The Fair Hill Bugle

Fair Hill Foundation Newsletter

From an Owner's Scrapbook

Flatterer: A Horse of a Lifetime

By George I. E. Harris

After 35 years in his private collection, George Harris donated this portrait of Flatterer to the Museum of Racing in Saratoga in December, 2021. Painted in 1986 by esteemed equine artist Richard Stone Reeves, it now resides in the permanent collection there.

The Early Years

After driving over from California to Maryland in September 1970, I would begin to build friendships with people who enjoyed living a life in the countryside, which often included foxhunting, steeplechase and timber racing. This life was for me much closer to what I had left behind when I boarded the plane at Shannon (Ireland) airport bound for Los Angeles and the Santa Ynez Valley, some two years earlier.

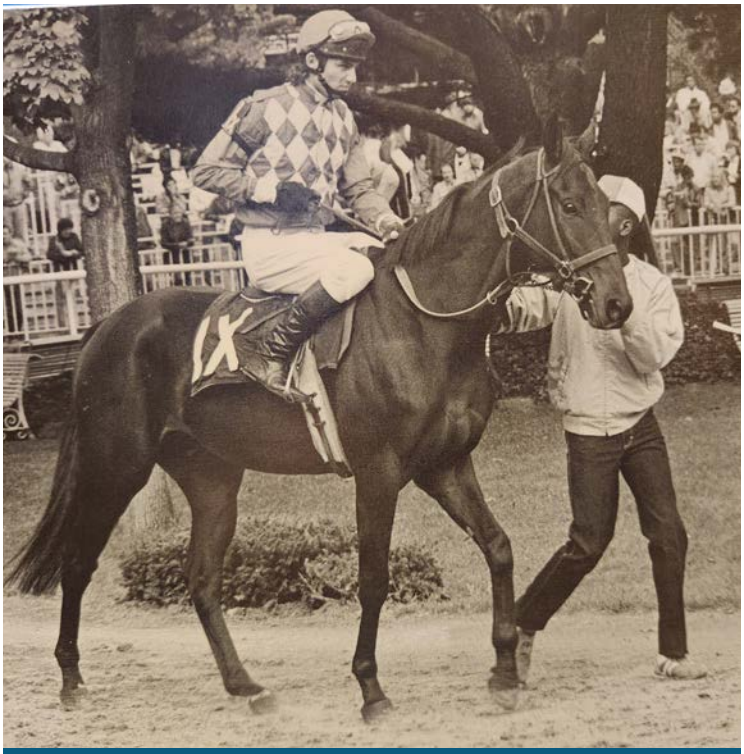
Many of the friendships I made were with people from the Monkton and Unionville areas of Maryland and Pennsylvania. To name but a few who were owners, riders and or trainers from Maryland, I would include Jay Griswold, Tommy Voss, Turney McKnight and the Secor family and from Pennsylvania, Jonathan Sheppard, Paddy Neilson, Marshall Jenney and Johnny Fisher. All of these people shared one thing in common – the love of the horse – and as the years moved along, each one would play an important role in my life.

Jonathan Sheppard

Soon after our marriage in 1975, Kitty and I left London and returned to New York and started a life together living in the city and at High Acres Farm near Shelburne, Vermont. I would often drive down from Manhattan to Unionville, Pennsylvania to spend a night or two with Jonathan and Penny Sheppard at Inverbrook Farm on Lamborntown Road. In 1966 Jonathan started his own training stable situated in a large Bank Barn belonging to Penny's parents, Colin "Skipper" and Ida Lofting. He named it Ashwell Stables after the village near Newmarket, Suffolk where he grew up. I would meet Janet Elliot, Graham Motion and Betsy Wells and several other apprentice stable hands. Both Janet and Graham in later years would become very successful trainers.

On those early visits I would spend time with Jonathan and talk to him about his training methods and the daily workings of the barn, which over time would lead to his great success as a steeplechase trainer and his induction into the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame in 1990.

I remember receiving a call from Jonathan in early January 1982 saying that he would be in Manhattan for a meeting with Bill Pape, his partner in their joint breeding and racing program. The three of us would meet for dinner later that evening at an Upper East Side restaurant not far from our 79 East 79th residence. As dessert was being served, I casually asked Jonathan if he and Bill might have an unraced home-bred colt that I could purchase an interest in. After a moment or two they replied that they did have two horses in mind but said that my purchase of an interest would be subject to a "buy in" option Ida, Jonathan's mother-in-law had been given when both horses were yearlings. They talked about two three-year-olds they valued at $20,000 each who were close to making their first starts. Subject to Ida not wishing to act on her option, I could proceed with the purchase of a one-third interest in both horses. One three-year-old was named Flatterer (1979-Mo Bay) and the second was named Sky Bird (1979-Northern Fling). Back on the farm the next day after our late dinner the previous evening, Jonathan spoke to Ida who thought it would be

