RACING POST

PUNCH A HOLE IN THE WIND

The Stories Behind 50 of the Greatest Flat Racehorses Since the Dawn of Film

Oli Hein

Foreword by Michael Bell

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In memory of my father Pierre: outstanding surgeon, tireless parent, loving grandfather, athlete, agent provocateur and the ultimate horseracing purist.

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FOREWORD

It is sometimes hard to overstate the sheer variety in ability and attitude within the breed that we call the thoroughbred. Like humans, their size, temperament and natural gifts can range from the sublime to the ridiculous. I shall confess that several of the latter, over the years, have passed through the gates of my stables at Fitzroy House in Newmarket. Unsurprisingly, interacting with the shamelessly optimistic owners of said horses needs a proper dollop of diplomacy and endless good cheer which, in the scheme of things, is hardly a bad way to pass the day.

But when, just occasionally, you are fortunate to come across something special that comes to the yard, a colt or filly that reveals such a profound ability as to make your heart flutter that tiny bit more, then it is your own turn, as a trainer, to be the hopeless dreamer. As the mysterious forces of genetics, luck and circumstance align to create a four-legged wonder, these are the moments that we treasure most. I am fortunate enough to have trained, amongst others, a winner of both the Epsom Derby and Epsom Oaks. Both the colt (Motivator) and filly (Sariska) in question were wonderful and my memories of their successes and the ensuing joy are likely as vivid as those of their owners.

But this book is about some of those very few racehorses who take it to the next level still.

I first met Oli at my stables, where he happily described himself as one of those very owners who, in a relentless triumph of hope over experience and evidence, frivolously believed that the horse of which he was part-owner would defy all logic and land him a Group 1. But I quickly realised that this lopsided love for his own horse stood in stark contrast to his clear, level-headed assessment of those greats of years gone by in which he did not have a personal stake.

We bonded also over shared experiences from our families' professional lives in years gone by, and I was pleasantly surprised when he unearthed for me a letter that my grandfather, a wartime security chief, wrote to his staff when the end of the war was declared. Clearly Oli knew where to dig to find interesting things.

You may well have read other books that capture the lives of some of the great horses who have graced the world's tracks over the years. What makes this one different?

I would say three things. First, its sheer international outlook. Racing is an intense and all-consuming sport, so it is only natural that both fans and professionals within it don't necessarily have the time or energy to explore the racing horizons from further afield with a dispassionate eye. It is refreshing,

therefore, to see greats from Europe, Australia, North America and elsewhere all sitting side by side here, and not being directly – and unnecessarily – compared.

Second, the research. Oli has demonstrably gone over his sources again and again to try to reconcile conflicting evidence, correct misunderstandings and dig out some more obscure nuggets that may not be familiar to even the most seasoned racing reader. These 50 chapters are each long enough to properly immerse you in the ups and downs of the champions it describes.

Third is the passion and entertaining humour that weaves its way into the pages that follow. Writing with equal verve, whether about an unbeaten Australian heroine of this century or a French champion of the 1920s who came to a tragic end, it is evident here that the horse is king (or queen), and not the flag. Nevertheless, underpinning this are some fascinating insights into some of the well-known and also more obscure racing characters who have helped, in their own way, to shape the racing scene over the decades.

The seed was sown for my passion in horseracing watching the majestic, multiple Cheltenham Gold Cup winning Arkle when he was at his pomp in the mid-60s. I was five or six, sitting by the grainy, black-and-white television watching his exploits being called home by Peter O'Sullevan. He was a majestic horse with great presence and any books about Arkle got devoured immediately. Later in life, I bought a hunter chaser who managed to lug me successfully around Cheltenham a couple of times, and one of the reasons that encouraged me to buy this horse – Ten Cherries – was that he was a very close relation of Arkle as their dams were closely related. So my fondness for Arkle will live long and it is one of my great regrets that I never saw him in the flesh; tragically he lost his life too soon, in 1970.

