

It wasn't so much that no one thought a Maryland-bred horse named Challedon could win the Preakness in 1939. It was just that everyone assumed the great Johnstown would.

Bondholders at Pimlico pleaded with the Maryland Racing Commission to allow them to refuse to sell show tickets on Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons' powerful entry of Johnstown, Gilded Knight, and Challenge (who later was scratched). Although there was a state law that Maryland pari-mutuel machines had to pay off a nickel on the dollar, there was such a small field that year the track would stand to lose thousands on show tickets, given Fitzsimmons' entry seemed unbeatable, particularly with the inclusion of Johnstown. "Nobody," wrote Bob Considine in the *Washington Post*, "can see how the big fellow, who won the Kentucky Derby by eight lengths last week, can possibly lose." Most race fans agreed.

BY ELIZA R.L. MCGRAW

"CHALLEDON, My Challedon"

Johnstown was, like the terrible flood that shared his name, relentless. He was the most successful son of Jamestown, who was famous for winning the Futurity carrying 130 pounds. By Preakness time, Johnstown had already had an impressive 3-year-old season. He had won the Pumonok Handicap, the Wood Memorial, and the Kentucky Derby, and was the shortest-priced favorite in the history of the Preakness. Even if another horse was to come close to Johnstown, racetrackers

predicted the challenger would be his stablemate, the talented colt Gilded Knight.

Before the Preakness, Grantland Rice wrote: "With horsemen leaving Churchill Downs, it wasn't a matter of Johnstown winning, but by how many lengths." Rice was just reflecting popular sentiment, and many trainers obviously felt the same way. Of the horses Johnstown trounced in the Derby, only one returned for the Preakness. So the Preakness field was small: only five horses dared to take on Johnstown. Just nine years after the phrase "Triple Crown" had been coined, people wanted to see one completed, and they believed Johnstown would do it. Challedon's jockey, George Seabo, bragged that his horse would beat Johnstown in either the Derby or the Preakness, but no one paid attention, especially after Challedon finished eight lengths behind Johnstown in the Derby.

Challedon's dam, Laura Gal, was a fairly undistinguished broodmare, but she had excellent breeding. Her sire was Sir Gallahad III, who was also the sire of Triple Crown winner Gallant Fox. Sir Gallahad III's strong record as a broodmare sire was still in the future. Laura Gal produced a bay colt in

April of 1936 for William L. Brann and then-partner Robert S. Castle, both of whom had made their fortunes in advertising. Challedon was sired by Challenger II, and born in Maryland at his breeders' Branncastle Farm. Challedon raced in Brann's red and yellow block silks. (Castle had gotten out of racing due to his poor health.) Branncastle Farm became Glade Valley Farm, and Challedon was trained by former jockey Louis Schaefer, who had won the 1929 Preakness on Dr. Freeland.

At two, Challedon gained attention by winning the Maryland Futurity by a nose. He had four wins from six starts in his 2-year-old season, winning three futurities in a row. He lost his 3-year-old debut, beaten by Gilded Knight and Impound, two colts he had previously beaten.

May 13, 1939, was a drizzly day, and the track was soft with thick mud. Women had to cover their Preakness finery with drab coats and cellophane slickers against the chilly rain. People left hats and raincoats on seats and went down to stamp around and test the muck themselves.

The Preakness started about five minutes late because of the fiery Volitant, who objected to the starting gate. At the start, Johnstown led right away, seemingly ready to run away with the race, as was his custom. Gilded Knight was right behind him.



Mr. and Mrs. William L. Brann

Hometown hero takes the 1939 Preakness

Challedon, George Seabo up, after the 1939 Preakness

TURF PIX PHOTOS

At the far turn, it looked as if Johnstown would simply keep going to win as he churned along. But at the head of the stretch, Johnstown failed to show his trademark burst of speed. Gilded Knight was stalled along with him, and the big bay Challedon responded. Down the stretch, the three horses were neck and neck and neck, all trying their hardest.

"For a fraction of a second the three colts appeared to be screwed to a merry-go-round," wrote Walter Haight. But as they thundered on, Challedon pulled ahead to win. Johnstown "began fading like the sun in a Western duststorm, and was raced completely off his once-famous feet," wrote Rice. Gilded Knight finished second, and as both Johnstown and Ciencia faded, Volitant rallied to finish third. Despite being named for a flood, Johnstown was clearly a dry-track horse, finishing 11¼ lengths behind the winner.

The Baltimore crowd at Pimlico thrilled to see their hometown favorite win, and roared constantly from the moment Challedon moved up in the race to the moment he was out of sight and safely back in his stall. