

CRAZY GOOD

The True Story of Dan Patch, The Most Famous Horse in America

“In this spirited narrative, Leerhsen, an editor at *Sports Illustrated*, tells the now-forgotten saga of Dan Patch, a race horse that at one time drew an estimated 60,000 people to a single event in 1903... Leerhsen delivers a mesmerizing look into a strange corner of American sports and folk history when Dan Patch became a household word... But the heart of the book is Dan Patch himself, a horse with an almost human capacity for calm and determination that deserves to be rediscovered by a modern audience.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

America has never loved any horse more than it loved Dan Patch, the champion harness racer who was nearly destroyed at birth but went on to become an undefeated, record-breaking champion. Charles Leerhsen’s **CRAZY GOOD: *The True Story of Dan Patch, The Most Famous Horse in America*** (Simon & Schuster; May 20, 2008; \$26.00) recreates America at the turn of the 20th century through the story of the greatest sports hero of his day. At a time when the highest-paid baseball player, Ty Cobb, made \$12,000 a year, Dan Patch was making over a million dollars. He was front-page news across the country when he broke the record for the mile, and subsequently lowered it by four seconds—a phenomenal achievement that stood for decades. In **CRAZY GOOD**, Charles Leerhsen reminds modern-day readers just why Dan Patch was so beloved.

Displaying his considerable storytelling talents, Leerhsen, an executive editor at *Sports Illustrated*, describes the sports world in the ragtime era and exquisitely sets the backdrop for Dan Patch’s remarkable career. Harness racing was the number one sport in America at the time, and huge crowds turned out to watch champion trotters and pacers compete against each other, and attempt to lower the record for the mile. Dan Patch raced on the pacing gait, meaning that he moved his right front and rear legs in tandem, then did the same thing on the opposite side. His home state of Indiana was renowned as “the Cradle of the Pacer.” (Leerhsen reminds us that this nickname is the reason Indianapolis’ professional basketball franchise is called the Indiana Pacers.)

Charles Leerhsen

Dan Patch took his first wobbly steps in the small town of Oxford, Indiana, in 1896. Because the foal was born with a crooked back leg, his owner, Dan Messner Jr., considered having him destroyed. But Leerhsen writes that Dan Patch “looked into [his owner’s] eyes in a way that made it impossible to put him down.” For a while, Dan Patch pulled the grocer’s cart in Oxford. But miraculously, Dan Patch seemed to be a natural pacer and Messner decided to test him in the races.

Dan Patch made his debut in the race-crazy world on August 30, 1900 at the Benton County Fairgrounds. Leerhsen painstakingly recreates Patch’s first racing season as the horse competed in a series of races throughout Indiana, ending the season four-for-four, with \$625 in race winnings and posting a best time of 2:16. Dan Patch’s inaugural season was supposed to end in Terre Haute, but the race was canceled due to inclement weather. Since he already had the horse on-site, trainer John Wattles decided to race him in an unofficial time trial on the Terre Haute track a few days later. Dan Patch recorded a time of 2:10, good enough to qualify the crooked-legged horse for the prestigious Grand Circuit races, a traveling race meet for the best stock, or, as Leerhsen writes, “a kind of movable major league.”

With Dan Patch ready for the big time, Messner decided to switch trainers, hiring Myron Emmer McHenry, also known as “The Wizard of the Homestretch,” a renowned race-driver who had a dark, self-destructive side. The five-year-old horse—horses in that era raced for several years, unlike today’s champions, which are put out to stud after a handful of races—caught the attention of the national media by easily winning his Grand Circuit division. “He is a rugged looking stallion with the best of feet and legs...His manners are simply perfect,” declared the *Chicago Tribune*. In fact, Dan Patch became so dominant in his 2:10 division that tracks often refused bets on his races.

Everyone who saw Dan Patch race swore that the horse loved to win. Leerhsen writes, “As for the racing and touring, he seemed to get it, to understand that his job was to be this new thing in America: a superstar. Whenever he saw a photographer, he stopped.” Dan Patch was beloved for his exceptional talent, but also for his serene and trusting personality. He “exuded calm, allowing strangers to approach him and small children to run back and forth beneath his belly.” And the people turned out to see Dan Patch, often numbering as many as 100,000.

Throughout **CRAZY GOOD**, Leerhsen provides fascinating insights about why harness racing captivated the nation. In the pre-automobile era, most people saw horses pulling buggies on Main Street every day. On the Grand Circuit people often saw the latest, fastest “models” of what they had in their home stables. Leerhsen writes, “It was, in other words, a lot like NASCAR, though the enthusiasts were much better dressed.”

After a *New York Times* front page headline announced “Dan Patch, Champion,” the horse emerged as an American icon. Fans scrambled to own Dan Patch watches, Dan Patch washing machines, Dan Patch sleds and Dan Patch cigars. The horse’s new owner—before the 1902 season, Messner sold him to Minnesota entrepreneur M.W.

Savage for a record \$20,000—used Dan Patch’s fame to add to his own fortune, licensing as many Dan Patch products as he could. Stud fees for Dan Patch jumped from \$225 to \$500 after the horse broke the world mile record, although none of the horses Dan Patch sired ever matched their father’s speed. And, sadly, as Dan Patch grew older and slower, he faded from public view. When he died at the age of nineteen in July 1916, he was buried without ceremony or headstone on Savage’s farm in Minnesota.

For a few Dan Patch aficionados, the great pacer continues to live on in memory. Scattered collectors still treasure Dan Patch relics. But in **CRAZY GOOD**, Charles Leerhsen reminds readers of the crippled foal that went on to unlikely fame. Gleaning information from hundreds of newspaper and horse magazine articles, as well as the faithful who keep the Dan Patch lamp burning, Leerhsen brings Dan Patch’s illustrious racing career back to life. Even readers who know nothing about horse racing will be enthralled. Just as Laura Hillenbrand introduced Seabiscuit to a new generation of Americans, Leerhsen lifts Dan Patch from obscurity by indelibly recalling a most special horse and time.

About the Author

Charles Leerhsen is an executive editor at *Sports Illustrated*. He has worked at *Newsweek*, *People* and *US Weekly*. His stories have also appeared in *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone* and the *New York Times Magazine*. His previous books include: *Press On!: Further Adventures in the Good Life* with Chuck Yeager; *The Last Great Ride*, with Brandon Tartikoff; and *Trump: Surviving at the Top* and *Trump: The Art of Survival*, with Donald Trump.

About the Book

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