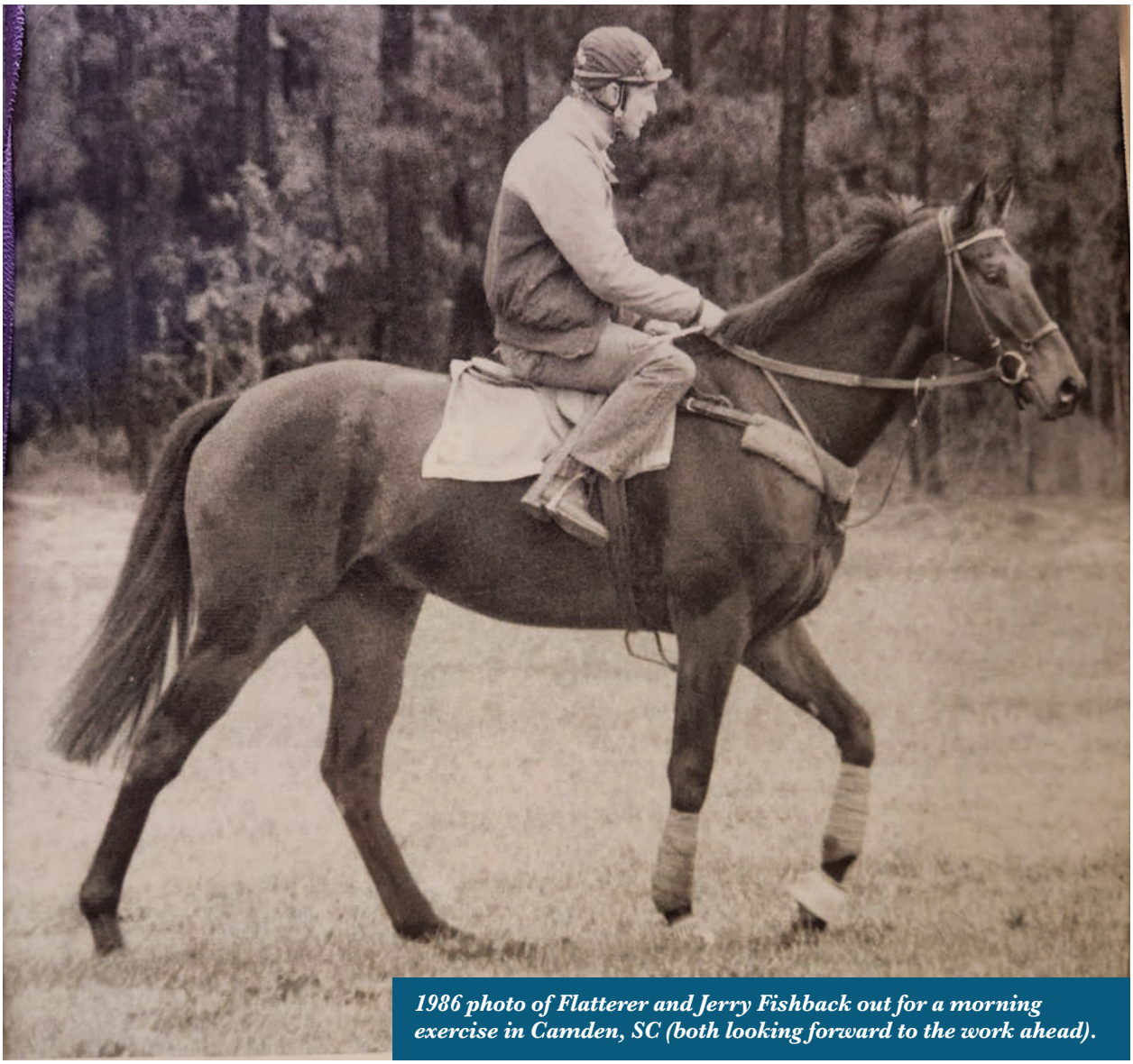


1983 photo of England's champion steeplechase jockey, John Francome in the paddock at Belmont Park for the 2nd leg of the Steeplechase Triple Crown, The Temple Gwathmey.

a fine idea for Bill and Jonathan to have me as their partner. Jonathan called to give me the news and so with a check payable to Ashwell Stables for $13,333, I now owned an interest in two Thoroughbred racehorses – my first investment in the horse business. Bill, our partner, owned a successful Chevrolet car dealership and a Marine Yacht business on Long Island and was the President of the National Steeplechase and Hunt Association.

An Auspicious Investment

With the 1982 year ahead, I looked forward to joining my friend, Jonathan, at the racetrack to watch Flatterer and Sky Bird winning a race or two, either on the dirt or the turf. As a three-year-old in 1982, Flatterer would make 18 starts, four wins, two seconds and two thirds.



1986 photo of Flatterer and Jerry Fishback out for a morning exercise in Camden, SC (both looking forward to the work ahead).

Sky Bird made four starts, winning his first race but failing to be placed in his other three and Jonathan decided to give him away to a friend who was looking for a dressage horse. Jonathan was impressed with Flatterer with "his workman-like record" and later in the year, he told Bill and me that he would begin training him to jump over a few low fences and logs on his farm to prepare him for a steeplechase career as a four-year-old.

