

Lightning in a Bottle: The Story of Chinook Pass



First of
a four-part
series

by John Loftus

I was a historian for many years before I became a turf writer. Historians have an inside joke about how, after you immerse yourself in research, you find everything so interconnected that you wind up wanting to start each story with, “In the beginning, the earth was a swirling molt en mas s.”

I thought everything had already been written about Chinook Pass. But I found out that there is a lot more to tell. A lot. Sure, I could just write the horse story: Chinook was – and at age 29, still is – a horse. He was foaled, romped at his mother’s side, was broke and trained, went to the racetrack and wound up doing pretty good. In fact, he won the Eclipse Award. End of story.

But we all know that this sport is about so much more. It’s about people, too. It’s about the adrenaline of the big race and it’s about being chilled to the bone in the darkness of a late winter morning when the horses are just beginning to leg up.

To tell the story of the great Chinook Pass in a way that will do him the honor he deserves on this, the 25th anniversary of his golden year, will require a deep telling. I expect it will take four chapters, and this is the first.

To give both Chinook Pass and history their due, we need to let ourselves fade back into the bygone times that shaped not only this particular horse and his road to glory, but also those of his connections, like Ed Purvis, the ex-cop and race car driver who bred, owned and campaigned Chinook Pass. We’ll meet him and many others – both human and equine – and, in the end, it is my sincere hope that there will be a trail of words left behind that will do this horse justice.

And, of course, we’ll finish by telling of his blissful retirement years . . . of the kindness of owner Dewaine Moore, on whose farm he was foaled and who still brings him fresh timothy hay; and of Jill Hallin, who has not, for a single day in her 20 years with Chinook Pass, lost her sense of wonder that fate saw fit to entrust her with the care of this magnificent and historic animal. In the many years since he came to her, Jill has devoted herself to simply letting Chinook be Chinook. The great champion has belonged to no one but himself, and that’s exactly the way it should be.

* * * * *

As our plane landed at LAX on the morning before the Santa Anita Derby (G1), I found myself worrying just a little that maybe this time it would all seem routine, that the thrill of covering big races would begin to lose its luster.

I needn’t have worried. I began snapping pictures, and soon the magic of top-level horse racing came to possess me once again. My wife Joyce and I had an epic day, capped by a “right place/right time” backside encounter with Winstar Farms president Bill Casner, who invited us to join his family in Eoin Harty’s barn for a post-race visit with the victorious Colonel John, whose floral blanket lay draped over the fence outside for all to see. It doesn’t get much better than that.

But to set our story in motion, I need to back up a few hours, to mid-afternoon. I was following the horses through the tunnel under the grandstand before the start of the Potrero Grande Handicap, a 6 1/2 furlong Grade 2 sprint, when I bumped into retired Hall of Fame jockey Laffit Pincay Jr.

“You’ve won this race before, haven’t you, Laffit?” I asked.

“I sure have,” he replied.

“Including one time on Chinook Pass . . .” I added.

“Now I remember you – the friend of Chinook Pass,” he said, flashing a broad smile of recognition as he added his usual rejoinder: “Fastest horse I ever rode, fastest horse I ever saw!”

This is a little routine I hear I go through whenever we meet. If you see him sometime, just say “Chinook Pass” and I guarantee you’ll get the same response.

Beautiful Golden Hands

It was dark when we arrived at The Derby for our nine o’clock dinner reservation. While waiting to be seated we studied the trophy cases lining the walls. They’re filled with the memorabilia of the restaurant’s former owner George “The Iceman” Woolf, whose statue gazes across the Santa Anita paddock at the cast bronze likeness of his greatest mount, Seabiscuit. Both have been gone more than 60 years now.

A framed image of Seabiscuit himself looked down upon us as we were seated at a nice corner table. The Derby has been a horseman’s hangout for generations, and our eyes eagerly scanned the room in search of turf legends. We weren’t disappointed. At the next table, over which a portrait of Man o’ War resided, sat a party of five. There was a talkative man who looked a bit like Bill Gates. He and his pleasant wife were clearly horse owners. Then there were two men of indeterminate age and occupation. Both had a kind of weathered look, and the

only thing you could tell for sure was that they were racetrackers. Neither man said very much, but when they did, they knew what they were talking about. And then, about three feet away with his back to us, sat the great Laffit Pincay Jr.

