



Following his racing career and during his more than two decades in Kentucky, Man o' War received a million visitors — and perhaps more. Inset, he and devoted groom Will Harbut were immortalized on a famous Saturday Evening Post cover.



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BIG
RED
STAR

After returning to his Kentucky birthplace, Horse of the Century **Man o' War** drew admirers from around the world

By Edward L. Bowen

That Man o' War transcended the sports world and became a beloved figure to the general public is well illustrated by his and groom Will Harbut's likenesses appearing, snuggling each other, on the cover of The Saturday Evening Post. The cover date was Sept. 13, 1941, and the photograph of the pair was taken by Ivan Dmitri. The Saturday Evening Post through the middle decades of the 20th century was the most widely circulated weekly magazine in America. The issue of the Man o' War cover included an article by the noted race caller and boxing announcer Clem McCarthy, who provided a verbal tour of Bluegrass Thoroughbred farms.

big red star

In 1941 Man o' War was 24 years old and had been at stud in Kentucky since 1921. The year 2017 marks the 100th anniversary of his birth on March 29, 1917. Man o' War's pull upon the public heart had been established by his sensational racing career of 20 wins in 21 starts at two and three in 1919 and 1920. An early indication of how the public would flock to see him came following his retirement when he was sent from owner Samuel Riddle's training headquarters in Belair, Maryland, to make an appearance at the Rose Tree Hunt Club in Pennsylvania, a club close to the hearts of Mr. and Mrs. Riddle.

In Page Cooper's and Roger Treat's 1950 volume *Man o' War*, the description of the trip to Rose Tree certifies the affection directed toward the horse: "... it was a slow journey, for it had no longer started then it was transformed into a triumphant procession. At every stop along the way, crowds gathered to see the champion, and he obligingly stuck his proud head out of the van door in answer to their cheers." At the Rose Tree Hunt Club, "Mr. Riddle's friends had planned a