On April 9, 1983 Flatterer faced the starter for his first race over the jumps at Atlanta with John Cushman in the irons. He won by eight lengths. Following his debut, Flatterer would win five more races during the year, being the first horse ever to win the American Steeplechase Triple Crown. His wins included:

- October 1: the 2 1/4 miles, $15,000 American Grand National Handicap (150 pounds), at Foxfield, Virginia by 7 lengths;
- October 14: the 2 5/8 miles $40,000 Temple Gwathmey Handicap, (154 pounds), at Belmont Park by 1 1/4 lengths with John Francome over from England for the win;
- November 20: the weight for age 14th running of the 2 3/4 miles $50,000 Colonial Cup (151 pounds) at Camden, South Carolina by 3 1/4 lengths.

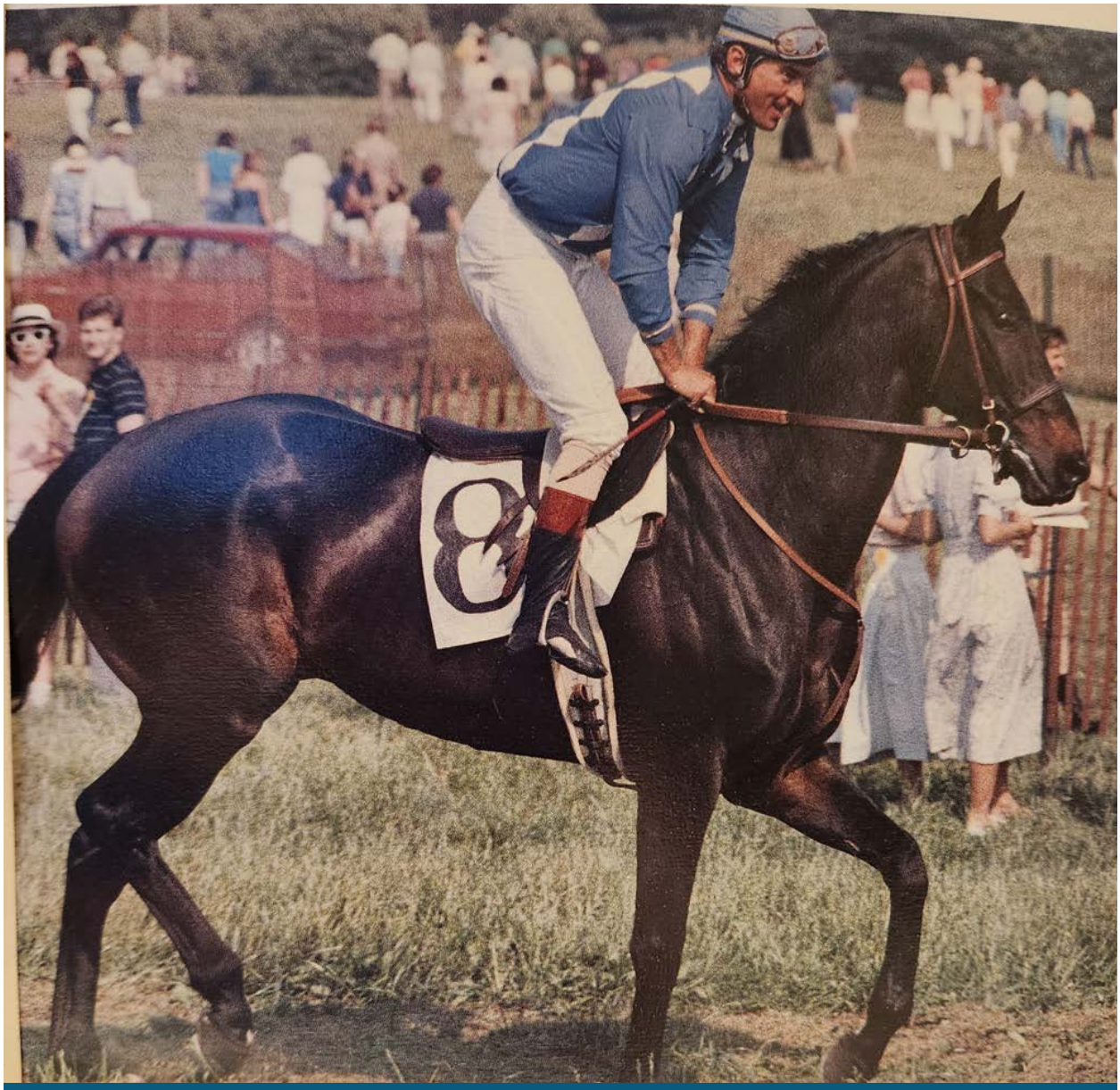
1986 photo of Flatterer and Jerry Fishback going to post for his fourth consecutive Colonial Cup victory being attended by Graham Motion.

