

Northern Dancer

Peerless Patriarch of the Racing Breed and Maryland Stallion of Distinction

by Laurel Scott

The year was 1962; the place: Windfields Farm in Ontario, Canada. A yearling sale was underway, with well-known horsemen in attendance; and one prospect in particular was being ignored. Though bred by owner Edward P. Taylor himself, the feisty bay colt was small and dumpy, built more like an old-style Quarter Horse than a streamlined Thoroughbred. And to make matters worse, his asking price of \$25,000, shared by only two other yearlings, was the sale's highest. So potential buyers – including those who purchased the other two yearlings – peeked once into his stall, and kept walking.

But if Northern Dancer the yearling was summarily dismissed, Northern Dancer the 3-year-old would not be denied.

In 1964, "The Dancer," under a deft ride by Bill Hartack, silenced his critics by winning the 1 ¼-mile Kentucky Derby in a record 2:00, trouncing favorite Hill Rise and becoming the first Canadian-born horse to take this prestigious race. It was the fulfillment of a 45-year dream for Taylor, who had been told by the Kentucky cognoscenti that breeding a champion in Canada was as likely as pigs flying.

This was just the beginning. Before long, a decisive win in Baltimore's Preakness Stakes had catapulted Northern Dancer to stardom and a chance at America's Triple Crown.

And if this oft-told tale sounds too good to be true, you ain't heard nothin' yet.

Seeds of Potential

Edward Plunket Taylor was a rare individual: a very "human" tycoon, who, though born to wealth, parlayed an inherited brewery into one of Canada's most successful industrial empires. He also loved horses enough to purchase the important equestrian property that would become Windfields. And, perhaps on the theory that one good gamble deserves another, Taylor made it his mission to populate that property with top breeding and racing stock.

Little did he know it, but he was about to create one of the world's greatest Thoroughbred dynasties with the 1952 purchase of Lady Angela at the December sale in Newmarket, England.

At the time, the 8-year-old Hyperion mare – easily the classiest in the sale – was in foal to the great Italian-bred champion Nearco. Although this particular combination had fallen out of favor with breeders, Taylor purchased the



Winants Brothers

Though he reminded Windfields' manager of a circus pony, Northern Dancer was all business in the breeding shed, where his size dictated the use of a "pitcher's mound."

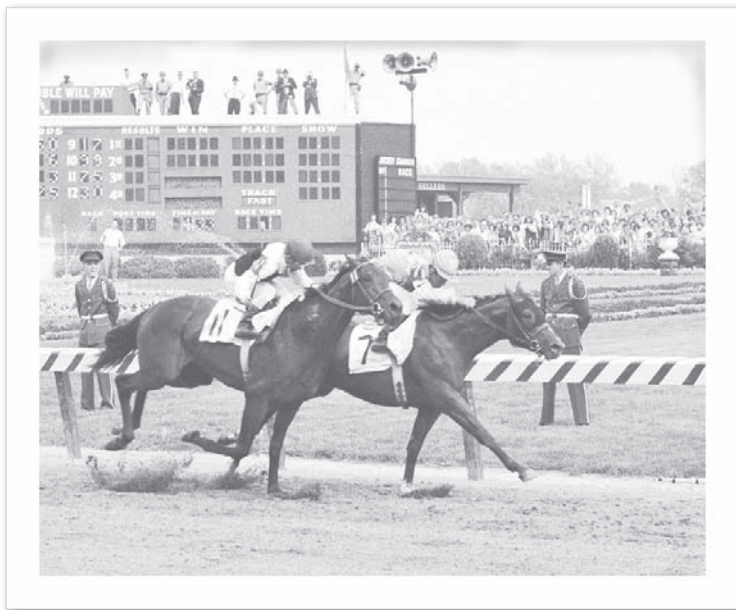
mare for a hefty \$35,000 with the understanding that she remain in England, bear her foal, and be bred back to Nearco. Which she was, two years later, producing a colt named Nearctic. This fleet but late-maturing racehorse Taylor bred in his first year at stud to the mare Natalma, a stakes-placed daughter of the great Native Dancer, the "grey ghost" of Maryland's famed Sagamore Farm and a hero of racing's gilded age.

