



The Northern Dancer Story for the 62nd Induction Banquet Program

The 62nd induction banquet was held on November 9, 2023. Story written by Chris Zang.

Northern Dancer is going into the Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame tonight.

The Dancer wasn't born in Maryland, but he spent 22 productive years here, at Windfields Farm in Chesapeake City. He came from his home in Canada with a glowing racing record that included a record-setting victory in the Kentucky Derby and Maryland's own Preakness Stakes.

He made such an impression, his owner E.P. Taylor had to hire a secretary to answer his fan mail. Fans came to visit. Streets and subdivisions in Warwick, Boyds, Bowie, and Churchville, Md., were named for him.

And thoroughbred breeders here still thank their lucky stars that Taylor decided to send the stallion to Maryland instead of Kentucky.

"There wouldn't be a breeding industry here in Maryland without him," says Bill Boniface, the 2018 Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame's Steadman Award winner and the man who bred Deputed Testamony, the last Maryland bred to win the Preakness.

"Before Northern Dancer came here, the Kentucky breeders' public relations machine made everyone think because they had blue grass, you couldn't breed a winning thoroughbred outside of Kentucky. He gave us all the prestige we could have ever imagined."

Northern Dancer was a little horse by stallion standards, measuring about 15 hands. Which means he was about 5 feet tall in people terms and about seven inches shorter than his descendants, Triple Crown winners Secretariat and Justify.

As a yearling, Northern Dancer was offered for sale for \$25,000 and no one bought him. Obviously you can't measure determination and heart by a horse's height.

By the time he was a 2-year-old in 1963, he was Canadian Horse of the Year. He was the United States 3-year-old champion and, again, Canadian Horse of the Year in 1964.

As good as he was on the track, he was even greater as a sire. There the 1976 U.S. National Racing Hall of Famer stands alone. At least twice (2014, 2018), entire Kentucky Derby fields have descended from Northern Dancer.

Early on there were doubters. Even Hall of Famer Willie Shoemaker, who rode Northern Dancer to victories in two of his Kentucky Derby prep races, decided he was too small, and maybe too slow, to win the Derby and chose to ride Hill Rise, six inches taller.

Bill Hartack rode Dancer to victory over Hill Rise in both the Derby — setting a record that stood until Secretariat cut three-fifths of a second off Dancer's time of 2 minutes flat — and the Preakness.

“To me,” says Benny Miller, the Windfields Farm stallion division manager throughout Northern Dancer's stay, “it was his determination that made him great.”

That and his energy.

“In my estimation, Dancer was very little, but he was built along the lines of a quarter horse, real stocky,” Miller, 88, remembers. “I always describe him as like somebody on two or three energy drinks. That horse never walked anywhere. He pranced.”

Multiple internet videos confirm this. They show Northern Dancer in his paddock or in a field — and in all of them he is prancing. Almost dancing along, and it is obvious he knows he is somebody special.

And he's beautiful. A statuesque 5-foot chocolate bay with strong hind hips and legs, three white socks, bold chest and a proud head with intelligent eyes.

Once in Maryland, he cemented the state's reputation in the thoroughbred breeding industry and his place as the world's leading sire. Even today, it is believed at least 90 percent of thoroughbreds can trace their ancestry to him. As can dozens of past greats including Triple Crown winners Secretariat, Justify and American Pharoah, as well as Derby and Preakness winners I'll Have Another, Animal Kingdom, Rachel Alexandra and, most recently, 2023 Preakness winner National Treasure.

“When you see Northern Dancer in the pedigree of your horse, it gives you confidence,” says Maryland's Graham Motion, who trained I'll Have Another and Animal Kingdom. “It's extraordinary what that stallion has done.”

Tom Coulter, who grew up at Windfields and worked there for 18 years, took Northern Dancer's babies to sales and saw his offspring set world records.

“In 1981, we doubled the world sale price to \$3.5 million,” Coulter says. “At those sales, it was like a Hollywood premiere.”

By the time Northern Dancer was through, the top price paid for one of his yearlings was \$10.2 million and his stud fee reached \$1 million — with no guarantee of a live foal. When he was 21 years old, a French syndicate, Horse France, offered to buy him for \$40 million.

The sale, of course, never happened.

Even after Windfields closed, Northern Dancer stayed, as part of the farm's sales contract. He lived at the farm, now called Northview Stallion Station, until his death in 1990.

Miller, the stallion manager, says every horse has its own personality, just like people.

“One can be very laid back, while another can be very high strung,” he says. “He was just a ball of energy. If you were working with him, he’d nip at you, or give you a little fuss, but there was nothing mean about the horse.”

Ron Paris, who cared for Dancer over the last decade of Windfields’ operation, recalls their first meeting:

“I remember going into Northern Dancer’s stall and when I came out part of my jeans were missing. After three or four pairs of jeans, we got used to each other.”

But then there were the kind stories. How much Dancer loved Taylor’s wife, Winnifred, how gentle he was with her and with a young boy who visited from the school for the blind, calmly stretching his neck over his stall door, lowering his head and never moving while the boy petted him.

“I think what he represented to us was the heroic little guy,” E.P. Taylor’s daughter Judith Mappin said in a long-ago video. “Perhaps [he didn’t have] everyone’s idea of the perfect stride. But he had a big heart, tried his best and never gave up. That’s heroic.”