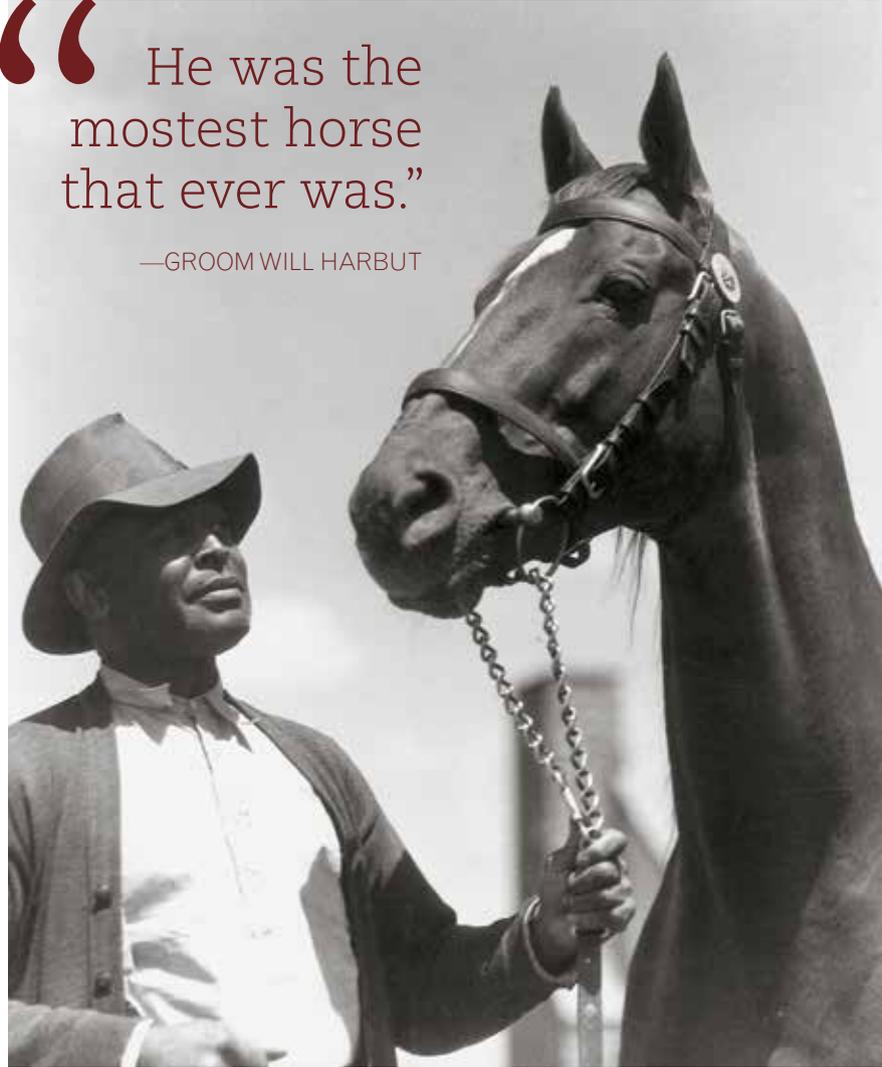


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Owner Samuel D. Riddle took great pride in his horse's popularity.

“ He was the mostest horse that ever was.”

—GROOM WILL HARBUT



Will Harbut contributed to Man o' War's myth.

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Legendary broadcaster Clem McCarthy, with Will Harbut, prepared to “interview” Man o’ War for NBC Radio.



It was estimated that 50,000 people signed Man o’ War’s guest book each year.



On Man o’ War’s 21st birthday a national radio audience heard him crunch sugar.



Man o’ War and Will Harbut welcome military officers from the U.S. and Peru in 1942, including Gen. Jose Vasquez, second from right.

welcome befitting royalty. As the van drew up ... the thousands of people who had been waiting ringed around.”

Among the crowd was another sports icon of the 1920s, Jack Dempsey, who had been heavyweight boxing champion for several years. Man o’ War and Dempsey were linked in their emergence as great sports heroes during the heady days of America’s growth in worldwide prestige following The Great War. Also before the decade was over, football had Red Grange and baseball, Babe Ruth.

Riddle decided to retire Man o’ War after he had asked official handicapper Walter Vosburgh how much weight the colt would have to carry were he campaigned again at four. Man o’ War had

won the Potomac Handicap under 138 pounds in his start immediately before his match race triumph over the first Triple Crown winner, Sir Barton. Vosburgh responded to Riddle that he would anticipate weighting Man o’ War higher than any other horse in history were he to race in handicaps. Riddle thought better of it and retired the colt, meaning the Sir Barton match race was his final start.

After the trip to Rose Tree Hunt, Man o’ War was sent to Kentucky, where he was scheduled to take up stallion duties at Hinata Farm, which Elizabeth Daingerfield managed for Mrs. Clarence LeBus outside Lexington. Locals saw an opportunity for a grand occasion to welcome the champion home. Specifi-

cally, according to the Louisville Courier-Journal, the idea came “from the fertile brain of ... [a member of] the Board of Commerce.”

Man o’ War was stabled in Col. E.R. Bradley’s barn at the Kentucky Association track, where he was scheduled to be exercised in public, and a large crowd turned out to see him on Jan. 27, 1921. Riddle had made stipulations that no one would have to pay a cent to see him on that occasion and that there was to be no band, lest the fiery colt be startled. An idea put forward for the horse to be paraded through town, following young girls strewing flowers in his path, also had been ruled out.

The Courier-Journal Sunday edition of Feb. 6, described the occasion under the headline “Kentucky’s Welcome to the King of Horses.”

The Riddles were in the stands that day, along with Ms. Daingerfield and Mrs. LeBus. Writer James M. Ross wrote in the style of the day of the “stout-hearted Thoroughbred ... full of honors and wearing his laurels, still the playful youngster” he had been as a foal. “His four years sit light upon his shoulders, it may be remarked in passing.”

Man o’ War’s regular exercise rider, Clyde Gordon, was on hand to guide the colt, who was accompanied by his old race-track companion, Major Treat, described as a larger horse even than the 16.2-hand Man o’ War. Ross extolled that the hundreds in attendance included a wide range of citizenry, specifically pointing out that some were easily capable of writing a check that would “equal the annual salary of, well, say, most newspaper workers.” Also in attendance were “charming women upon whose cheek the bloom of such real youth and beauty rests that one does not wonder that Kentucky is known as the state of beautiful women — all these and myriads of others gathered ... to participate in a welcome such as had not been



BLOODHORSE LIBRARY PHOTOS

Man o’ War, pictured as a weanling, was foaled at August Belmont’s Nursery Stud.



