

Fantastic Pasts... performances that is!

Dr. Fager, 1968 Horse of the Year & Chicago Favorite

By Kimberly A. Rinker

Dr. Fager is a name familiar to thoroughbred enthusiasts everywhere, but for many Windy City racing fans, his performances over Chicago area tracks have yet to be rivaled.



Photo courtesy of the author

Dr. Fager

Considered to be one of the finest milers in American turf history, the Florida-bred Dr. Fager was foaled April 6, 1964, on owner William L. McKnight's Tartan Farm. McKnight was then chairman of the board of 3-M (Minnesota, Mining & Manufacturing Company).

A son of the 1951 Santa Anita Derby victor Rough n' Tumble, Dr. Fager was out of Aspidistra, a 1954-born Better Self daughter who would later produce 1969 and 1970 champion sprinter Ta Wee.

Named for a Boston brain surgeon, Dr. Charles Fager, who had saved Hall of Famer John A. Nerud's life after a 1965 fall from a stable pony, the robust horse, Dr. Fager, carried the colors of Tartan Farms throughout his racing career. He would taste defeat in only three of his 22 career

starts, losing twice to the same horse (Damascus) and earning \$1,002,642.

"He was the only horse I ever had that could run. The only one," Nerud was quoted at the time. "He was the fastest horse that ever lived."

Dr. Fager's first start came on July 15, 1966 at Aqueduct, and he didn't disappoint, winning in a near canter, by seven lengths. He followed that up with a pair of freshman seven furlong stake victories; the World Playground Stakes at Atlantic City, running off by 12 lengths in 1:23.1, and the Cowdin Stakes at Belmont in 1:24.4. At two, the Good Doctor went postward five times, with four wins and a second, winning his races by a total of 28 lengths.

The colt's Chicago debut came in the \$106,000 Arlington Classic, with Braulio

Baeza in the irons, on June 24, 1967. Despite a torrential downpour that left the racetrack a virtual sea of mud, the mighty bay romped to a ten-length victory that put to rest any questions concerning his off-track ability.

Long-time Chicago racing fan Bill Blessing remembers the day well.

"It had started out as a nice sunny day," Blessing recalled. "About an hour before post time it started raining like crazy, so much so, that there was actually a current of water flowing down the stretch.

"It totally flooded the track and the apron," he said. "The winner's circle had a couple of feet of water in it and they delayed the races for a long while. It had rained right after the sixth race and they cancelled the seventh race and went right to the eighth—the Classic—because they needed time to drain the winner's circle and work on the racetrack."

The track was nearly four seconds off that day, Blessing stated.

"Dr. Fager put forth the most amazing performance I've ever seen," he said. "I figure in my lifetime I've seen nearly 50,000 races and that was definitely the most impressive effort ever by a racehorse."

In comparison, Blessing noted, the ninth race that day was a high-priced claiming test that typically went in 1:36 or 1:37, and due to the off track, was clocked in 1:41.4.

"Dr. Fager ran in 1:36 a half-hour earlier, when the track was much worse than it was for the ninth race," he stressed. "That gives a clear indication of the magnitude of his talent."

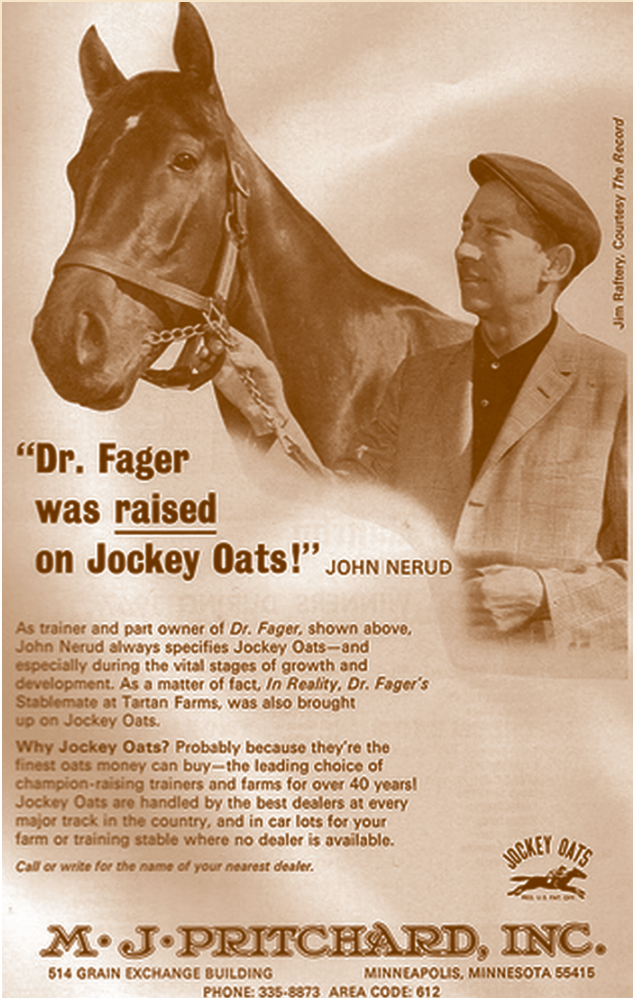
On Oct. 21, 1967, Dr. Fager cruised to an easy, gate-to-wire victory in the \$121,000 Hawthorne Gold Cup Handicap for Baeza. The rangy stallion galloped to a two and a half-length win, conceding nine pounds to runner-up Whisper Jet.

For 1967, a season that saw him start nine times with eight wins and one third, Dr. Fager was named Champion Sprinter of 1967. He won those eight starts by a combined total of 35 lengths.

As 4-year old, Dr. Fager raced primarily on first the East, then the West Coast, carrying 130 pounds. That season he beat such tough-stayers as Gamely and Rising Market, before returning to Chicago for the \$112,000 Washington Park Handicap, held at Arlington Park.

Carrying 134 pounds and conceding 16 to 20 pounds more than his rivals, the bay wonder scored a ten-length victory in a new world record time of 1:32.1 for the mile over dirt. Carrying Baeza, Dr. Fager shattered Buckpasser's old record by two-fifths of a second, taken when that horse was carrying just 125 pounds. His record would stand for three decades.

After winning his final career start carrying 139 pounds in the Vosburgh Handicap (for the second time) at Aqueduct, Dr. Fager was retired. He had started eight times as a 4-year-old, with seven wins and a second, beating his rivals



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by a total of 36 lengths. That season he deservedly swept the year-end awards, amassing titles as 1968 Horse of the Year, Champion Grass Horse, Champion Handicap Horse and Champion Sprinter.

Dr. Fager retired with career starts of 22 starts, 18 wins, two seconds and a third. He had won at distances stretching from seven furlongs to a mile and a quarter, both on the dirt and grass at eight different racetracks, setting or equaling three track records and establishing one world record. The only time he finished off the board was in the Jersey Derby when he was disqualified for interfering with another horse.

As well, Dr. Fager was bested only three times: by 1967 Horse of the Year Damascus; by 1966 Horse of the Year Buckpasser and by 1966 Freshman Champion Successor. He retired as a syndicated stallion with his value listed at \$3.2 million, making him the third highest syndicated stallion ever up to that time behind Vaguely Noble and Buckpasser.

On Aug. 5, 1976, Dr. Fager passed away suddenly from an acute case of colic that caused his stomach to rupture. He was buried where he was born, at Tartan Farm. The following year, he was the leading sire in the country with foal earnings of nearly \$1.6 million, and became only the fourth stallion based outside Kentucky to top the sires list in the 20th Century. **U**