Clearly this book is not designed to 'change your mind' about your own heroes. Indeed, hopefully it will enrich your knowledge and love of them as it has mine, and introduce you to new ones. It will provoke conversations – and what's wrong with that? Perhaps it will leave you (as it did me) desperate to revisit many of these races via the magic of video.

Above all, though, it will transport you, repeatedly, to another time and another place and make you realise once more why you love this sport and the wonderful creature that rightfully takes centre stage within it.

Michael Bell

INTRODUCTION

Let's not sugar-coat it: this book is conceptually flawed from the very outset. A list of 50 of the greatest thoroughbreds over so many generations, running over a huge range of distances in four corners of the globe – how is anyone supposed to measure all that?

Fundamentally, they *aren't* supposed to. True, we are an unrelentingly judgmental species, constantly daring to compare and contrast, even if those being compared are young apples and old oranges. So let's be abundantly clear: this is purely *my* chronological list of 50 of the greatest flat racing thoroughbreds of the last century or so; it's not a definitive countdown of the top 50, as that simply can't be done, no matter who says so. What each of these horses *does* have is a unique story to tell.

But let's rejoice in that fact, rather than shake our fist in frustration. This book is a celebration, not a competition. Since the thoroughbred was first developed over three centuries ago in Great Britain – three Arab stallions being brought over and bred with local mares to produce a stronger, faster but more capricious animal – these magnificent creatures have given the race-going public limitless joy, and filled our memories with wonder and respect. Every horse that has ever raced has given its connections, and many others besides, an unbridled feeling of elation, even in brave defeat. They were each, in their own way, 'great'.

Therefore, no two lists will ever look the same; indeed, some may differ violently, but that should just be the trigger for an engaging (albeit unwinnable) debate. Putting this tome together has been both immensely enjoyable and deeply upsetting. Enjoyable, because it has given me an easy excuse to abuse YouTube and watch so many heroes of the past show me yet again that they were just that little bit more special than the others, often for reasons one can't put one's finger on; but upsetting because I only have space here to explore 50 horses, which means hundreds – literally *hundreds* – had to be discounted. It felt like a betrayal, even though all have been eulogised in passages elsewhere and will, we hope, never be forgotten.

I was clear when I started this endeavour that I simply had to lay down some really tough criteria at the outset, more for reasons of sanity than anything else. Some of these will seem straightforward enough; others will come across as borderline sacrilegious. But believe me that, without them, this task would have been absurdly unrealistic.

So, for the sake of clarity:

1) These are only Flat racing horses. I adore jump racing too, but it felt one step too far amalgamating the two into what could have been a rather

incongruous mash-up of five-furlong sprinters and four-and-a-half-mile Aintree Grand National winners. It is hard to overstate, too, how global an enterprise Flat racing has become in the last two generations, in a way that jump racing has not. For lovers of Arkle, Red Rum, Flyingbolt, Desert Orchid and others, please accept my apologies now.

2) Linked to the global theme was a desire to rectify what I have come across time and again during my lifelong love of racing, which is the predictably parochial approach that so many take when working out who they think are the best. Ask the question to anyone knowledgeable in Europe, and they will instinctively refer to *Timeform* ratings or similar, and probably list a succession of uniquely British, French and Irish horses. Similarly, go to the US experts, and their top 20 will likely leave you feeling that horseracing is a uniquely North American pastime. Imagine how this, in turn, will wind up the Australians, Japanese and others, each of whom has had the world's top-rated racehorse in recent years. You only have to read the comments in any number of online videos – please resist that urge, I implore you – to see how quickly this descends into grubby flag-waving. So this is my attempt to put the jingoism that always clouds judgment firmly in its corner, and really explore the merits of horses in many parts of the world, and not just the two usual cornerstones of Europe and the US.
3) In turn, I wanted to depersonalise this as much possible, as such intrusions – heartfelt though they are – tend to upset the integrity of any such compilation. Despite being a lifelong racegoer, sad to say that I have seen very few of these legends running in the flesh, nor bet successfully on any of them, nor owned any of them, but maybe that's an advantage; my aim is to be as passionate about them all when writing about them, whilst being as dispassionate as possible in my rationale for including them.
4) And now I'm going to be really provocative. My final self-imposed criterion will risk leaving some to shake their heads in despair. I decided, with such a wealth of greats to choose from, that I wanted to be able to *see* the horses in action alongside writing about them, and I wanted the reader to be able to do likewise. Consequently, I am only looking at horses that have been captured on film for posterity, with a video camera that doesn't lie in a way that a 19th-century reporter could (and often did).

