

phar lap trust formed in New Zealand

Gone but not forgotten, racing great Phar Lap still captivates the imagination.

Phar Lap: Interchangeably interpreted to mean “lightning” or “wink of the skies.” Both definitions perfectly describe what was arguably the fastest Thoroughbred racehorse to ever thunder down the track and into legend. A predecessor to Seabiscuit both on film (Phar Lap, starring Tom Burlinson of *The Man From Snowy River* fame) and as a national icon, Phar Lap became a Depression-era ray of hope on two continents — Australia and North America.

The immortal galloper is now making headlines again. First, the construction of a spectacular memorial is underway in his hometown of Timaru, New Zealand, courtesy of the newly formed Phar Lap Charitable Trust. Second, almost eight decades after his tragic, untimely and mysterious death in California, new scientific evidence has surfaced surrounding the cause.

Today the horse remains an inspirational hero to the common man — a concept that never ages.

As the Trust states, “Phar Lap stands for many admirable attributes including perseverance, excellence, determination, the ability to rise above perception and the enduring qualities of a true champion. Even today, his name is frequently used as a benchmark of excellence to analyze the highest level of performance.”

As barrel racers are often racing fans and mystery lovers, Phar Lap’s tale is doubly compelling.

the memorial

The \$500,000 elaborate bronze sculpture will depict jockey Jim Pike aboard the 17.1 hand red giant, capturing for posterity his remarkable 27-foot stride. Towering atop a map of New Zealand, his left forefoot lands squarely on his hometown. The marble base will showcase the names of donors to the trust, and will be surrounded by walkways, flowerbeds and fountains that rise and fall to the sound of racing hoofbeats. Internationally renowned sculp-

tor, Joanne Sullivan-Gessler, is lending her talent to the project. Sullivan-Gessler is known for her stunningly life-like portrayals, right down to rippling muscle and popping veins. The Phar Lap Trust is



Preliminary artwork for the half-million dollar bronze and marble memorial for the legendary Phar Lap in Timaru, New Zealand.

adamant that the horse’s majestic physique is kept in true proportion.

Katharine Mayne, trustee of the newly formed trust, said that response and information from the United States has already been impressive and heartwarming.

“There are a lot of Phar Lap fans in the United States,” she said. “We’ve received a lot of e-mails, and even some fascinating stories from eye-witnesses who are still living.”

The goal of the trust is two-fold: to erect a long-overdue monument in Phar Lap’s honor, and to collect and preserve the memorabilia of a national hero.

the phar lap story

Purchased for next to nothing in 1928 as a tall, gangly, disproportioned yearling, Phar Lap

was already a gamble. But trainer Harry Telford had poured over the horse’s breeding and was impressed. After a slow start and some maturity, the gelding eventually dominated Australian racing. His reign as “king of the sport of kings” was crowned by an impressive three-length victory under record weight in the coveted two-mile Melbourne Cup of 1930.

The homeland conquered, it was destination North America. As of 1932, Phar Lap, nicknamed the “Red Terror,” was set to prove his metal on American tracks against the best that the United States had to offer. There was talk of movie deals, match races and more. But first up was Mexico. Just south of the border from San Diego, Calif., the Agua Caliente Handicap was one of the best and most lucrative races in North America. It regularly featured champs and derby winners from the United States, and hosted Hollywood’s top stars and starlets.

Phar Lap received meticulous care aboard the ship, including three turnout areas on deck with matting, padding, a sandbox to roll in, special lighting and ventilation and around-the-clock attention — chiefly from his best mate and appointed trainer, Tommy Woodcock. He had long been the horse’s strapper (groom), and had ably assumed the trainer’s role, as Telford couldn’t go. For years, due to various threats and attempts on the horse’s life, Woodcock slept in Phar Lap’s stall or directly across from it, forming a close bond with the red giant. Woodcock had nearly given his life for the horse on one occasion.

“Bobby,” as the horse was known to his best mates, docked in San Francisco on January 15, 1932. He was then driven down the coast to Agua Caliente and housed under tight security.