This was truly a “mouse-in-the-corner” moment. Hardly a word passed between us all through dinner as we listened to the conversation at the next table, our ears perking up each time Pincay told a story. From time to time he’d make the rounds of the dining room to greet people, fulfilling his celebrity duties.

At last his hosts took their leave. The two old racetrackers called it a night, too, or maybe retired to the bar. Pincay looked around, and for the first time noticed we were there, right behind him. Recognizing me from the track, he pulled up a chair and soon was regaling us with stories about one of his greatest mounts, Chinook Pass. Remembering the horse’s amazing speed and acceleration still gets his heart pounding.

“I’ve always thought he might’ve been the fastest Thoroughbred that ever lived,” he told us.

He started explaining how he learned to get Chinook Pass to break sharply from the gate. The trick was to be *very* quiet, he said – no smooching or clucking, feet barely touching the irons. “Don’t even let him know you’re there.”

As Pincay spoke, he rose from the table, leaned forward and began to vividly act it out. The effect was hypnotic. I was transported back in time and felt as if I were sitting in that gate myself, waiting for the bell to ring, and for Chinook Pass to suddenly explode beneath me.

The great jockey grasped the imaginary reins, entwining his left hand ever-so-gently in Chinook’s invisible mane. “Soft hands,” he said, almost in a whisper, “... soft hands.” My eyes were transfixed on his hands, the beautiful golden hands of Laffit Pincay Jr. . . .

* * * * *

SANTA ANITA PARK DECEMBER 26, 1982

The gate sprang open and the six-horse shot forward, clearing the pack in just three strides.

“It was amazing,” Bud Klokstad recalled, sitting on his sunny patio more than a quarter century later. “That horse ran in :21 flat! :43 flat! :55 flat! Bob Meeking was sitting up there with me, and he said, ‘Jesus Christ, Bud, that horse is going to run in six-and-change!’”

Klokstad doesn’t like to spend his time rehashing ancient history. Chinook Pass was many, many horses ago. He’s trained a thousand since then – many of them good ones – and his eye is always on the next young horse. He doesn’t like to do interviews, but had consented to this one out of respect for Chinook Pass, and for history.

In spite of his reluctance, though, he’d let himself get caught up in the excitement of the Palos Verdes Handicap all over again.

His eyes took on a faraway look as he shouted out the points of call, and I could tell that he was back there, sitting in that box at Santa Anita with Bob Meeking again on the day after Christmas in 1982.

“And then Laffit just kind of eased up on him – just kind of took hold of him, and stopped in seven and change,” he finished, pausing for a moment before adding, “But he *would* have. That horse *would*’ve run in six-and-change that day if he’d been gunning him.”

He fell silent and gazed out across his lovely little spread, perhaps watching the two young weanlings that were chasing each other back and forth. I could feel him surfacing, coming back to the present.

“Laffit always tells me that Chinook Pass was the fastest horse he ever rode, fastest horse he ever saw,” I noted, trying to restart the conversation.

“Hell, I’m the first guy that ever heard that statement!” the veteran trainer replied. “I walked out to the winner’s circle that day and asked him, ‘What do you think about him, Laffit?’ And he said, ‘He’s the runningest son of a bitch I ever thrown a leg over!’”

Even though eased before the wire, Chinook Pass had tied the Santa Anita track record. But Klokstad was wrong about one of the fractions. The 5/8 call wasn’t :55 flat. It was fifty-four-and-four – a full two-fifths of a second faster than his own recent world record.

The Mostest Hoss

Throughout his many years of retirement, Man o’ War’s groom Will Harbut led the legendary stallion out year after year to meet the endless stream of visitors that came to see him at Samuel D. Riddle’s Faraway Farm. “He was da mostest hoss,” his faithful companion would tell the adoring fans as he reeled off Big Red’s many accomplishments.

He may not be Man o’ War, who was voted US Horse of the Century for all of Thoroughbred racing, but I feel a bit like that every time I pull into the driveway of Jill Hallin’s little Maple Valley farm to visit Chinook Pass. To me, and many other fans of horse racing, Chinook is a living legend. He’s the “Mostest Hoss” – or, as Emerald Downs’ Joe Withe puts it, he is simply “The Great One.”