'What about Eclipse?' you may scream; or Triple Crown winner Gladiateur, the 'Avenger of Waterloo'?; Or Carbine, one of Australia's greatest ever? Or even that magnificent Hungarian mare Kincsem, unbeaten in 54 races across Europe? Or

West Australian, or St Simon, or Ormonde? Wonderful horses, all, along with so many others. But the undeniable truth is that we live in an interactive age, and I wanted this book to be as interactive as a book can be; I want the reader to be inspired by stories they already thought they knew as well as races they probably didn't, so that they can then satisfy that lust online and watch them immediately after reading about them. And, heartbreakingly, we will simply never be able to do that with all the great horses of the Victorian era or before. Take heart in the fact that their stories are captured in loving words elsewhere.

That said, any book with a historical element to it has a hurdle to overcome. As one sage once reflected, 'There is a propensity in each of us to exalt the past and to deprecate the present, particularly as we reach our more senior years.' I can assure you that I am both conscious of that and, when looking at the even spread of these 50 champions across the decades that span the existence of racing on film, believe that it is a trap that I have avoided.

My earliest racing memories are of the Champs de Mars, the six-and-a-half furlong oval in the Mauritian capital Port Louis, with the spectacular backdrop of the Moka Range mountains only heightening the atmosphere. My grandfather and uncle were both chief stewards there, proud of Mauritius having the oldest Jockey Club in the Southern Hemisphere, even if it still has just the one tiny racecourse, and even though a Mauritian horse is unlikely to make this list anytime soon. But I hope that this detached, remote upbringing absolves me, at least partially, from accusations of geographical favouritism. My travels since have taken me to watch racing throughout the UK and France in particular, as well as Australia, South Africa, the US and even Turkmenistan, where the thoroughbred makes way for the staggeringly beautiful Akhal-Teke, its unique metallic sheen sparkling in the spartan desert surroundings.

Superficially, these places have little in common. Yet peel back the veneer of difference and the key similarity shines through: we all love to watch the harmonious magic of a well-trained horse and a skilled jockey working in glorious tandem, striving to go that little bit quicker than the others.

You are unlikely to have this book in your hands if you don't love racing in the first place. I therefore urge you to bear all of these criteria in mind whilst reading the chapters that follow. And if any of it spurs you to make your own list, or triggers stimulating conversation with other race lovers, or even prompts a spontaneous trip to a racecourse to remind yourself of the beauty of a thoroughbred racehorse in action, then so much the better.

A NOTE ON DISTANCES

Different countries measure distance in different ways. This applies equally to their measuring distances for horse races.

The most common global unit of measurement is now the metric system of kilometres, metres, centimetres, etc., as practised in Australia, France and elsewhere. In the USA and the UK, the imperial system of miles and yards is usually preferred. However, this is a book about horses, and we are fortunate that thoroughbreds have a distance that is pretty much unique to their sport: the furlong. Equal to 200m or 220 yards, I have chosen to use the furlong as the standard measurement in this book, firstly because it is still one of the most universally recognised measurements amongst horse lovers, but also to celebrate the uniqueness of it within this sport.