John Francome, the English steeplechase specialist, returned to the irons for his second victory aboard Flatterer who at year's end had earned $93,064. It was an exciting result for the partnership and Flatterer was voted to receive the first of four Eclipse and Horse of the Year awards from 1983-1986.

John Francome, the leading English steeplechase jockey of all time from Lambourn, Berkshire was invited to ride Flatterer at Belmont Park and later at Camden, while the American rider John Cushman rode Flatterer to four victories at Atlanta, Saratoga, Ligonier and Foxfield with winning margins of seven or eight lengths in each race.

On Friday, December 9, 1983 in Washington, D.C.'s posh Madison Hotel, the third annual NSHA-Bollinger Champagne Awards Dinner was held with over 200 in attendance. A special

presentation, made by New York Racing Association (NYRA) Vice President Lenny Hale, was conducted honoring Flatterer as the NSHA's first Steeplechase Triple Crown winner. Lenny Hale made the historic presentation to tri-owners, Bill Pape, Jonathan Sheppard and George Harris. It was a great evening to remember and the partnership was now wondering what the following year might bring for their Champion Flatterer. No doubt about it, year 1983 was one to remember and for me it was a moment to reflect on how luck can play a part in so many different ways in the ownership of a racehorse.



1986 photo of Flatterer jogging to post under 176 pounds, National Hunt Cup at Radnor, Jerry Fishback aboard, with a hole in his boot and a smile on his face.

Flatterer's record-breaking four Eclipse Awards.

Track Records, Eclipse Awards Mark Career

So following Flatterer's exciting first year over the jumps as a four-year-old, he put together at ages five, six, seven and eight some outstanding performances over the hurdles. He won multiple stake races with the 37-year-old, four-time champion NSA rider Jerry Fishback coming out of retirement to be Flatterer's number one rider.

At age five in 1984, Flatterer won six races from eight starts, including four major stakes races, among them the two-mile $50,000 Delta Airlines – Bear Stearns Handicap on April 7 at Atlanta (160 pounds). While leading from pillar to post, he was never headed and demolished one of the best fields of the year by four lengths.

On August 24, at Saratoga the 2 3/8 miles $40,000 New York Turfwriters Cup Handicap (164 pounds), a great rivalry between Flatterer and Census began when they went head-to-head over the last four fences with Flatterer winning by 1 3/4 length, giving Census (155 pounds), nine pounds. It was a championship performance and Flatterer's 164-pound assignment was the most ever carried to victory in the 43-year-old stake.

On September 21, Flatterer won the 2 1/2 miles $40,000 Brook Handicap at Belmont Park (167 pounds) by two lengths defeating Census (156 pounds), who was outrun to the wire while giving him 11 pounds. The race established Flatterer as a championship caliber chaser, despite his relative inexperience.

On November 18 Flatterer won for the second time the 15th running of the 2 3/4 miles $50,000 Colonial Cup at Camden (160 pounds), defeating Census (162 pounds), by 1 1/4 length while receiving two pounds from the six-year-old Census in the weight-for-age race. The race was the big showdown between the two rivals with Flatterer over the last fence

Bill Pape (left) and George Harris (center) were greeted by Alain du Breil, the president of the Societe des Steeple-Chases, the French equivalent of the National Steeplechase and Hunt Association.

edging ahead on the run to the wire. Flatterer's money earnings were $120,342 for the year.

A brief explanation of a handicap race and why horses are handicapped is in order – it is all about the amount of weight assigned to a horse by the Racing Secretary based on the horse's past performance. Weight means the weight of the jockey, plus his saddle plus the "lead" dead weight that may be added to the saddle to make up the assigned weight given by the racing secretary. So every time Flatterer ran in such a handicap race and came in first, in his next race the weight given would usually increase by two to three pounds.

Thus between his first 1984 race and his last race, the weight given to Flatterer was 160, 164 and 167 pounds. In a weight-for-age race such as the Colonial Cup, the assigned weight is based on the age of the horse and not on his past performance. When winning his first Colonial Cup, Flatterer carried 151pounds at age four and at age five carried 160 pounds when winning his second Cup.

At age six in 1985 Flatterer ran three times over the jumps and chalked up two wins and a second in a late fall campaign when winning for the second time on October 11 the 2 5/8 miles $55,300 Temple Gwathmey (170 pounds) at Belmont Park by two lengths over Gateshead (158 pounds), establishing a new track record (4:51 1/5).

The feat was described as the most remarkable performance in National Steeplechase Association (NSA) history. Flatterer won the 16th $60,000 Colonial Cup at Camden (162 pounds) by two lengths for the third time in a row with Jerry Fishback on board for his two wins at Belmont Park and Camden. It had been a quiet spring for Flatterer with time off for wear and tear from his previous year's Colonial Cup victory. Heat in his right front tendon was detected from an ultrasound scan and rest and rehab were recommended. Flatterer was given time off for his fall campaign and at the close of the season had chalked up money won earnings of $73,510 for his six-year-old year.

