapers of the day. I paged through thousands of them and scrolled through thousands more online. The hard part about looking through newspapers from say, 1901 is staying focused. The eyes keep getting seduced, sometimes by shameful stories about lynchings of black men and boys in the South—there are a lot of those stories—and sometimes by strange headlines. I think my favorite—because it was so 1902—was “Mice Cause Feminine Panic on Trolley.” That was in the Minneapolis Tribune. Then there were the ads for patent medicines like Dr. Kilmer’s Swamp Root and Kickapoo Indian Sagua, products meant to address previously unknown ailments of the liver, heart, lungs and bowels; carefully worded ads for erectile dysfunction remedies proliferated in the sports pages, just as they do today. The newspapers of the day, of course, covered Dan Patch very closely. When he broke Star Pointer’s record at Brighton Beach in 1903 in New York the Times ran an account on page one, above the fold. In those days, before radio, newspapers were the only mass medium and there was a densely woven web of them across the country, but the feature story and the profile hadn’t been invented yet, so stories about athletes, the two and the four-legged kind, they might be numerous but they were also usually short and shallow. So I could track everywhere Dan Patch went in the country, but you couldn’t get too much in terms of color and detail from the daily papers. Still, some papers did convey a sense of what the sport was like in those days. In a 1907 edition of the Fort Wayne Sentinel, I found an account of a strange trotting place, it was in Columbus, Ohio actually, in the first heat there was a wreck and two of the horses dumped their drivers and ran into the infield, eventually they were caught, they weren’t scratched though they were brought back to the paddock to be prepared for the second heat. In that second heat another mare took a bad step and broke her leg, said the paper “she was taken to the infield and shot.” Good times. And then the race continued. The old newspapers gave me a sense of how the horse’s name was becoming part of the language. The Michigan football team was scoring points, I read, at a Dan Patch clip. In another paper I learned that it was a good year for the farmer and corn was coming in like Dan Patch. I also got a sense of how people exaggerated their connection to the horse to make themselves more important. A common boast in the 20s, 30s and 40s, a kind of urban myth comparable to saying you were at Wrigley Field when Babe Ruth hit his famous called-shot homerun, was to say you were at a racetrack someplace watching

Dan Patch warm up when his trainer and driver drove the horse over, picked you out of the crowd and asked if you wanted to take old Danny boy for a spin. I came upon that story dozens of times in papers from coast to coast. I also read many obituaries of people who had almost certainly never met Dan Patch but were identified as his trainer, owner, breeder, horseshoer or groom; their impressive fibs had followed them relentlessly to the grave. Another and better source of information to me were the horse magazines of the day, weeklies like the Horse Review and the American Horse Breeder were devoted strictly to the standardbred, and let's not forget that harness racing was the number 1 sport in America in this sports-crazed time for about 15 years before and after the turn of the 20th century it was clearly the number 1 sport. And these weekly horse magazines were devoted strictly to the standardbred and they were vibrant, jam-packed journals that were something of a cross between Sports Illustrated and Time. They covered the harness scene in deep detail and they were brimming with news, opinion and gossip. That's the good news. The bad news for me was that I had these thick, large-format weeklies that are completely unindexed. I had no choice but to sit for many days in the library of the Harness Racing Museum in Goshen, New York and page through the bound volumes, running my eyes up and down the smallish print and looking for mentions of Dan. This would have been an impossible task without Gail Cunard, by the way, the director of the Museum, and without Ellen Harvey and Ken Weingartner from the USTA who sat, spent many long afternoons with me, next to me on the library table. But all that squinting was worth it. From the Horse Review, in particular, I learned what owners and trainers were saying about him and about each other. Reading their lengthy quotes is sometimes reading between the lines, I got a sense of their personalities and the conflicts that shaped and defined their relationships. I picked up some fascinating details too, I learned Dan Patch was stabled for a while in Harlem and worked out in Central Park. I learned that when Dan's barn in Minnesota caught fire one morning in 1904 he fled the scene calmly and on the pace. I learned that Dan was referred to inexplicably by his grooms as Dennis, and that the horse liked to stand around with his little pet rat terrier on his head. I learned what hotels his trainer-drivers stayed in, what jokes they told and when they had a cold. I even knew when one of them got sick and vomited from the sulky in mid-race—there's no such thing as too much information in my business—and I read a whole lot of very bad Dan Patch poetry in those magazines. My other chief source of information was, let's call them the Dan Patch cult, the 300 or so people, I estimate, who are passionately devoted to keeping the