That being said, should you be more familiar with another system, the chart below spells out the various equivalents:

Race distance	Metric	Imperial	Example
1 furlong	200m	1/8 mile	
2 furlongs	400m	¼ mile	
4 furlongs	800m	½ mile	
5 furlongs	1000m	5/8 mile	Nunthorpe Stakes, Hong Kong Sprint
6 furlongs	1200m	¾ mile	Breeders' Cup Sprint, Golden Slipper Stakes
8 furlongs	1600m	1 mile	2000 Guineas, Prix Jacques Le Marois
10 furlongs	2000m	1 ¼ miles	Kentucky Derby, Breeders' Cup Classic
12 furlongs	2400m	1 ½ miles	Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, Epsom Derby
16 furlongs	3200m	2 miles	Melbourne Cup, Tenno Sho

MAN O'WAR

'The mostest hoss that ever was.' Man O'War's reputation – and his myth – have only grown with time. Seen here in a morning workout at Belmont, July 1920.

We should be more than a little grateful to the nameless camera operator who filmed Man O'War racing in 1920 – considered, in fact, to be the first recording of a full horse race in North America. It means he can be included in this book without breaking the strict, self-imposed criteria. Just as well, as omitting him would have rendered its whole integrity obsolete. He was the earliest great to be foaled of any horse described here and, to many, he remains the near-mythical benchmark of equine perfection.

By Fair Play out of Mahubah, a daughter of English Triple Crown-winner Rock Sand, Man O'War was sold as a yearling at the Saratoga Sales for $5,000 to Pennsylvania textile magnate Samuel Riddle, and trained by Louis Feustel. Initially, it was touch-and-go as to whether he would ever race: he was wilful to the extreme and refused to be broken in; he was too smart by half. Eventually he acceded but – the trainer would later say – the horse never forgave them.

His 21 races were spread quite evenly across his two and three-year-old seasons. He demonstrated a colossal stride that would only later be rivalled in North America by Secretariat and Native Dancer. He looked different too. Standing over 16.2 hands and an almost golden chestnut, his withers properly stuck out, his long

back dipped more than average and he possessed an almost supercilious look in his eye. His first six races, run over five and six furlongs, and starting with a six-length victory at Belmont Park, were all won in a canter. His fan club grew quickly as word spread of a horse that was running like no other before. He was sent to the six-furlong Sanford Memorial Stakes at Saratoga for what was planned to be another procession. But whilst Saratoga was at the time the US's premier racetrack, it also had a well-earned nickname: 'The Graveyard of Champions'.

We can easily forget that this was the era before starting stalls; there was nothing but a thin tape, and jockeys needed to position themselves well for the off. With Johnny Loftus aboard, as he would be throughout Big Red's first season, Man O' War was facing fully backwards when the tape went up, losing many lengths. His immense stride caught him up with the pack, only to get boxed in by the tiring horses in front of him. Still he found a way through, but the finish line came too quickly. Half a length in front of him was a well-regarded colt whom he had already beaten easily in a previous race at Saratoga, and to whom he was conceding 15 pounds. The colt's name – and you couldn't make it up – was Upset.

Journalists and public alike – who had watched the hapless start and breath-taking finish – were unequivocal that only bad luck (and perhaps poor jockeyship) accounted for the defeat, thus his reputation, ironically, only grew in defeat. For the record, they met three times more over their careers, and Upset never again got near him – then again, neither did any other thoroughbred. Man O'War finished the year as two-year-old champion, a colossal 16 pounds clear of his nearest peer in the rankings.

There would be no blemishes, unfortunate or otherwise, in Man O'War's second season. That said, there was a glaring omission: he was not entered in the Kentucky Derby. The reasons were twofold and utterly spurious: Riddle believed that a three-year-old shouldn't race 'as far as 10 furlongs' so early in the season; second, the Preakness Stakes in that year was run only a few days later, and it was only his preferred target because of Pimlico's proximity to Riddle's farm where Man O' War had wintered. We shirk at the narrow-mindedness of it now, but it is worth recalling that the US Triple Crown as we now know it did not become recognised as such until the 1930s. Regardless, having never raced beyond six furlongs, and ridden by new jockey Clarence Kummer, he still won the nine-furlong Classic in record time.

