

John Henry is Gone

One of Thoroughbred racing's greatest stars humanely euthanized.

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John Henry, the legendary Thoroughbred racehorse who was twice Horse of the Year, was humanely euthanized at 7 p.m. Monday, October 8, at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington. He was 32 1/2 years old.

John Nicholson, executive director of the park expressed, "The mighty heart of the great John Henry has, at long last, yielded to time. The racing industry has lost a legend, but more significantly, many people have lost a personal hero. John Henry's true legacy was written in people's hearts far more indelibly than his superlative racing career could ever reflect." He continued, "John Henry was a testament to the fact that a horse's value is far greater than the sum of his pedigree, conformation, sales price and race record. Winston Churchill said that the outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man, but I would add that horses like John Henry prove that the inside of a horse is even better for the inside of man."

The sad but unanimous decision to euthanize John Henry was reached by a team of people who knew him best. The park's equine director, Kathy Hopkins stated, "After continued successful efforts to maintain the quality of John Henry's life, in the past 48 hours he did not respond to our medical intervention. Due to the loss of kidney function and muscle mass, his veterinarian, Dr. Mike Beyer, found it impossible to keep him properly hydrated and comfortable. Over the years, our goal has always been to maintain the highest quality of care and life for him, and it became evident over the weekend that this was no longer possible. Our hearts go out to all of those who so deeply cared for John during his long and charismatic life."

John Henry went to sleep peacefully, surrounded by a small circle of friends who were closest to him, including Cathy Roby, who has been his friend and caretaker for 16 years and his breeder, Verna Lehmann.

John Henry overcame numerous well-known obstacles throughout his career, and colic surgery in 2002. His talent, determination, tenacity and toughness inspired thousands of people who didn't even see him race, but became aware of him many years after his retirement. Some of his fans visited him at least once a month from Toledo, Ind., and other cities in the Midwest, while others made annual pilgrimages to his barn from California, Texas and around the world. When it recently became public knowledge that his health was in a state of decline, many of his fans immediately came to the park to thank their beloved champion for the memories, and to whisper their personal, final farewells to the horse who inspired great respect and ardent devotion.

John Henry's race record included more than \$6.5 million in earnings, 39 wins including 30 stakes wins (16 Grade 1 stakes wins) and seven Eclipse Awards, including two Horse of the Year titles. He equaled a world track record for 1 1/2 miles in 2:23 at Santa Anita and was the only horse to win Horse of the Year more than once in nonconsecutive years, and the oldest horse ever to win that title at age 9. John Henry was voted Racehorse of the Decade for the 1980s, and was inducted into racing's Hall of Fame in 1990.

Sired by Ole Bob Bowers out of Once Double, by Double Jay, John Henry was foaled on March 9, 1975 at Golden Chance Farm in Paris, Ky.

After having passed through several owners and trainers, John Henry finally blossomed under the careful tutelage of trainer Ron McAnally, and with his owner, Sam Rubin. McAnally, who brought out the best in the horse with "carrots, apples and love," visited John Henry many times during the horse's retirement. As recently as September he brought John's favorite cookies and carrots to his aging protégé. Lewis Cenicola, John Henry's exercise rider for six years, also visited the horse in September.

Tom Levinson, stepson of the late Sam Rubin said, "John always had fire in his eyes as he circled his opponents in the paddock while they pranced, his eyes glazed with the determination to win. Certainly he was the people's hero... Sam and Dorothy loved sharing John's victories with his adoring fans and we appreciate their devotion even to this sad day ... We are sure that if Sam Rubin were here today, he and my mother Dorothy would agree that their wish would be for John Henry to be remembered as the mighty, cantankerous champion we all loved."

Chris McCarron rode John Henry in 14 of his last races and has spent many hours with the horse during his 22 years at the Kentucky Horse Park. Regarding the great horse's passing, he observed, "What can I say about the legendary John

Henry that has not already been said? John meant the world to my family and me. Everywhere he raced, his presence doubled the size of a normal race track crowd. He did so much for racing, even after he retired, that he will be impossible to replace. He will be sorely missed but forever in our hearts.”

A public memorial service will be held and will be announced by the park upon completion of the arrangements. Plans will be posted on the park’s website, www.kyhorsepark.com under News & Media and the Calendar of Events. John Henry will be buried near his paddock at the Hall of Champions. Other Thoroughbred champions buried at the park include Man o’ War, War Admiral, Forego, Bold Forbes, Allez France, Peteski and Jay Trump.

A new documentary, John Henry: An American Hero, produced by Open Sky Entertainment is expected to be completed by the end of the year, with the release date to be announced.

One of his legions of admirers, Howard McClurkin from Weatherford, Texas, summarized his and many fans’ devotion this way, “John Henry is an anchor in one’s life. When things are not going well and one needs inspiration or perhaps one just wants a moment of happiness by thinking of extraordinary accomplishments arising from such a painfully humble beginning, the thought and image of John Henry are readily at hand. He started in a hole. He started with zero and went on to lasso the stars.”

John Nicholson concluded, “The next few days will be terribly difficult for his fans, but especially for the people here at the park who have worked with him and loved him for so long. It was our unparalleled privilege to have John Henry living at the Kentucky Horse Park for the past 22 years.”

Share your memories and condolences at the John Henry Memorial page >>