

Maryland Equine History: Galloping Through Maryland's Rich Thoroughbred History



Maryland Jockey Club Archives

A poster celebrating the famed "Race of the Century" between War Admiral and Seabiscuit. The race was held November 1, 1938 during the height of the Great Depression and ignited hope in many working class Americans.

even more popular as an escape from the day-to-day worries facing many Americans, with nearly 15,000 races held throughout the country in 1934. It was also during the Great Depression that all eyes fell on Maryland as the much anticipated "Match Race of the Century" between War Admiral and Seabiscuit was run at Pimlico.

On November 1, 1938, these two racing legends faced off at Pimlico to a packed crowd of around 40,000 fans with 40 million listening to the call on the radio. Two hundred yards from the finish, the under-dog Seabiscuit pulled to the front and extended his lead to win by four lengths over War Admiral. Seabiscuit's win ignited a nation and is often credited with inspiring many working class Americans to hold on to hope and move forward through the Great Depression.

Seabiscuit wasn't the only Depression-era horse to thrill Maryland race fans, as the state had many champions with Maryland connections to cheer for. His rival in the match race, the 1937 Triple Crown winner War Admiral, trained at the great Glen Riddle Farm here in Maryland, which also produced his sire, Man o'War.

Man o'War was named the 1920 Horse of the Year after winning the Preakness Stakes and Belmont Stakes. Two out of three Belair Stud Triple Crown winners, Gallant Fox and Omaha, the only father/son duo to win the Triple Crown, were also big names during the Great Depression, shining a strong light on Maryland Thoroughbred racing.

Sagamore Farm in Reisterstown was another bastion of Depression-era racing. Isaac Emerson established the farm in 1925 for his daughter, Margaret Emerson Vanderbilt. Sagamore began building bloodlines with the purchase of Discovery in 1933. Nicknamed "The Iron Horse," Discovery sired influential broodmares that produced such greats at Native Dancer and Bold Ruler. Margaret's son Alfred Vanderbilt, Jr., was given the farm after Emerson's death. Vanderbilt also became president of Pimlico twice, once in 1932 and again in 1938, during which time he modernized the track and marketed it on a national scale.

New Era of Racing

Television transformed the sport of Thoroughbred racing in Maryland. WMAR out of Baltimore was the first Maryland station to air live racing with two races live from Pimlico in 1947. The broadcast was hosted by Jim McManus (known professionally as Jim McKay) and Jim Kelley.

McKay, who spent the majority of his life in Baltimore, became a nationally and internationally known sportscaster and sportswriter. He was the mastermind behind the annual day of racing held specifically to highlight Maryland-bred horses. First known as Maryland Million Day, the traditional 12-card race day

is now called the Jim McKay Maryland Million Day and is the second most popular day of racing in Maryland behind the Preakness Day.

The first racehorse to become a television star was Sagamore Farm's Native Dancer. Over the course of his career, Native Dancer won 21 of his 22 races and was Horse of the Year in 1952 and 1954. He appeared on the cover of Time magazine and was considered one of the top television personalities in America by *TV Guide* in 1953. When Native Dancer retired, his many adoring fans came to Sagamore to visit him in person. The "Gray Ghost" is buried at Sagamore and visitors still flock to his grave.

In 1953, Vanderbilt, Jr., sold Pimlico Race Course to Ben and Nathan Cohen. The Cohen brothers continued to modernize Pimlico, including expanding the seating.

Around the same time, in 1950, Morris Shapiro became the new owner of the Laurel Park Race Track. Shapiro placed his son, John Shapiro, in charge of the track and assigned his son-in-law, Major League baseball pitcher, Joe Cascarella, to head public relations. In an effort to reinvigorate the declining track attendance, John Shapiro came up with an idea for an international, invitation-only race to be held at Laurel.

Shapiro's first invitational ran at Laurel Park in 1952 as the Washington, D.C., International Stakes. The International grew in prestige over its 43-year run and attracted the attention of many important people, including Queen Elizabeth II of England. Even the Soviet Union ran horses despite the Cold War in the 1960s.

The International would ultimately become the inspiration for the Breeders' Cup World Championships and was discontinued in 1994. It was brought back as the Colonial Turf Cup in 2005 at Colonial Downs and returned to Laurel Park in 2015 as the Commonwealth Turf Cup. In 2017, the race, which remains at Laurel Park, was renamed the Baltimore Washington International Turf Cup.

Racing in the Late 20th Century

As horse racing across the country moved into the 1980s, Maryland's Deputed Testamony won the Preakness Stakes in 1983, the last Maryland-bred to do so. He was bred in Maryland by J. William Boniface and Francis P. Sears, trained in Maryland at Bonita Farm, and was ridden by Maryland-based jockey Donnie Miller. The Deputed Testamony Stakes was named in his honor and has been run each February at Laurel Park since 1985.

It was also in the mid-1980s that Jim McKay founded Maryland Million Day. The first Maryland Million Classic - for horses sired by stallions standing in Maryland - winner was John A. Franks' Herat. Herat's sire, Canadian super horse Northern Dancer, was relocated to the Maryland division of Windfields Farm in December 1968.

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Interested in more history about Maryland Thoroughbred Racing? Check out the sources below!

- "The Preakness: An American Classic"
<https://equiery.com/the-preakness-an-american-classic/>
- "The History of the Godolphin Barb"
<https://equiery.com/the-history-of-the-godolphin-barb/>
- "Maryland's Horse: The Iconic Thoroughbred"
<https://equiery.com/marylands-horse-the-iconic-thoroughbred/>
- "Maryland at a Glance: Horse Racing"
<https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/sports/html/horse.html>
- Racing the Times, MPT
<https://www.pbs.org/video/mpt-presents-racing-times/>
- Belair Stable Museum
<https://www.cityofbowie.org/289/Belair-Stable-Museum>
- 2021 Maryland Jockey Club Media Guide: Maryland Jockey Club History
https://www.pimlico.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2021_MJC_Media_Guide_FINAL.pdf