Natalma had raced earlier that season before a knee injury ended her career. Rather than wait until the following spring to breed her, it was decided to breed her in mid-June, in part to fill Nearctic's first book. The result, on May 27, 1961, was an unremarkable bay colt, a little latecomer named Northern Dancer with three white socks and a crooked blaze.

Taylor's equally diminutive wife Winifred, who had given Windfields its name, is said to have done likewise for this colt. She was fond of Northern Dancer from the start, and according to Joe Hickey, former general manager of Windfields' Maryland division, often visited him with a purse full of sugar. "I remember once she reached between the bars of his door with this sugar, and he grabbed her finger and started backing up!" he recalled. "But we got to him in time, and she came right back the next time."

Today, there are few who remember Northern Dancer as a foal. But Northern Dancer as a racehorse – that's a different story. A squat but powerful 15.2 at the height of his career, he had a choppy stride but was quick on his feet. He developed into a determined closer, lurking just off the pace and then morphing into a "Lamborghini," according to Canadian journalist Peter Gzowski.

As sportswriter Jim Murray observed in the *Los Angeles Times*, "His legs are barely long enough to keep his tail off the ground. He probably takes a hundred more strides than



Northern Dancer bids Hill Rise adieu during the final strides of the 1964 Kentucky Derby.

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anyone else in the race, but he's harder to pass up than a third martini."

Joe Hickey concurred, adding, "Northern Dancer could go from cruising speed to top speed in a twink. He had that great acceleration, and could sort of pounce on horses and be by them before they even knew it."

Hickey first glimpsed "The Dancer" in a pre-Derby workout at Churchill Downs. "I was standing there with Chick Lang, who was general manager of Pimlico," Hickey recounted. "And Northern Dancer came off the track, and Jimmy Jones [legendary trainer of Citation] turned to us and said, 'That little son-of-a-gun will never win the Derby. It looks like somebody put him together by candlelight or something!'"

"And then, of course, he won. It was always amazing to watch people's reactions to him ... he was really like a little pocket battleship."

Championship Years

Northern Dancer's start had been auspicious enough. Under Windfield's second-string trainer Tom "Peaches" Flemming, the colt won his 5 1/2-furlong debut at Canada's Fort

The following spring, after having a quarter crack patched in an experimental procedure, Northern Dancer hit the American Triple Crown trail, counting the Florida Derby among his spoils. "The Dancer's" early jocks included Ron Turcotte and Willie Shoemaker. But headed into the Derby, Shoemaker opted instead for the unbeaten California colt, Hill Rise. So Bill Hartack took the reins, steering Northern Dancer to victory in his final prep and to Derby glory.

In the Preakness, Northern Dancer beat his West Coast rival with even more authority.

Alas, a Triple Crown sweep was not to be; Northern Dancer finished third in the Belmont Stakes, run that year at Aqueduct. Although some concluded that he was beaten by the 1 1/2-mile distance, others contend that Hartack simply misjudged the pace.

One thing is certain: the horse strained a tendon during the race.

Still, Northern Dancer returned to Toronto that June to win North America's oldest continuously run sweepstakes, the Queen's Plate. When he was retired afterwards, it was because of his injured tendon. He ended his career with 14 wins, two seconds and two thirds from 18 starts, to the tune of more than \$580,000.

The 3-year-old championship soon followed, as did Canadian Horse of the Year and Athlete of the Year kudos. Inducted into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame in 1965, Northern Dancer was the first animal so honored. And the accolades just kept coming.