In 1986 at age seven, Flatterer won all four of his races in North America and in June traveled to Paris, France to compete in 3 3/16 miles $141,000 Grande Course De Haies D'Auteuil,

where he placed second by five lengths to Le Rheusois in a field of seven runners. With a plan to race abroad in the June 27 French Champion Hurdle, Flatterer made his first start for the year returning to Atlanta to win his debut on April 5 in the two miles $50,000 Atlanta Cup Handicap (173 pounds), winning by two lengths with Steve Canyon second (144 pounds) in a field of six. He won the race giving 15-30 pounds to his five rivals and set a new track

Flatterer and Census flying the last fence together in the 1984 Colonial Cup.

record (3:461/5) without hardly drawing a breath. Flatterer's 173 pounds tied the record for most weight ever carried to victory by Mrs. Ogden Phipps' Neji, who won the 1957 Temple Gwathmey under the same burden.

In his next start on May 17 at Malvern, Pennsylvania, Flatterer won the 2 1/4 miles $20,000 National Hunt Handicap (176 pounds), carrying a bone crushing weight and drawing off to win by seven lengths over Jolly Four (148 pounds), giving 26- 40 pounds to his four other rivals with Jerry Fishback clocking up his second win of the year on the champion. Flatterer's weight assignment was the most weight ever carried by any winning horse and established an untouchable record.

Now it was time to prepare for the French Champion hurdle some 40 days later where Flatterer would carry sixty-four kilos (141 pounds). Since Fishback could not make the 141 pounds weight assignment, the English rider Richard Dunwoody was contacted and would get the ride. On race day the temperature was 96 degrees, the ground was soft and the distance of the race was the farthest Flatterer had ever been asked to run. He ran second, collected $35,000 and was stone cold exhausted when he returned to the paddock. It was a great effort by our champion who was given time off on his return to Ashwell Stables on Lamborntown Road in the heart of Chester County.

Flatterer and Fishback (with Graham Motion) returning to the unsaddling enclosure after the Champion Hurdle, while receiving a warm ovation from the assembled crowd of 60,000 enthusiasts!

Flatterer made his return to the races on October 18 to run in a 1 1/2 mile flat race at Red Bank, New Jersey with a purse of $1,000 and won by 10 lengths with flat rider Ernie Dufton on board. It was the perfect tune-up race for Flatterer in the 17 running of the $60,000 Colonial Cup on November 16.

"He's the best I've ridden and I've been on champions" – Jerry Fishback

On race day, eight contenders lined up with Flatterer for the second to last race of the year. He won by 17 lengths and was never threatened for the largest winning margin of all four of his Colonial Cup victories and the largest winning margin in Colonial Cup history. After the race Jerry Fishback was quoted as saying: "Most horses don't get to run in the race four times, let alone win. He's the best I've ever ridden, and I've been on champions." At year end Flatterer's money won earnings for 1986 were $83,940.

Tim Thompson-Jones

An ambitious 1987 three-race stake schedule for the eight-year-old Flatterer, would include an overseas trip in March to England for the annual three day Cheltenham Spring race festival to run in the two-mile $108,000 Champion Hurdle (168 pounds), held on St. Patrick's Day, Tuesday, March 17. Jerry Fishback would be in the saddle in a field of 18 runners including the previous two-time winner, See You Then, ridden by Steve Smith-Eccles and trained by Nicky Henderson. Flatterer arrived three days before the race and got well settled in at John and Miriam Francome's stable close to Lambourn. Race day was one of the most exciting lead up to any race I had ever been to with a large and enthusiastic crowd on hand, an awesome parade ring with great viewing stands and an atmosphere like none other at an NSA meet back in America. Flatterer ran a gallant race finishing in second place to See You Then, beaten just 1 1/2 lengths. I remember Graham Motion leading Flatterer and Jerry Fishback back to the parade ring to the applause of the record crowd of over 60,000 fans.

On returning to America on April 18, Flatterer ran third in a race over 2 1/8 miles at Middleburg, carrying (178 pounds), when ridden by the English leading amateur rider, Tim Thompson-Jones. This race would be a prep for the 46th running of the weight-for-age, three mile, $100,000 Iroquois Memorial Steeplechase (168 pounds), run on May 9 at Percy Warner Park, Nashville. Tim Thompson-Jones was making his return trip from across the pond to win the nine-runner race by an easy four lengths. Tim was all smiles after the race and told Jonathan that Flatterer was "the best all-around steeplechase horse in the world today" – high praise for a great champion.

1987 photo of Flatterer looking regal as ever on his way to the paddock for the 1987 Breeders Cup Steeplechase with Graham Motion and Betsy Wells.

The final goal was some months away from this victory on May 9 and in fact Flatterer would not face the starter's flag until October 17 when he would run in a two-mile flat race at Great Meadow near The Plains, Virginia, in his penultimate start before the second running of the $250,000 Breeders Cup Steeplechase over 2 5/8 miles at Fair Hill, Maryland on Halloween day, Saturday, October 31. He won his tune-up race by six lengths over 12 rivals with John Fitzgerald up and now it was just two weeks to the Breeders Cup.