horse's name alive and collecting Patchiana: Dan Patch lunch boxes, pedal cars, flower sacks, tobacco tins, that and all the bric-a-brac that I've mentioned already and more. The members of the Dan Patch cult suck it off eBay or out of auction houses and they add it to their household shrines. My living room, more than one of them told me, looks like a museum. I met a man who showed me a mock-bamboo walking stick, worn smooth by the obscure Hoosier farmer who was Dan Patch's first trainer; and another man who owns an authentic left rear shoe, which is the holy grail of Dan Patch footwear; a retired printer in Burnsville, Minnesota who owns what may be the tail of Dan Patch died red for mysterious reasons and who also has the horse's harness and not-so-miniature scale model of the farm where Dan lived from 1902 until 1916 and photographs of virtually everyone who worked there and their significant others. He has even for some reason when possible acquired the clothing those people were wearing in the photographs. "Sometime over the last 40 years," he told me, rather unnecessarily, "I got carried away." George has moldering brushes that may contain Dan Patch hair and dander and boxes of cancelled checks from the horse's third and final owner, a Minneapolis entrepreneur named M.W. Savage, and George wants more. He wants, for example, M.W. Savage's belt buckle and false teeth, "and I think I can get them too," he said to me. I just hope a shovel isn't involved in that episode. These people were a little crazy, but they were important to me. In a book you may have heard of called Seabiscuit, Laura Hillenbrand says that she found the old newspaper clippings invaluable, but that she couldn't have written her book without talking to the old-timers who remembered the horse first hand. Well Dan Patch stopped doing time trials in 1909 and died in 1916, so even if I found an eyewitness he might not have known I was in the room with him. I did, however, have the Dan Patch cult. In Oxford, Indiana, a retired farmer named Bob Glassby and his wife Thelma who, for the last 30 years, have been working to keep the horse's name alive in that town of 12 thousand people, they gave me the grand tour of Oxford. We visited the spot where the horse was born—then a livery stable, now a private home—and the place where he first raced, which is now a soybean field. Bob introduced me to a man now in his nineties who had worked for Dan Messner, Jr., Dan's breeder and first owner and who drove the strange looking cart that was used to break Dan Patch. Through Bob I also met John Messner, the grandson of Dan, Jr. the first owner, who is the golf pro at the local country club. John Messner owns the Dan Patch barn where Dan lived from shortly after his birth until he was sold to a man from New York in 1902. John had kept the outside of the barn up, doing repairs and

