

John Henry shows signs of improvement

Known as the grumpy old man, the aging Thoroughbred champion proves he isn't done yet.

32-year-old John Henry proves he isn't done yet.

Late last week, Kentucky Horse Park officials were worried that their most famous resident, 32-year-old retired racing legend John Henry, might have to be put down. But the grumpy old Thoroughbred had other ideas.

John Henry, who has lived at the Kentucky Horse Park since 1985, has been suffering from kidney problems. After receiving intravenous fluids over the last several days for dehydration, the salty icon seems to have bounced back and has even felt well enough to acknowledge park visitors. Socializing with humans has never been one of the incorrigible Thoroughbred's greatest attributes.

"We are very pleased that he's feeling so well," says Robin Bush, an assistant in the park's Hall of Champions where John Henry has spent most of his last 27 years.

"We were afraid we might lose him over (last) weekend, so it is a surprise that he's feeling this well," Bush says. "But we're really not shocked because he's John Henry. All his life he's just kept going and going, in his career on the track and in his life."

According to reports, last Friday park officials were spray-painting corners of potential grave sites in the grass outside John Henry's barn, just in case.

But this week the old guy seems more like his former self, although he has lost a lot of weight. He's off the IV tubes and is banging on his stall door, demanding treats. The Kentucky Horse Park provided this status report on Sept. 20: "As of 8:30 a.m., John Henry was very vocal in demanding his breakfast. His appetite is very good and his head is in his feed tub right now. He had a short walk outside of his stall yesterday, and his blood test from yesterday came back this morning showing that he is still doing well and will not need fluids today. He will have at least one chocolate-covered donut later this morning. He especially enjoyed a visit yesterday from his old friend and exercise rider from his racetrack days, Lewis Cenicola. He is expecting a number of other visitors today. He receives guests at his stall during park hours, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m."

John Henry rose to racing stardom during the 1980s, after first changing hands for a mere \$1,100. Over his career, he won a then-record \$6.6 million. He was one of only two horses at the time to win a major stakes race at age 9. He was twice Horse of the Year and won a total of seven Eclipse Awards for championships.

About six years ago, John Henry survived a serious bout with colic. His caretakers are hoping that his improvement since the weekend might similarly give him more time.

"I can't say he's recovering as if he's getting over an illness," Bush said. "But he is feeling quite well, better than anyone would have expected. He just never ceases to surprise and amaze people."