Over the summer months there had been some moments of concern for Jonathan and his team when Flatterer was enjoying light work at the farm in Pennsylvania and at Saratoga. Questions arose following a workout he had at the farm and after his race at Great Meadow about a tendon and ankle issue which had been niggling him on and off for some time. Richard Dunwoody who had ridden Flatterer in France was engaged to ride and arrived on course on the day for the race. The race course at Fair Hill was in magnificent shape and the French horse Gacko (156 pounds) was expected to run well. During the race it became apparent to Richard that there was something not totally right with Flatterer. When he jumped the eighth fence on the far side of the race course on landing, Richard started to pull him up as he was galloping to the next fence. Indeed, he had broken down and as Dunwoody dismounted it was apparent that he had bowed a tendon.

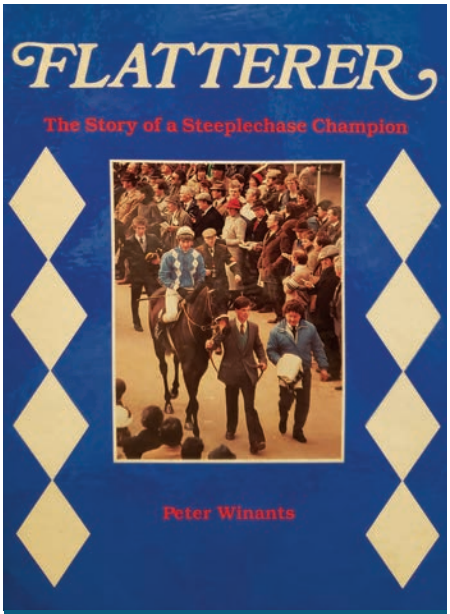
A Happy Retirement

Saturday, October 31, 1987 was a fateful day for Flatterer when his racing career came to a most unfortunate end having bowed a tendon at the eighth fence in the second running of the Breeders Cup Steeplechase at Fair Hill, Maryland.

It was a sad day for all of us and for Jonathan who managed his training so brilliantly through his patience and keen eye and kept Flatterer at the very top of his game for all to enjoy and admire this truly special horse. And for all the people who looked after him so diligently back at the farm and on the road, Janet, Graham, Betsy and so many more.

Flatterer bronze sculpture by distinguished equine artist Jean Claggett.

To my two partners, thank you for letting me be part of this truly memorable time enjoying this one-of-a-lifetime horse which you bred in partnership. It was a wild and crazy ride, the highs and lows, the great moments with this champion steeplechase horse Flatterer will be remembered by me forever.



Flatterer book by Peter Winants.

Flatterer was born on June 5, 1979, began his racing career at age three on April 9, 1983, retired from racing on October 31, 1987 at age eight, and passed away on April 14, 2014 at age 35. He was one of the longest living Thoroughbreds ever born and the oldest champion racehorse to have lived to this mighty age.

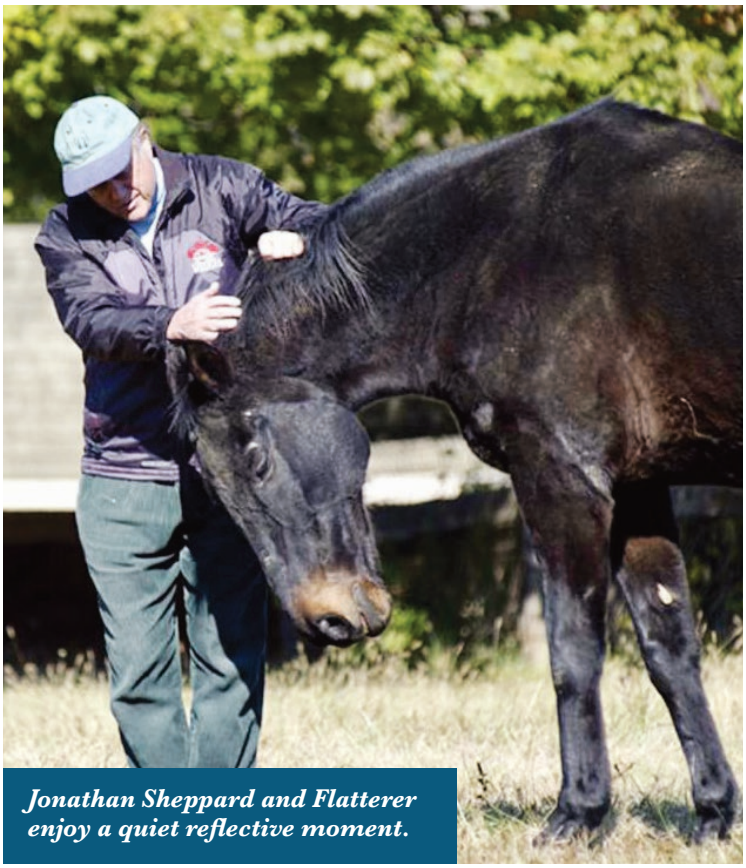
Returning to Bill Pape's My Way Farm in Unionville, it was time to rest up and so began the next 27 years of Flatterer's retirement. A decision was made for him to become a dressage horse, once the attending veterinarian gave Bill and Jonathan the green light following his tendon recovery. So Flatterer started his training, learning the early movements of dressage and was given the opportunity to show himself off. By all accounts, it was all going well and he seemed to be enjoying himself in this new discipline.