The Legend Begins

Northern Dancer took to his stud duties like a fish to water, standing initially for \$10,000 in Canada. Of his first crop, he boasted an incredible 16 winners from 18 starters – including 10 stakes winners – for a winning average *six times* the norm. Three foals from this freshman effort went on to become Canadian champions: Viceregal, Dance Act and One For All.

Clearly, Northern Dancer the stallion was too big a phenomenon for Canada. So, in late 1968, he was sent to Windfields' new Maryland division in Chesapeake City.

This flew in the face of convention, since Kentucky was the traditional nursery of American Thoroughbreds. But Taylor had already begun construction of a training center on this Cecil County property. A lush tract with good grazing, it was located within

shipping distance of several racetracks, and offered tax incentives, to boot.

No one remembers those early days better than Hickey. "I came [to Windfields' Maryland division] at the same time they brought Northern Dancer down from Canada," he said. "And we spent the rest of his career together."

It was due in part to Northern Dancer that Taylor knew Hickey. During the little horse's Triple Crown campaign, Hickey was public relations director for Pimlico Race Course. Come Preakness time, he thought it would be nice to treat Taylor to an exhibition of the Canadian Governor General's Horse Guards. "But there was a great bureaucracy problem, because this troop carried lances, so they constituted an armed body crossing an international border!" Hickey said. "I had to go through the Defense Department to get all kinds of waivers, so between the Pentagon and Ottawa, I was pulling out my hair.

"But it all came out well, and the horse won, of course; and they had this troop of horses as a backdrop for Mr. Taylor getting the Woodlawn Vase. That's how we got to know each other."

The first mare Northern Dancer bred in Maryland was a stakes winner. "And he just went on from there," Hickey said. "He had a great personality, and was a good-feeling colt; and he always put on a show. We had a lot of visitors to the stallion barn, and if someone came in and wanted to see Halo, The Minstrel, El Gran Senor or some other horse, he would raise a fit! He wanted to be the center of all the attention ... and he could be tough to handle sometimes."

Veterinarian Alan McCarthy, who attended to Northern Dancer from 1980 until his death, agreed. "He definitely had his own mind," he said. "But he could be readily controlled; not that you ever had to roughhouse with him or anything."

"The Dancer" generally sired small horses – with one famous exception, the great Nijinsky (later renamed Nijinsky II). "In a field of 15 yearlings, you could pick out the Northern Dancers," Hickey attested.

There were 32 shares in his syndicate, with four extra breeding rights. "So his normal book was 36 mares," he explained. "His book created a great premium on his yearlings, as there would only be a dozen or so sold in a year."

America's leading sire in 1971 by worldwide earnings, Northern Dancer was also the country's top broodmare sire in 1991. But in between those years, his stock generated an unprecedented buying frenzy among foreign breeders.

It all started in 1968, when Irish trainer Vincent O'Brien flew to Canada on behalf of Charles Engelhard to see a *Ribot colt that Windfields was offering in the Canadian breeders' sale. Once there, O'Brien changed

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Drummer Boy

Northern Dancer, left, acknowledges his son The Minstrel, who held court in Maryland alongside his famous sire.

Erie by 6 3/4 lengths. Though defeated his next time out, he redeemed himself in the 1-mile Summer Stakes over heavy turf.

Ornery and prone to tantrums – traits he is said to have inherited from his dam – Northern Dancer was nonetheless blossoming into a promising 2-year-old. So he was transferred to Taylor's first-string trainer, the dashing Argentinian Horatio Luro, at Woodbine Racetrack. Second his first time out for the future Hall of Famer, "The Dancer" then reeled off a string of five wins, including Aqueduct's Remsen Stakes. At season's end, he was named Canada's champion 2-year-old colt.

Because Northern Dancer could be difficult, Luro reportedly wanted to geld him. Fortunately, Taylor said, "No."

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his mind and recommended that Engelhard purchase a Northern Dancer-Flaming Page yearling instead – which he did, for a record \$84,000.

