



## Ruffian Comes To The Screen

by MARY WALSH

There's nothing more captivating than a Thoroughbred in flight, especially one who runs unequivocally for simple pleasure. Years ago, I read Jane Schwartz's novel *Ruffian, Burning From The Start*. It was one of the most touching stories I have ever read. Capturing the magnificent prowess of that legendary filly, it gifted her compelling story to the world. It portrayed Ruffian for the heroine she was—unrelenting, indomitably high-spirited, and so elated with the freedom she found in racing that she ran to her final hours. Unbeaten to the finish line in ten starts, the only race that could stop Ruffian was tragically her last.

From her birth at Claiborne Farm on April 17, 1972, Ruffian was determined to rule the world. In a career that spanned just 13 months, she earned the title of Queen of the Fillies. She became the female version of superiority in Thoroughbred horseracing, as did Secretariat for the males. Both having Bold Ruler bloodlines, they certainly proved critics wrong about that stallion's poor stamina influence. Long-boned, muscularly sleek and as iridescent as an Oriental black pearl, Ruffian was a speed machine and could run as far and fast as an eagle could fly. She ran effortlessly, ears pricked and head held high.

Barbara and Stuart S. Janey Jr., of Locust Hill Farm, produced an equine fable—a Goddess that literally took one's breath away. Trainer, Frank Whiteley Jr., and jockey, Jacinto

Vasquez, had their hands full trying to rate her, and the harder they tried the faster she went, never accepting restraint.

She wooed racing fans in crowded grandstands packed like sardines after her first appearance on May 22, 1974. There she broke her maiden, equaling the 5 1/2-furlong Belmont Park track record of 1:03 and winning by an astounding 15 lengths! With that impressive win she immediately advanced to graded stakes races. Her first such test was Belmont's 5 1/2-furlong Fashion Stakes (grade III) on June 12, and she deftly beat the fillies in 1:03 to equal the record. Then on July 10, in Aqueduct's 5 1/2-furlong Astoria Stakes (grade III), she won by nine lengths equaling another track record of 1:02 4/5.

An unbeaten California-bred filly from Rancho Jonata then emerged to challenge Ruffian. Her name was Hot n Nasty. America couldn't help but notice that filly's astounding Lassie Stakes win at Hollywood Park in 1:09. She would become the 1974 California Champion Two-Year-Old Filly. It seemed only fitting that the two should meet, and they did in the six-furlong Sorority Stakes (grade I) at Monmouth Park on July 27. Ruffian was notorious for her unheaded runs and, other than a few determined strides from Hot n Nasty to take the lead, Ruffian refused to back down and won by 2 1/4 lengths in 1:09, setting a new stakes record in the process.

Tackling Saratoga's six-furlong Spinaway Stakes (grade I),



Ruffian wins the grade I Coaching Club American Oaks at Belmont Park on June 21, 1975

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she won going away by an easy 12 3/4 lengths and broke the stakes record in 1:08 3/5. In the fall of 1974, Ruffian was diagnosed with a stress fracture in her right hind pastern which sidelined her for the rest of that season. Nonetheless, Ruffian had proven her mettle and was voted the Eclipse Champion Two-Year-Old Filly.

Coming back at three after recuperating from her fracture, Ruffian won Aqueduct's Caltha Purse on April 14, 1975, by 4 3/4 lengths with Jacinto holding her back while the other jockeys earnestly battled behind her for the runner-up spot. The seven-furlong Comely Stakes (grade III) was next on April 30, and she cruised to the wire ahead of the field by 7 3/4 lengths again setting a new stakes record of 1:21 1/5. That landed her on the threshold of the American Filly Triple Crown.

The first of these three was the one-mile Acorn Stakes (grade I) on May 10, and—without encouragement—she again stormed gate-to-wire setting another stakes record of 1:34 2/5 leaving her competition 8 1/4 lengths behind. In the second jewel of the crown, Ruffian took on all comers in the nine-furlong Mother Goose Stakes (grade I) on May 31. Not one horse could even attempt to catch her as she recorded another new stakes record of 1:47 4/5 when winning by 13 1/2 lengths! Then on June 21, she equaled the stakes record of 2:27 4/5 in Belmont's 1 1/2-mile Coaching Club American Oaks (grade I). With only a chirp from Jacinto, Ruffian held off a tough contender in Equal Change by 2 3/4 lengths, thus capturing the Filly Triple Crown.

After her passing, as a result of the injuries she suffered

in a match race with her male champion counterpart Foolish Pleasure on July 6, Ruffian was honored with the Eclipse Award for Champion Three-Year-Old Filly and, in 1976, the magnificent filly was inducted into the National Museum of Racing's Hall of Fame. *The Blood-Horse* ranked her 35th on their list of the Top 100 Thoroughbred Champions of the 20th Century, while *Sports Illustrated* rated her 53rd on their Top 100 Female Athletes of the Century list—the sole non-human recipient.

Just two years after Ruffian's death, her sire Reviewer and Shenanigans, her dam, would both eerily suffer the same fate as her. Shenanigans was euthanized following intestinal surgery on May 21, 1977. Like Ruffian, she thrashed around after the anesthetic wore off breaking two legs in the scuffle. Days later, Reviewer fractured a hind leg in his Claiborne Farm paddock and underwent successful surgery. However, when the cast was replaced two weeks later, he uncontrollably re-injured his leg upon waking from the anesthesia and was euthanized on June 21.

An ESPN made-for-television movie of Ruffian's life is scheduled for broadcast on ABC this month. Considering the filly's huge following, it will no doubt be a must-see. Sam Shepard portrays trainer Frank Whiteley and Frank Whaley plays sportswriter Bill Nack. Many stories about Ruffian dwell on her death as if that gave her fame, but history is as one perceives it, and I'm hoping the movie centers on her record-breaking achievements. Bill Nack was contemplating a story about her that he envisioned releasing around the same time. 🐾



Ruffian's jockey in nine of her eleven career starts, Jacinto Vasquez, visits her grave at Belmont Park in 1989

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