

Death of a Derby Winner: Slaughterhouse Likely Fate for Ferdinand

by Ray Paulick

Ferdinand, the 1986 Kentucky Derby winner who went on to capture the following year's Horse of the Year title with a dramatic victory over 1987 Derby hero Alysheba in the Breeders' Cup Classic, is dead. The Blood-Horse has learned the big chestnut son of Nijinsky II died sometime in 2002, most likely in a slaughterhouse in Japan, where his career at stud was unsuccessful.

Reporter Barbara Bayer, as detailed in an exclusive story in the July 26 issue of The Blood-Horse, attempted to learn of Ferdinand's whereabouts after a member of the Howard Keck family that owned and bred the horse inquired about having him returned to the United States, where he began his career at stud in 1989. As a racehorse, Ferdinand won eight of 29 starts and earned \$3,777,978, retiring as what was then the fifth leading money winner of all time. His victory in the Kentucky Derby gave trainer Charlie Whittingham his first success in that classic, and it was the final career Derby win for jockey Bill Shoemaker.

Ferdinand was retired to stud in 1989 at Claiborne Farm near Paris, Ky., where he was foaled. His initial stud fee was \$30,000 live foal, but he achieved little success as a stallion from his first few crops of runners.

Sold to Japan's JS Company in the fall of 1994 at a time when Japanese breeding farms were aggressively pursuing American and European breeding stock, Ferdinand spent six breeding seasons at Arrow Stud on the northern island of Hokkaido, from 1995-2000. Initially popular with local breeders (he was mated to 77 mares his first year), Ferdinand was bred to just 10 mares in his final year at Arrow, and his owners opted to get rid of him.

After efforts by the farm staff to place Ferdinand with a riding club failed, he passed into the hands of a Monbetsu, Japan, horse dealer named Yoshikazu Watanabe and left the farm Feb. 3, 2001. No attempt was made to contact either the Keck family or Claiborne Farm.

Bayer at first was told by Watanabe that Ferdinand had been "given to a friend." When she asked for more information, she was told Ferdinand "was gelded and I think he's at a riding club far away from here." In fact, records showed Ferdinand was bred to six mares in 2001 and then two in 2002. He spent a period of time at Goshima Farm near Niikappu, where a former handler at Arrow Stud had seen him.

Finally, when Bayer told Watanabe she wanted to see Ferdinand, the story changed yet again. "Actually, he isn't around anymore," she was told. "He was disposed of late last year." Ferdinand's registration in Japan was annulled Sept. 1, 2002, Bayer learned.

"In Japan, the term 'disposed of' is used to mean slaughtered," Bayer wrote in The Blood-Horse. "No one can say for sure when and where Ferdinand met his end, but it would seem clear he met it in a slaughterhouse."

"Unfortunately, to those well-versed in the realities beyond the glitter and glory of the racetrack, it comes as no surprise," Bayer wrote. "Ferdinand's story is the story of nearly every imported stallion in Japan at that point in time when the figures no longer weigh in his favor. In a country where racing is kept booming

by the world's highest purses and astronomical betting revenues, Ferdinand's fate is not the exception. It is the rule."

"That's just disgusting," said Dell Hancock, whose family operates Claiborne Farm, upon hearing the news of Ferdinand's likely fate. "It's so sad, but there is nothing anyone can do now except support John Hettinger's efforts to stop the slaughter of Thoroughbreds in this country. That wouldn't change anything in Japan...to have this happen to a Derby winner is just terrible."

While the Japanese are among the societies that consume horse meat, it is more likely a slaughtered Thoroughbred would be used for pet food, since the meat consumed by humans is a certain breed of horse raised specifically for that purpose. The slaughter of no longer useful imported breeding stock and many domestic Japanese Thoroughbreds is not uncommon. Shortages of land and the high cost of maintaining a pensioned horse are reasons slaughter is considered an alternate. As in the U.S., where slaughter is also an option available for horse owners, a number of organizations are attempting to provide homes for retired and pensioned racehorses, stallions, and mares. The Japan Racing Association funds one program that currently benefits 90 horses.

Among the people Bayer met and spoke with while trying to learn of Ferdinand's fate was Toshiharu Kaibazawa, who worked as a stallion groom at Arrow Stud during the horse's years there. He called the former champion "the gentlest horse you could imagine. He'd come over when I called to him in the pasture. And anyone could have led him with just a halter on him. ... He'd come over to me and press his head up against me. He was so sweet."

"I want to get angry about what happened to him," Kaibazawa added. "It's just heartless, too heartless."