That yearling was the aforementioned Nijinsky II. A magnificent specimen of an animal, he was champion 2-year-old colt in England and Ireland, and in 1970, became the first winner of England's Triple Crown since *Bahram in 1935. Horse of the Year honors were practically a given. And once again, this was just the beginning.

After Engelhard's death, O'Brien partnered with Robert Sangster and John Magnier to establish Coolmore Stud. Together, they declared "open season" on Northern Dancer stock, buying or breeding and racing such top-class runners as The Minstrel, Be My Guest, El Gran Senor, Storm Bird, Try My Best and Sadler's Wells. Most of these horses were national champions, some of them several times over. And so it was that the American "pony" became England's top sire in 1970, 1977, 1983 and 1984, and the United Arab Emirates' top broodmare sire in 1995.

It is testament to his worth that in 1981, when Northern Dancer was 20, the syndicate that owned him rejected a \$40 million offer for the aging Canadian-bred. These were affluent times, and breeders were willing to pay outrageous sums for a piece of "The Dancer" – even if he *was* long in the tooth.

"I sold several seasons to him for \$1 million," Hickey recalled. "And *People Magazine* once said that Northern Dancer was the only celebrity they were aware of that could make \$1 million before breakfast."

Meanwhile, high-priced Northern Dancer progeny continued to fuel the dizzying bloodstock boom of the '80s. The bidding wars among foreign interests had reached a fevered pitch, with the Sangster-O'Brien group figuring prominently and Northern Dancer yearlings averaging a record \$3.3 million by 1984.

The year before, at Kentucky's Keeneland July sales, the Northern Dancer colt Snaafi Dancer (out of the Bupers mare My Bupers) had become the first \$10 million yearling sold at auction (the gavel actually dropped at \$10,200,000, more digits than the toteboard could handle). The colt went to Dubai's Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, a deep-pocketed horseman who was determined to outbid "Sangster's gangsters."

Those were banner years, and Tom Bowman – whose Dance Forth Farm in Chestertown honors a Northern Dancer granddaughter – recalls them well. "If you went into the stallion barn at Windfields, you were immediately impressed by the names of all the stallions on all the stalls," he said. "And if you looked at the guest book they had in the guest room off the stallion barn, the names were like a *Who's Who* of Thoroughbred owners from around the world – Sheiks, the Queen; there

was a line of dignitaries that would impress anybody, and it was all for a horse.

"There have been decades of great horsemen and really tough horses that have come from Maryland, but the breeding industry in Maryland really opened up on an international basis with the arrival of E.P. Taylor, Windfields Farm and Northern Dancer."

In time, Northern Dancer was recognized as a sire of epic proportions. Over 23 seasons, he fathered 635 registered foals, of which 80 percent raced. Of these, 80 percent were winners, 146 of them stakes winners and 26 champions in not only the U.S. and Canada, but England, Ireland, France, and Italy. His chief standard bearers included not only multiple champion Nijinsky II, but, on the male side, The Minstrel, Shareef Dancer, Try My Best, El Gran Senor, Nureyev, Storm Bird, Be My Guest, Secreto, and Sadler's Wells; and on the female side, Northernette, Lauries Dancer, Broadway Dancer, Fanfreluche, and Woodstream. In other words, the *crème de la crème* of international racing.

Northern Dancer's overall percentage as a sire of stakes winners (22.6%) was comparable to that of Bold Ruler and his sire Nasrullah. But what makes "The Dancer" the most successful sire in the history of Thoroughbred racing is the fact that his offspring have earned more money and won more major stakes races than those of any other stallion. "I think you could say, without contradiction, that he's the greatest commercial sire in the history of a 350-year-old breed," Hickey offered. "No matter how far back you go, nobody has had more worldwide success."

Indeed, given his longevity at stud and the success of his progeny, it is estimated that 50-75 percent of all modern Thoroughbreds have Northern Dancer blood in their veins.