Man o’ War lost only once and concluded his career with a handy defeat of Sir Barton, the first Triple Crown winner.

seen here in the memory of man.”

Man o’ War’s brief gallop concluded through the stretch, “while the people stood as one person and cheered until throats were sore, and white gloves were so far gone toward utter wreck that they were not fitting even for the purpose of warmth.” Afterward, a speech was made by George Bain, who had been the auctioneer for the yearling sale in Saratoga, New York, three years earlier, when Riddle bought Man o’ War for \$5,000 from the yearling consignment of breeder August Belmont II.

Ross noted that Riddle had been asked whether visitors would be allowed at Hina-

ta once Man o’ War was at stud there. “The only reply to that at this time,” he wrote, “is declaration by Mr. Riddle that the welcome at Lexington was to be the horse’s last appearance in public.” Whether Riddle really meant that as a policy against any visitors or merely that no more public ceremony was planned, it was fortuitous that he allowed thousands of visitors to see the horse over more than a quarter century.

McCarthy’s Saturday Evening Post article in 1941 commented that “Riddle delights in the hundreds of daily and upwards of a thousand Sunday visitors to Faraway.” Man o’ War had stood at Hinata



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Saratoga Race Course witnessed several of Big Red's victories.

for one season and most of another and then was moved to nearby Faraway Farm, which had been developed by the Riddles along with Mr. and Mrs. Walter Jeffords Sr. Mrs. Jeffords was Mrs. Riddle's niece. McCarthy continued that "The guest books — nearly three dozen of them, 400 pages in each — reveal that Man o' War's admirers come from all parts of the globe.

"And none is ever disappointed, for Big Red is a horse to look at, and his company manners are perfect. On the occasion of his 21st birthday [broadcast over radio], I held a microphone almost against his lips as he crunched sugar."

The impact of seeing the wonderful horse was enhanced in entertainment value by the arrival of the aforementioned Will Harbut to take over as Man o' War's stud groom in 1931. Harbut was a distinguished-looking African-American with a resonant voice, and he developed a spiel

that told of Man o' War's greatness and his ability to dominate all challengers in his racing days.

Over the years, a number of Harbut's quotations became familiar to readers of various publications, generally presented in spellings meant to evoke how a Southern-raised African-American would have spoken. While that technique might not fit today's sensibilities in general, we cannot resist quoting the line that tended to end those stories: "He was the mostest hoss that ever was."

Among the distinguished visitors was Lord Halifax of England. The noted Turf writer Joe Palmer visited Faraway the same day of Lord Halifax's arrival and devoted several pages to the occasion in his book *This Was Racing*. Palmer dared suggest that as many as a million people might have visited Man o' War, alleging "the guest book runs to something like 50,000 names a year." Of the Lord Halifax visit, Palmer wrote that Harbut gave of his best, holding the visitor spellbound for 20 minutes. The routine often included showing lesser stallions, including Man o' War's greatest son, War Admiral, and then bringing out the high-headed, gleaming chestnut patriarch. Following Harbut's soliloquy, Lord Halifax declared, "That's worth coming half-way around the world to hear."

Harbut had a way of judging if a visitor were just on a curiosity mission or whether he/she had true appreciation for this exceptional creature. He would favor the latter category with his best stories. He also was polite for the most part, although his answers might be a tad curt to questions of whether Man o' War was a trot-



Groom John Buckner exercised the stallion Man o' War.

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CELEBRATING BIG RED

Throughout 2017 a number of organizations and companies will commemorate the 100th anniversary of Man o' War's birth.