On race day, again carrying the top weight, Phar Lap was positioned ninth of 11 and broke nearly last. Pike remained in Australia, so capable jockey Billy Elliot took to the irons. He expertly guided Phar Lap toward the middle and outside of the track to avoid flying dirt; the horse detested it. On the backstretch, records say Phar Lap came from last to first in two furlongs (one-quarter of a mile), making the rail and lead before the final turn. Described as “cantering at the finish,” he won easily by three lengths and set yet another track record.

Phar Lap seemed unstoppable. Tragically, that sentiment soon proved to be untrue.

A short sixteen days later, stabled at Menlo Park, Calif., the great Phar Lap died an excruciating and inexplicable death while cradled in Woodcock’s arms. Around 4 a.m., Woodcock noticed signs of acute distress in the horse. Phar Lap’s accompanying veterinarian, Bill Nielsen, was then awakened.

Treatment began, and the head veterinarian from nearby Tanforan racecourse was immediately summoned.

Woodcock and Nielsen exhausted their vast knowledge. After slight improvement, followed by “two hours of dragging him [Phar Lap] around the yard,” Woodcock described the horse’s retching, groaning and pain as unbearable to watch. Allowed to return to his stall, Phar Lap fell to the floor. Around 2 p.m., Phar Lap lifted his head, nuzzled Woodcock, and died — expelling bloody fluid from his nostrils. Woodcock was inconsolable, and shied from discussing that dark day for years.

After the autopsy, Phar Lap’s skeleton, hide and heart (which was double-sized at an astonishing 14 pounds) were preserved and put on display in Australian museums. (<http://www.museum.vic.gov.au/pharlap>).

the unsolved mystery

Immediately, outsiders assumed foul play, some saying the American mob must’ve eliminated the perceived threat to their pocketbooks. Then came news that nearby trees had been sprayed with a chemical. That must’ve been it; Phar Lap ate tainted grass. Or, maybe his imported feed had fermented, accidentally poisoning him. Speculation flew for months.

However, the original autopsy yielded the diag-

nosis of acute enteritis that was accepted for years. Phar Lap’s stomach was highly inflamed and perforated, but signs of typical colic or impaction were absent. It was as if something had eaten the stomach linings, but what? Phar Lap and most racehorses of the day were administered Fowler’s Solution or similar arsenic-based cure-all tonics. Did a gradual, unknown build-up in his system tragically kill him? Not very likely. Telford had used his version of the solution on many horses for years with great success and no adverse effects. Was he accidentally overdosed? Highly improbable. The meticulous and doting Woodcock wouldn’t make such a fundamental mistake.

In 2002, leading veterinarians and researchers from both countries reviewed the autopsy findings. They unanimously agreed that Phar Lap had no chance — there was no effective treatment. He had succumbed to a bacterial infection not formally identified until the early 1980s, now known as Duodenitis-Proximal Jejunitis. In simplest terms, as bacteria attack the intestine, it quits functioning and can’t absorb fluid. Liquid then backs up in the organs, causing ruptures. Even with modern means, the condition currently kills nearly 70 percent of horses that contract it. Stress, travel and environmental change are prime triggers.

Finally, the Americans were innocent and the Phar Lap camp exonerated, although some experts remained unconvinced. As of October 2006, testing

began on Phar Lap’s mane hair and a small patch of hair from his neck using a new high-tech laser proving effective on difficult and historic cases.

What they found put Phar Lap back in current headlines.

The hair samples contained extremely large doses of arsenic — four times what it’d take to kill a horse — according to one report. Evidence further suggests that one large dose was ingested approximately 35 hours prior to death.

Mystery solved—again? Not quite. Between the preservation process of the hide, which used an arsenic-based solution, combined with the horse’s usual tonic, sorting out the origins of the arsenic levels is the newest challenge. Researchers have been awarded a grant to find and test the coat of another preserved horse of the era for comparison.

Therefore, the “who dun it?” continues. Hopefully, two nations and the mystery can soon rest in peace over the matter as the immortal Phar Lap races on — unbridled after 75 years of speculation.

If you’re interested in contributing, following current developments, or possess Phar Lap stories or memorabilia, please visit the Phar Lap Trust at www.pharlap.org.nz, or e-mail Doreen@x2dhorses.com.

Doreen Shumpert is a barrel racer and freelance writer from Northern Colorado. Email your comments on this article to bhneditorial@cowboypublishing.com.