Dewaine Moore could never have imagined that the little colt foaled in his Rainier Stables barn on the night of April 28, 1979, would grow up to be an Eclipse Award winner and Washington Horse of the Century. Yu Tum’s foal by Native Born was just a plain brown wrapper that night. If you looked real hard, you could see the world’s tiniest star on his forehead – so small you could probably count the hairs. But there was nothing else to distinguish him.

* * * * *

The historical timeline of the Washington breeding industry has been marked by the periodic introduction of top bloodstock from outside the state. Current horsemen will

recall the arrival of the first Seattle Slewo or the first Storm Cat stallions in the Northwest. More than 40 years ago, four men pooled their assets to bring a young colt to Washington that would later sire Chinook Pass. His arrival was the subject of great anticipation, and rightfully so.

The Son of Native Dancer

Word spread fast on that spring day in 1966 when Native Born landed at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and was delivered to Longacres. Before the day was out, pretty much everyone had stopped by Hump Roberts’ barn to take a look at what may well have been the most regally-bred colt ever to set foot in Washington, and the consensus was that the good-looking, powerfully-built young chestnut lived up to his advance billing.

They had good reason to have high expectations. His sire was none other than the “Gray Ghost” himself – Native Dancer – winner of 21 of 22 races, 17 of them major stakes. His only loss – by a head – came after a troubled trip in the 1953 Kentucky Derby. Native Born’s dam, Next Move, was no slouch either. The two-time champion was the pride of the Alfred Vanderbilt barn and one of the finest distaffers of her era.

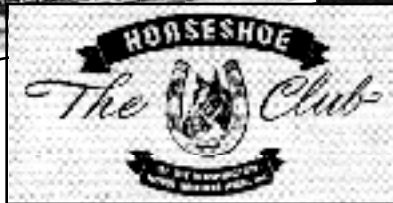
Native Dancer was the first horse to gain national fame through the new medium of television. In fact, *TV Guide* ranked him second only to Ed Sullivan in popularity. Retired at four with an injury shortly before he was shipped to France for the Prix de l’Arc de Triomphe, he went on to become one of the greatest sires of the 20th Century. By 2008, a bit more than a half-century later, Native Dancer’s blood would flow in the veins of 75 percent of all US Thoroughbreds, including all 20 of that year’s Kentucky Derby starters.

On the first Saturday in May of 1966 – just weeks after Native Born arrived in Washington – his sire’s loss in the ‘53 Derby was avenged by another of his sophomore sons, Kauai King, who won the first two legs of the Triple Crown before finishing fourth in the Belmont Stakes, two lengths behind a horse named Amberoid.

Immediately afterward, on June 16, Kauai King was syndicated for a then-record \$2,520,000, reflecting an expansive trend that would continue in the industry through the present day.

A Different World

The world that young Native Born stepped into when he was led down the ramp that day was very different from the one he came from. The white fences and genteel atmosphere of Maryland’s Sagamore Farm were separated from the rough-and-tumble Seattle of the 1960’s by more than just miles. It wasn’t much like the city we see today. The Smith Tower, built in 1914, was still the tallest downtown building, while a few miles to the north stood the almost-new Space Needle, symbol of the recent World’s Fair. Seattle had been a wide-open town ever



since the days of the Yukon Gold Rush. Gambling and vice were woven into the fabric of the city. State laws were ignored under what was known as the tolerance policy, which allowed illicit activities to flourish through a well-oiled system of payoff that started with crooked cops on the beat and percolated all the way to the top, including prosecutors, judges and elected officials.

Every few years a reformer would get elected promising to clean up the city. Mayor Gordon Clinton was one such reformer. He tried to clamp down on gambling and vice in advance of the 1962 World's Fair but, in spite of his efforts, the fair wound up having its own adult entertainment zone "to give dad something to do while mom and the kids were looking at the exhibits."

The next mayor rested on the tolerance policy, but each attempt at reform brought a small measure of progress, and gradually the wide-open city of old gave way to modern Seattle. By the time Native Born's greatest son, Chinook Pass, hit the track in 1981, old Seattle would be fading into memory as the sparkling city of skyscrapers and condos we see today began to take shape. It was a new era—one that resembled the future more than the past.

Horse racing was different in the 1960's, too. There was no such thing as a graded stakes race, an Eclipse Award, or a Breeders' Cup. Although there hadn't been a Triple Crown winner since Citation, the sport did not lack star power. At the national level, it was the age of the great gelding and five-time Horse of the Year, Kelso, as well as Northern Dancer, Buckpasser and Damascus. Californians were cheering on another great gelding, Native Diver.