Just 11 days later he was back in Belmont Park, first winning the eight-furlong Withers Stakes in a US record of 1min 35.8secs before, in June, destroying a class field in the Belmont Stakes (then 11 furlongs) by 20 lengths in a time of 2min 14secs – a world record on dirt that would stand, incredibly, until 1991.

Several more victories followed, sometimes with starting odds of 100-1 on – the stingiest anyone could remember in track history. Further superlatives were on show at the Lawrence Realization Stakes at Saratoga, where every horse but one – Hoodwink, owned by Riddle's niece – had run scared despite the $15,000 prize. Reports state clearly that Kummer did little more than sit quietly for 13 furlongs. Man O'War still reduced the world record by nearly two seconds to 2min 40.8secs, and officially won by 100 lengths – the stewards sensibly rounding it down to a memorable figure as photos showed that Man O'War had won by *over two furlongs.*

Only once was he properly tested. Facing only one opponent, the top-class John P Grier, in the Dwyer Stakes at Aqueduct, Big Red was still expected to win, despite carrying 18 pounds more. Man O'War led for most of it until the home stretch, when John P Grier ranged up beside him. Clarence Kummer drew the whip on his mount, allowing the distance to grow, only for Eddie Ambrose on his opponent to do likewise and draw back level. This happened once more before finally John P Grier could take no more and wilted in the final furlong. The *New York Times* loved every minute of it: 'The contestants had set such a dazzling pace from the very start that they seemed to fairly fly through space rather than to touch ground.' The world record for nine furlongs had predictably been broken too.

After a few more facile successes, and with an enormous following fan club, Man O'War's career finished with a match race for the ten-furlong Kenilworth Park Gold Cup in Ontario against Sir Barton, who had won the Triple Crown the previous year (even if it had not been called that at the time). Here, finally, Big Red is captured at glorious full tilt on film, albeit at the accelerated frame speed of what was still primitive technology. We see him lead from the start, high head carriage reminiscent of Sea-Bird many years later, and we see just how far before the end Kummer starts pulling him up whilst still winning in absurdly easy fashion by seven lengths.

With Man O'War thereafter facing crippling handicap weights as a four-year-old, Riddle instead chose to retire his hero but, quirky to the last, restricted his stallion to a mere 25 mares a year, many of which were either his own or those of friends. Living to the ripe old age of 30, Man O'War still sired 64 stakes winners – War Admiral pre-eminent amongst them – but one feels it could have been so much more. His devoted stallion hand Will Harburt didn't care, calling him 'The mostest hoss that ever was'.

Certain racing and breeding experts – trying to take a more objective view – have called Man O'War the 'sacred cow' of US racing. The challenge is fair. In the same way that some consider it borderline illegal for a Brit to criticise a Shakespeare play, Man O'War's reputation within certain US racing circles sometimes feels

similar: to question his achievements is simply not the done thing. To many, he has long passed through the wormhole of history and can now only be viewed through the prism of myth.

Two tempering factors are perhaps worth reflecting upon: one of quality and the other of quantity. First, the quality of US bloodstock improved – gradually but undeniably – between the start and the end of the 20th century, which doesn't undermine Man O'War's incredible individual achievements but might put into question the overall strength in depth of his challengers. Second, in the lean years of World War One, there were a mere 1,680 thoroughbreds foaled in the US that year, the second lowest of the century (after 1919) and far fewer than in later years, perhaps reducing the chances of a genuine competitor for Man O'War to prove himself against – which, again, he surely would have.

Yet at a time when heroes as timeless as Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey loomed so large in the US sporting public's eye, it is telling that the most popular of all of them was a headstrong horse whose trainer had once said of him that 'he was hell to break, a headache to handle, and a catapult to ride'. Perhaps. But he was also an imperious legend.

That so many should have turned up for his funeral was unsurprising for, as was said in the eulogy that day, 'he touched the imagination of men and they saw different things in him. But one thing they will all remember was that he brought exaltation into their hearts.'