It seems ironic that a horse whose reputation was forged on the dirt and whose own stamina at the longer, classic distances was questioned should produce so many horses suited to the world's great classic races, many of which are run on the turf. His children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren have mastered – even dominated – the Epsom and Irish Derbies, the Prix du Jockey-Club, the Kentucky Derby, and all of the Breeders' Cup races, to name a few.

So pervasive is Northern Dancer's impact in this regard that a list of his classic winners alone would fill a book. And his influence is felt as far away as Brazil and Japan.

Ripple Effect

If his first generation was golden, Northern Dancer's successive generations proved no less sparkling. His daughters certainly passed on his "designer genes." And some of his sons have been good broodmare sires, too.

But as a sire of prepotent sires, Northern Dancer was without peer, establishing racing's most dominant male line of the late 20th

century. Among the keepers of his flame were noted stallions Danzig (sire of standouts Danehill, Danzig Connection, Lure, Polish Navy and Dayjur, among others); Fairy King (Helissio, Turtle Island), Northern Taste (Dyna Gulliver, Amber Shadai, and Adorable); Lyphard (Dancing Brave, Alzao, Ghadeer, Lypheor, Ends Well, etc.); Nijinsky II (Caerleon, Shadeed, Green Dancer, Hostage, etc.); Nureyev (Theatrical, Polar Falcon, Zilzal, etc.); Sadler's Wells (Barathea, El Prado, Saddlers' Hall, Fort Wood, Correggio, etc.); Storm Bird (Storm Cat, Personal Hope, Summer Squall, etc.); and Vice Regent (Deputy Minister, Regal Classic, etc.).

As John Sparkman, bloodstock/sales editor of *The Thoroughbred Times* wrote, "His place in history is secure."

And though Northern Dancer's immediate offspring were "pearls beyond compare" – and therefore reserved primarily for flat racing – his grandchildren and great-grandchildren branched out to excel in other disciplines, as well.

In the sport of steeplechasing, Northern Dancer son Northern Baby is the sire of choice. Indeed, only three steeplechase champions over the past 20 years have pedigrees devoid of Northern Dancer blood.

Northern Dancer descendents have also made their mark in the show ring. His grandson Northern Raja was one of the top Thoroughbred sires of show hunters in recent years.

Edward P. Taylor died in 1989. The first Canadian member of the New York Jockey Club, he had received Eclipse Awards as Outstanding Breeder in 1977 and 1983.

Northern Dancer was inducted into American racing's Hall of Fame in 1976. He stood in Maryland until his retirement on April 15, 1987 at the age of 26. And when the end came, on Nov. 16, 1990, it was a merciful one. The old stallion had colicked, and given a heart murmur and his advanced age – plus the possible distress of shipping – Taylor's son Charles ruled out surgery.

So "The Dancer's" suffering was ended humanely. "I felt terrible about having to do it, but his time had come," said veterinarian Alan McCarthy, who called his patient "one of the greatest stallions who ever lived."

In his native Canada, Northern Dancer was mourned as a fallen hero. And it was to Canada that he returned one cold, rainy night, formally escorted across the border.

Today, a portion of the Maryland facility where Northern Dancer reigned continues the tradition as Northview Stallion Station. And a marble slab at Canada's Windfields Farm marks the final resting place of the little horse who danced down from the north. ■

Editor's Note: The author is the longtime owner of a Northern Dancer granddaughter whose foals lived up to their winning heritage.

Maryland Stallions of Distinction

*Each year, The Equiery recognizes
a Maryland stallion that has had a
significant and lasting impact on his
breed. Previous honorees include:*

First Secretary

*1974-1993
Thoroughbred-Appaloosa*

Indraff

*1938-1967
Arabian*

Native Dancer

*1950-1976
Thoroughbred*

Nylon Lad

*1969-1994
Quarter Horse*

Olney Gepeto

*1967-1995
Shetland*

The Statesman

*1967-1994
Morgan*

Wertherson

*1983-1999
Hanoverian*