However, he deserved much more than that and was officially retired for a happy life on the farm, joining other retirees from the Pape and Sheppard racing stable. Flatterer received deserving care and attention at the farm and

everyone who came to visit the champ would bring sugar cubes which he relished. He soon settled into his daily life and was a very happy camper at My Way Farm.

Flatterer would soon meet for the first time a special lady named My Tombola (1989 Bay mare, Northern Fling-Better To Be Lucky) the winner of six races with earnings of $100,741, owned and bred by the Pape and Sheppard partnership.

The two would each become paddock friends for the remaining years of their life, sharing a large paddock with a run-in shed for protection against inclement weather. The paddock was next to Bill Pape's house, where he would watch them both every day going about their daily routine. Being ten years younger than Flatterer, My Tombola would put a spring in his step and as Bill noted, they would seldom be seen far away from each other out in the field. It would be from winter to spring, spring to summer, summer to autumn and autumn to winter, each and every day, warm or cold, inseparable friends for a happy life of well-earned retirement from their earlier days of racing on the flat and over the jumps.



Jonathan Sheppard and Flatterer enjoy a quiet reflective moment.

Following a cold and difficult 2013 winter, Flatterer the champion was beginning to slow down and like any aged horse he was being closely watched every day, as he slowly walked about his paddock. Blood tests were taken, none of which showed any abnormalities and along with regular vet checks confirming that "Flats" was now beginning to feel his age. Bill and Jonathan got together to decide on what decision might be best for Flatterer. They both agreed that they did not want the "great horse" to accidentally fall down and be unable to get back on his feet again. A really tough decision would soon have to be made by them both and as the warmer days of spring approached, they decided that it would be in the champ's best interest to put him to sleep. His dear partner and lady friend for many years had reached the age of twenty- five and she joined Flats for a life together up in horse heaven on April 14, 2014.

Bill described Flatterer as "a fine horse to be around, a happy horse and to have a horse like that is just a dream of a lifetime as he gave us all that he had." Jonathan said "he lived a great and remarkable life."

Both were buried side by side at My Way Farm.

Winning connections after 1985 Temple Gwathmey presentation.

Epilogue

Flatterer (PA)
1979- Mo Bay-Horizontal-Nade
Starts: 51 (1982-1987)
First: 24
Second: 7
Third: 5
Fourth: 5
Earnings: $538,708
Inducted to the Hall of Fame: 1994

Jonathan E. Sheppard
Elected to the Hall of Fame: 1990
Career: 1966-2020
Won: 3,426 races
Led all steeplechase trainers in earnings 29 times and in wins 26 times
Trained: Cafe Prince and Flatterer

Jerry Fishback
Elected to the Hall of Fame: 1992
Career: 1964-1987
Five time leading steeplechase rider, won 301 career steeplechase races, rode Cafe Prince and Flatterer

Sources
All There's To Know About Apples and Oranges by Peter Winants

American Steeplechasing 1987, Page 218-219

Flatterer: The Story of a Steeplechase Champion by Peter Winants 1988

Flatterer
A bay gelding 16 hands, foaled 1979

First horse to win the American Steeplechase Triple Crown: The Grand National, Temple Gwathmey and Colonial Cup in a single season

Won under the record weight of 176 pounds

Set course records in the Colonial Cup, Atlanta Cup and at Belmont Park in the Temple Gwathmey

Twice traveled abroad to tackle the world's finest hurdle horses on their home turf, finishing second in the Champion Hurdle races in France and England

Earned a record $421,146 in races sanctioned by the NSA

Earned $578,708 overall and was awarded Eclipse Awards as America's best steeplechase horse for an unprecedented four straight years

Editor's Note

George I. E. Harris, a native of Ireland, is a former member of the Fair Hill Foundation Board of Directors. A graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, he served as stallion and breeding manager at Flag Is Up Farm in California and manager of Glade Valley Farm in Maryland before opening his own bloodstock agency in 1977. He was also a board member of Fasig Tipton Company for more than ten years and is a founding partner of Taylor Harris Insurance Agency. He wrote this piece for his grandchildren.

Plaque in the Racing Hall of Fame commemorating Flatterer's racing record.