FACTFILE

Description: Chestnut Colt
Size: 16.2 hands
Dates: 1917-47
Racing seasons: 1919-20
Where were they trained?: USA
Trainer: Louis Feustel
Owner: Samuel Riddle
Jockey: Johnny Loftus, Clarence Kummer and Andy Schuttinger
Sire: Fair Play
Dam: Mahubah
Damsire: Rock Sand
Record: 21: 20-1-0
Most impressive victory: Belmont Stakes, 1920
Nickname: Big Red

EPINARD

Having already conquered Europe, the wonderful Epinard arrives in the USA in 1924.

One of the only two films in existence that definitely shows Epinard racing is of him coming second. Further, his greatest-ever performance was when he again finished second. Then again, you can take almost anything out of context and twist it. In fact, there is nothing incongruous about Epinard's place amongst these exalted thoroughbreds. He won plenty too, in deeply impressive fashion, and was enough of a European star to have the US beckoning him to challenge their best as long ago as the 1920s, thus blazing a trail that many decades later would morph into the Breeders' Cup.

Owned and bred by Chanel co-founder Pierre Wertheimer, Epinard (French for spinach) was an underwhelming yearling, but he was sent into training with French-based American Eugene Leigh. At the start of his two-year-old season, they weren't sure what to make of him; by the end of it, he was Champion European two-year-old against an outstanding crop of peers. It started in Deauville in the Prix Yacowlef, primarily against a two-year-old whom leading trainer Willie Pratt swore was his best, and Epinard gave him a five-length panning. Soaking it all up at the glamorous seaside resort that day was a certain Ernest Hemingway, who proudly recalled later, 'Epinard won in a breeze, and I was able to support myself for six or eight months with my earnings.' One can only imagine how.

Epinard, soon after, effortlessly annexed the Grand Criterium, Criterium de Maisons-Laffitte and the Prix de la Foret (against older horses), with his sole loss

being in the Prix Morny where, as was not uncommon in those days, he was left at the start facing the wrong way.

By age three, Epinard was an imposing, muscular and handsome chestnut, but had not been entered in the Classics on either side of the Channel, partly because his speed suggested he would never stay for a Derby distance anyway. Nevertheless, he crushed all-comers in France in his first four races that year over distances from six to nine furlongs, including the Prix d'Ispahan and the Prix du Gros-Chene, usually ridden by another Euro-based American, Everett Haynes. Ambitions then grew to send him to topple England's best. The most prestigious sprint handicap at the time was the six-furlong Stewards' Cup at Goodwood. His reputation being what it was, he was allotted 8st 6lb – far bigger than a three-year-old had ever carried to victory in that race. It made no difference and he cantered in by two lengths. It was clear that the Brits were in awe of him as much as the French.

He then returned to England in the autumn to take on the nine-furlong Cambridgeshire Handicap, another of the very top prizes at the time. This time he would be burdened with 9st 2lb – considered impossible. Stabled at Newmarket in the week leading up to the race, he undertook a mile-long gallop, witnessed by jockey and subsequent journalist Jack Leach, who was on a parallel gallop starting fully a furlong ahead: 'We jumped off and came a good gallop. As we [reached the end], Epinard was with us. In fact, he pulled up in the bunch as if he had been with us all the way. I have never been so astonished in my life!'

Epinard, in fact, didn't win the Cambridgeshire, although he should have. That being said, he still blew the audience away. Drawn high, Haynes had been told to bring him straight to the stand rails, which Epinard did almost violently. He then let him go and Epinard was fully six lengths clear, and with his swerving had gone so much further than his competitors. He was caught at the death by Verdict, carrying nearly two stone less, and who would go on to win the Coronation Cup the next year. Even in defeat, the audience knew what they had witnessed, with the word 'astonishing' mentioned liberally. 'The performance, by common consent, stamped Epinard as the best three-year-old in the world up to a mile and a little over,' wrote the no-nonsense *Bloodstock Breeders' Review*.

