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On the 30th Anniversary of Ruffian's Last Race

Lyn Lifshin reflects on the life of the super racehorse Ruffian who died during a match race against Foolish Pleasure on July 6, 1975.

By Lyn Lifshin



Ruffian, 1975 Filly Triple Crown winner
Image courtesy of John Bellucci

July 6, 2005 -- The memory of that undefeated, miraculous black bolt of lightning, Ruffian, Champion Juvenile Filly of 1974 and Filly Triple Crown winner of 1975, still haunts us. In a decade of horse racing stars like Secretariat, Affirmed and Seattle Slew, Ruffian stands out for her unearthly speed, beauty, the way she danced, seemed to know she was truly a queen...and how she died.

Nearly black, she was born with a star on her forehead, a sign of what she would become. Now, 30 years later, her fame continues to touch even those not yet born that sad July 6, 1975, when she broke down in a match race against the year's Kentucky Derby winner, Foolish Pleasure. Big for a filly, Ruffian was often taken for a colt. She was perfectly conformed and with a colt's name, her owners hoped she would run like one and win. The racehorse's trainer, Frank Whiteley, said "she was just a different horse, was like nothing you ever seen." When she ran it seemed she was not even trying, seemed to float over the ground.

On May 22, 1974, her maiden race at Belmont, Ruffian, with Jacinto Vasquez up, finished 15 lengths ahead of all the other horses. She equaled the Belmont track record for 5 and 1/2 furlongs. One reporter called it the greatest race ever run by a first time horse, colt or filly. Through the spring of 1974 Ruffian won every race and equaled or set new track records for each of the stakes races. No filly had ever run so fast. "Super Filly," "Freak," it seemed Ruffian didn't know how to lose. She won the Fashion, the Astoria Stakes, the Sorority Stakes and the Spinaway. Before The Frizette Stakes, Ruffian left some grain in her tub. Discovering a slight fever, Whiteley scratched her. Ruffian had taken a bed step and was soon on her way in a jelly cast to recuperate in Camden, S.C. In spite of doubts about her injury, Ruffian came back in 1975 stronger than ever to win the Caltha Purse. She went on to win the Comely Stakes, and then the Filly Triple Crown--the Acorn, the Mother Goose and the Coaching Club American Oaks.

With little to prove, the pressure was on for the filly to race colts. Finally, a

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match race with Foolish Pleasure was set. That afternoon the race started as a celebration. People brought bright tablecloths for picnics, wore their Ruffian or Foolish Pleasure buttons and danced to the Preservation Hall Jazz band. It was the largest televised race, and Ruffian was the favorite. Fans who never went to races, nuns, babies, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts watched.

Ruffian was in the lead, setting a blazing pace. She was pulling away when both jockeys heard a hideous crack like a branch breaking. Ruffian had broken down. She was running on splintered bone, still running at close to full speed. Cheers and laughter turned to silence. Vasquez tried to pull her up but she kept running, her hoof dangling by shreds. She was running on her bloody stump and nothing and no one--no veterinarians, not Whiteley, not her groom, though they operated and prayed for hours--could save her. No one who saw her can forget her. Ruffian was rare, perfect and spectacular. She is buried where no other horse has been buried, where she ran her first and last race at Belmont in the infield under the flagpole, her nose pointing, as it always did, to the finish line.

Lyn Lifshin is the author of The Licorice Daughter: My Year With Ruffian, published by Texas Review Press. For more information about Lyn, visit www.lynlifshin.com.

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*May 2005, EquiSearch/ The Equine Collection

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