At the local level, Joe Gottstein was still alive and these were the days of Smokey Dew, the gritty racemare that took on the boys in stakes after stakes. It would be years before Seattle had a major league team in any sport. Horse racing was the number one spectator

draw in the Northwest, and Longacres was packing 'em in.

More Glamorous Times

The city had a bawdy and, by many accounts, more glamorous nightlife in those days. Some who remember may well say that it was more fun than the present day, when the streets of Seattle are pretty much rolled up by 11 p.m. There were numerous clubs and cabarets offering every kind of entertainment, from the down night curious—Siamese twin torch singers, for example—to the tastefully elegant.

On the elegant end of the spectrum, one of the classiest and most popular private clubs in the Seattle area was the Horseshoe Club, owned and operated by the Washington Horse Breeders' Association. The WHBA (now the WTBA) was established in 1940 and in a few years opened its club at 8501 - 15th Ave. NW, literally across the street from Seattle's north city limits, in the Crown Hill neighborhood. Luxurious surroundings, fine food, classy entertainment and gambling opportunities—including slot machines—contributed to the Horseshoe Club's popularity, and both horse people and high society types lined up to pay its \$15 per year membership fees.

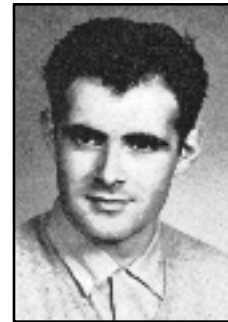
Horse-related activities at times seemed to take the back seat to the social side of things, but the money rolled in and everyone had a good time. Ed Heinemann, assisted by a part-time secretary, conducted the association's equine business from a small upstairs cubicle, and from there, in 1946, *The Washington Horse* was launched.

In the late 50's, Clio Hogan, local correspondent for the *Daily Racing Form*, was its part-time editor. In just a few years it had grown from an eight-page sheet into a glossy magazine comparable to *The Blood-Horse* and *Thoroughbred Record*. It had Kentucky, East Coast and California correspondents, and even covered European racing. Seattle's own Pete Pedersen was also a regular contributor. To top it off, the

magazine had its own society page to record the comings and goings of the Horseshoe Club's A-list clientele.

The downside was that they were located many miles from Longacres, where the horses were, and some of the horsemen felt that the WHBA's focus should be more in that direction. The issue was resolved when the Horseshoe Club was destroyed by fire in the early morning hours of April 19, 1959. Its manager, Charles "Smiles" Cufley was directed to help find other clubs that would welcome its members, and the WHBA got out of the entertainment business.

Some of its signature events continued for years afterward, however. The Jockey's Ball, held in the Grand Ballroom of the Olympic Hotel, remained a high point of the social season, and Hollywood stars such as Georgie Jessel were hired to emcee dinners honoring Eddie Arcaro, Johnny Longden and other racetrack legends. The ladies wore floor-length gowns.



Field man Ralph Vacca.

After the fire, which fortunately did not destroy the WHBA's library, temporary quarters were found on Pacific Highway near the airport while a modern new office building dedicated solely to equine pursuits was being built. Farther back in the same edition of *The Washington Horse* that recorded the burning of the Horseshoe Club was a small article entitled "FIELD MAN ADDED TO STAFF." It was accompanied by a photo of a handsome young man named Ralph Vacca. 4

NEXT MONTH: The WHBA thrives in its new location and Ralph Vacca's wide circle of connections proves essential in bringing Native Born to Washington. Ed Purvis of West Seattle teams with Dewaine Moore of Rainier Stables in a breeding program that ultimately results in the 1979 birth of Chinook Pass. The youngster is trained to race and sizzles locally as a freshman and sophomore before undertaking a Southern offensive, where he will testify against the West's top sprinters of the day.

John Loftus is media services director for the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe and has been contributing stories and photos to Washington Thoroughbred since 2005. John has setup an informal "Friends of Chinook Pass" e-mail group for those who have memories to share about the great Eclipse Award-winning champion and his human connections. E-mails received will be shared with all that have joined the group, and also with Chinook and Jill. (Yes Chinook Pass has e-mail!) So let's hear from you! Join the Friends of Chinook Pass e-mail group by writing to: chinook.pass@earthlink.net.