The US Racing scene agreed and wanted to see more. To that end, a series of international races were set up between the European champion and the cream from across the pond. As usual, it was the European horse who had to travel. It wasn't so easy in those days, but after some negotiating Epinard and his team set sail in July 1924 from Cherbourg on the *Berengaria*, whose owners

had adapted part of the ship to accommodate their special cargo. Indeed, Epinard was big news at the time and there were daily cables sent from the ship to the press to keep the public up to date. If the *New York Times* was anything to go by, the Americans were mostly amused that Epinard was being accompanied by 40 barrels of Evian spring water to quench his thirst on the journey. Bearing in mind the horse was originally born near Bordeaux, they speculated, mischievously, why was he not being given wine?

Thus, as a four-year-old, after a long sea crossing, Epinard took in four races, all on dirt that he clearly loathed, and with increasingly sore hooves, which were abnormally prone to getting thrush infections. He ran against sprinters over five furlongs, then milers, and finally against middle-distance horses over ten furlongs. Despite being given lumps more weight to carry, he came a close second in all of them, with the Americans realising that, despite these defeats, he would patently have won on turf if not in agony. Even so, the starts of his races were by all accounts a sight to behold, as they had been throughout his career. In the days before starting gates, many swore that they had never seen a horse reach full tilt so quickly from a standing start. 'Once launched, he went like an arrow,' one admiring US hack wrote. Another more melodramatic journalist in *The Free Lance* reflected after the last of these gallant defeats: 'Whether it be beast or man, the French die gloriously.'

In fact, Epinard's feet were so painful on the day of a match race with Sir Gallahad III that he had to be literally dragged to the racetrack. He still only lost by a neck. In the fourth race, the Laurel Stakes, his tender hoof finally cracked after five furlongs and he pulled himself up in searing pain. The US had seen enough and made him Champion American older horse. Subsequently retired, and a hero on both sides of the ocean, each wanted a piece of Epinard, so he was shuttled repeatedly between studs in the US and France, which wouldn't have done his condition much good – his immediate output was unspectacular, although it is pleasing to note that many, many generations down the line, his distant, direct ancestor Goldikova would carry those same famous Wertheimer colours to victory in three successive Breeders' Cup Miles. His closest companion was an old Airedale terrier named Peter, who had travelled to the US and back with him, and whom he would tenderly carry around by the neck.

Years later, doubt swirled around Epinard's death. Initially it was thought that the Germans had commandeered him post-invasion in 1941 and had worked him to death as a carthorse near Chartres – a harrowing enough tale, and one announced by French radio in 1942, but it was then thought that eyewitnesses may have been mistaken. So racing historian John Hervey dug deeper …

Dunkirk, Spring 1940. A never-ending grey beach, smothered in a colossal, retreating British land force, pincered on the coastline with limited protection from an equally under-pressure French army and with a huge Nazi war machine bearing down remorselessly. On the shore, in amongst hundreds of thousands of desperate soldiers, were countless horses, and one of them – more likely than not – was Epinard. Stolen from his stud, and doubtless still in pain from his sensitive hooves that never really recovered, the gentle, 20-year-old stallion would likely have been filled with fear and confusion. With a flotilla of fishing boats soon to appear from England, a miracle would eventually arrive for the soldiers, but sadly there was no miracle for Epinard. We cannot know whether in his last moments – before likely becoming a meal to starving soldiers – he still remembered those glorious performances of 17 years before, but moved as we are by this haunting image, we can only hope that his end was quick, respectful and merciful. It was the very least that this pioneering champion deserved.

FACTFILE

Description: Chestnut Colt
Size: 16.2 hands
Dates: 1920–40
Racing seasons: 1922-24
Where were they trained?: France
Trainer: Eugene Leigh
Owner: Pierre Wertheimer
Jockey: Everett Haynes
Sire: Badajoz
Dam: Epine Blanche
Damsire: Rock Sand
Record: 20: 12-6-0
Most impressive victory: Stewards' Cup 1923
Nickname: The Great Gentleman