The Kentucky Horse Park will honor Man o' War in various ways through the year. A descendant of his that bears a physical resemblance has been transferred from the Kentucky Equine Humane Center to the horse park, where he will be available to meet visitors. A special exhibit will open in the International Museum of the Horse on March 29, Man o' War's birthday. Other related activities include a bike ride with riders in jerseys the colors of the Samuel Riddle silks that Man o' War's jockeys wore, and Nov. 1 will feature a recognition of Man o' War's death in 1947 and a replaying of his funeral on public radio.

The Kentucky Derby Museum at Churchill Downs will open an exhibition April 8 that will run through the remainder of the year. The exhibition will be accessible with general admission and includes images as well as artifacts such as the saddle Man o' War wore in his match race with Sir Barton. The exhibition also will stress the importance of Man o' War's legacy as well as his descendants' impact on the Kentucky Derby. Some of the items are being provided by avid Thoroughbred memorabilia collector Ken Grayson.

The National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame in Saratoga Springs, New York, will launch "Man o' War at 100," a special two-year exhibition. Scheduled to open on his 100th birthday, the exhibition will feature artifacts and photographs from the museum collection and on loan that celebrate Man o'

War's legacy and impact on racing, with emphasis on his Hall of Fame connections.

Greg Goodman's Mt. Brilliant Farm, location of the stallion barn housing Man o' War's stall, is collaborating with The Race For Education in planning events at the farm. Also, Mt. Brilliant is working with Horse Country Tours to facilitate tours of the barn. The original door to Man o' War's stall has been lent to the National Museum of Racing.

Illustrating the various ways the horse is ingrained in public imagery, the Man o' War Harley-Davidson motorcycle dealership in Lexington "will be very involved in the 100th birthday of Man o' War," reports Enerio Romero, the store's marketing and

public relations director. "We have a lot of horse memorabilia, and our entire store is built like a barn honoring Man o' War."

In addition, a Man o' War mural will be painted on the side of the downtown Lexington restaurant The Village Idiot.

A barn from the training center in Berlin, Maryland, where Man o' War trained during winters, is incorporated into nearby GlenRiddle Golf Club. The barn includes a section of memorabilia of Man o' War and his Triple Crown son War Admiral. GlenRiddle, which has courses named for the two horses, will hold a special tournament and cocktail event March 29.

A tribute to Man o' War, the original Big Red, will even be included in festivities during the eighth annual Secretariat Birthday Celebration, honoring the second Big Red. It will be held at The Meadow Event Park in Doswell, Virginia, March 24-26.



ter, or if he could be coaxed to stand up if he happened to be lying down in his stall.

On occasion, Harbut revealed a sense of humor. When the father of the Dionne quintuplets had visited and thanked the old groom for the chance to see Man o' War, Harbut — reflecting a business in which any hint of prodigious paternity is well appreciated — responded, "I don't so much care about you seeing him, but I sure wanted him to see you."

Among horsemen of today with lifetime memories of Man o' War is Ercel Ellis, a former trainer and Turf writer who has a weekly radio show, "Horse Tales," in Lexington. Ellis' father worked for August Belmont II's Nursery Stud, and family tradition is that he was the first to put a halter on the newly foaled Man o' War. Later, the senior Ellis worked for nearby Dixiana Farm, and Ercel vividly recalls the frequency of automobiles whose drivers would ask the way to Faraway Farm. "You could tell what they wanted before they said anything," Ellis recalled. "I never went to Faraway that there weren't visitors there."

Man o' War lived to the age of 30. In his final days he was administered a sedative to ease discomfort by Dr. William McGee, today a centenarian living in Naples, Florida. Harbut had died not long before Man o' War's death on Nov. 1, 1947. Man o' War had been retired from breeding in 1943, but it was not until six months before his death that it was decided he would no longer have visitors.

Man o' War's funeral was broadcast nationally. Ellis recalls the occasion as the only time he ever saw his father cry.

In 1941 sculptor Herbert Haseltine had begun work on a larger-than-life-sized statue of Man o' War. The finished product stood for years in a small park on the farm and in 1976 was moved to the Kentucky Horse Park, where the likeness seems to gaze out over his broad domain. Haseltine had been among the thousands subject to the spell of Man o' War: "There was something that emanated from that noble animal that took my breath away." KM



Man o' War's funeral was broadcast nationally.

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