Flatterer accumulated many honors, awards and tributes throughout his extraordinary lifetime. Acclaimed equine artist Richard Stone Reeves captured him in oil, a painting that now hangs at the National Museum of Racing in Saratoga Springs. In addition to his record-breaking four Eclipse Awards, Pierre Bellocq, known as Peb, a French-American cartoonist and caricaturist for the Daily Racing Form *and mural artist for Churchill Downs and Del Mar, created a cartoon featuring co-owners Bill Pape, Jonathan Sheppard, and George Harris and jockeys Jerry Fishback and John Francome. This cartoon, declaring across the bottom "Who said Flatterer would get you nowhere?," now hangs in National Museum of Racing as well.*

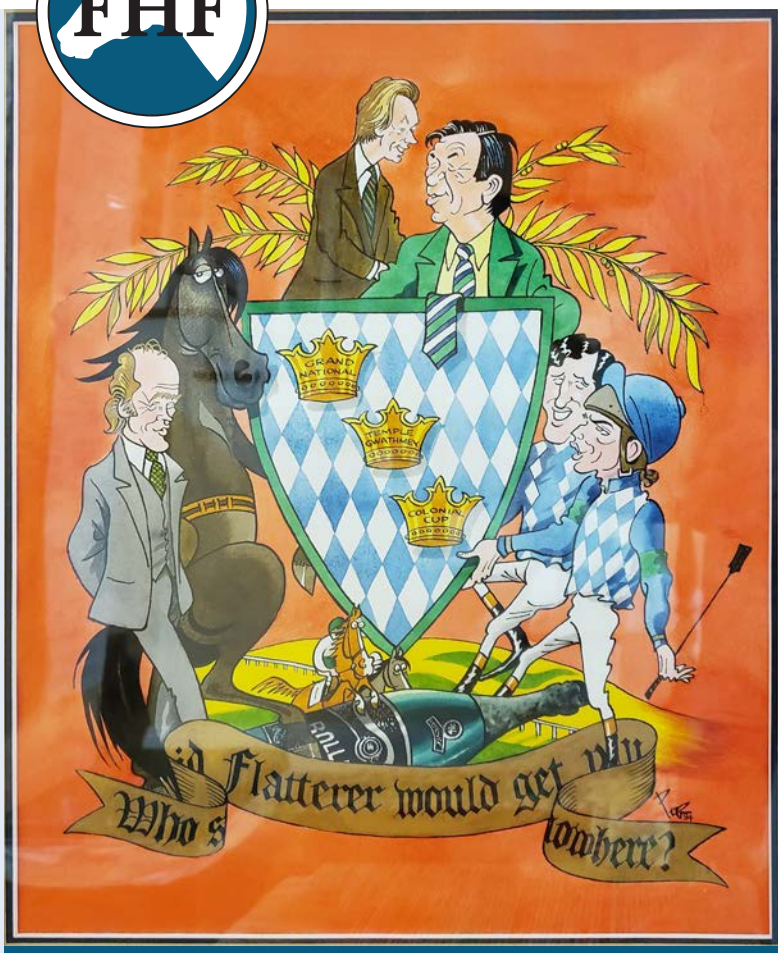
Jonathan Sheppard's retirement was announced in the Daily Racing Form *on January 4, 2021 and the first "Jonathan Sheppard Stakes" Grade 1 was run at Saratoga on August 18, 2021 with a purse of $150,000. The race was won by The Mean Queen, owned by Rod and Alice Moorhead and trained by Keri Brion, who had been with Sheppard for many years right up to his retirement.*

Distinguished equine sculptor, Jean Claggett, who received art training in Nice and Parsons in Paris, captured Flatterer in bronze in 1986. One of her early sculptures of Thoroughbred Horse of the Year, Spend A Buck, is on display at Fair Hill. The Flatterer sculpture is now part of a private collection.

The Fair Hill Foundation thanks the National Museum of Steeplechasing in Camden, South Carolina, for providing the photo of Flatterer and Census flying the last fence together in the 1984 Colonial Cup, perfectly capturing the long-time rivalry between the two horses.

The late Peter Winants, long-time editor of The Chronicle of the Horse, *published* Steeplechasing: A Complete History of the Sport in North America *in 2002 with numerous photos and entries about Flatterer's remarkable career throughout the book.*

Winants' 231-page Flatterer: The Story of a Steeplechase Champion *was published in 1988. Limited to 1,000 copies signed by the author, the book includes a Foreward by Charles T. Colgan, Executive Vice President of the National Steeplechase & Hunt Association. He asserts, "Every time Flatterer was honored, or set a weight-carrying record, or performed some heroic exploit in some foreign land, the ensuring story would carry a sidebar about the healthy state of affairs in American steeplechasing. Before you knew it, feature stories began appearing in the media, and everyone was looking at the sport with new respect. It's this type of influence that 'the choice and master spirits of the age' possess, and as much as anything else it defines Flatterer's position the pantheon of American steeplechasing."*



Pierre "Peb" Bellocq cartoon featuring co-owners Bill Pape, Jonathan Sheppard, and George Harris and jockeys Jerry Fishback and John Francome.

Acknowledgments

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The Campaign for Fair Hill