repainting the lettering on the roof that spelled out Dan Patch 155, but oddly enough he had never gone inside. Oddly enough John's father, who was born in 1912, died in the 1980s and had lived his whole life in Oxford, Indiana, he had never gone in that barn either. Or maybe it wasn't so odd because both men had mixed feelings about their grandfather having let Dan Patch slip through his hands for the then, not-quite-princely sum of \$20 thousand. When I first met John Messner, he seemed to have no interest in going in the barn—which stood just across from his house, about 75 feet from his front door—but he did show me how, balancing on a card table placed precariously on some cinder blocks, I could look through a hole in the wall. I did and I saw the past. A shaft of yellow light came in through a crack in the roof and struck the door of the largest, and judging by the latticework, the most luxurious stall. A rusted pitchfork lay in the middle of the floor, its tines curled upward, and near it was a thick, green glass bottle. This was the room where Dan Patch has lived, and where men in celluloid collars and women with hats trimmed with ribbon rosettes had come to stare with awe at the horse that had once delivered their groceries. It looked like everyone had fled the scene in a hurry and no one had disturbed it for nearly 100 years. Eventually John changed his mind about the barn and not only went in but supervised its renovation during the time when I was researching the book. He would lead me on a tour of the structure where his helper had found a tack trunk with the words Dan Patch painted on it in fancy, fading letters. The trunk had been opened and was surrounded by a brush, leg wrap, skirt straps, a bottle of Humphrey's liniment, and a copy of the Western Horseman Magazine, dated September 24, 1900. To a small number of people, it is an amazing find. I'm proud to say that I have stood in Dan Patch's stall and seen with my own eyes the urine spot he left in the dirt. In Savage, Minnesota, however, they have something that people in Oxford could never have. They have Dan Patch's grave. It is not easy to find though, there are no guidebooks, no signs, there's not even a headstone to show where it is. Still I think I know where Dan Patch is buried, approximately. On a perfect, late summer afternoon I walked, escorted by an entourage of butterflies, past several "no trespassing" signs and over railroad tracks, and I found a spot down by the Credit River, a particular bend in the stream that certain people had described to me. To check my location I took from my pack an 8 x 10 aerial photograph of the area that I had been given by a great-grandson of a man who helped bury the horse on a steamy July day in 1916. "I hope no one's going to disturb the grave after all these years," my source had said, his concern was understandable if only because, in the late 80s a Savage man who told someone the

exact location of the horse's remains had died suddenly a few years later. Since then some people in Savage have talked about a Dan Patch curse. It struck me, as I stood there in the 3-foot high grass that I was not sure what I was doing. Why did it seem so necessary to seek out this place. The setting, to be sure, was lovely and it's always fun to trespass especially in middle age, but what did I expect to find? I knew that the horse's grave was unmarked and an unmarked grave that is set between two unmarked ones looks, 90 years later, like nothing at all really, so what was there to see? Even if I was a grave robber, looking for bones to peddle to the Dan Patch cult, it seemed impossible that anything would be left in this muddy earth along this winding stream. For you see, the great horse had been horridly stuck in a shallow, wet hole without even a simple pine box. Wait. How did a horse that was once as famous as any human in America wind up this way? Did I mention I have a book for sale? Thanks.

Does anyone have any questions?

A Voice: He was at Lexington to try and break his own record and went off stride in the stretch, but there's very, very spotty fractional times. Do you have any information on that?

Charlie Leerhsen: On that particular Lexington appearance?

A Voice: Yeah, his last time trial in Lexington.

Charlie Leerhsen: It's in the book, I don't want to page through it, I'll talk to you after. You're very up on Dan Patch to even know about the Los Angeles appearance, but that was his last, very sad appearance in Los Angeles in 1909, very thin crowd and Dan going in about 2:16 or something like that, that was all he could muster.

Dave Johnson: Charlie, where did the name Dan Patch come from?

Charlie Leerhsen: That's a good question Dave. His owner's name was Dan Messner and his sire's name was Joe Patchen. Joe Patchen, in his day, if Dan Patch is forgotten, Joe Patchen was a huge celebrity in his day and is even more forgotten, and the owner first tried to register his name as Dan Patchen and he was called that around town for a while, and then whatever the body was—I forget the exact name of it—that registered names, rejected that name. They said it was against their rules, they didn't explain why, and then he had suggested an alternate name which was Dan P, and then that was rejected when they said two or three other horses had that name. Registration was a little chaotic in those days. Then apparently he had said “well, I'll leave it up to you if those two don't work out,” so the association had said “we're going to register him as Dan Patch,” and they threw it back to him, which is actually a neater, better

name. The name lasted in America until the 30s and 40s; people knew who the horse was I think more but it was a brand name like fading from your washing machine or your sled or your wagon. These were all products that he had sold and those were some of the more enduring ones—the breakfast cereal boxes and all tend to get thrown away. There's still a fairly lively market for some of the stuff on eBay, but none of it is all that expensive.

Hope to see you around the circuit this summer and thanks a lot.

Stan Bergstein: Thank you Charlie, and you'll find the book fascinating and hopefully you'll find the movie that follows it even more fascinating.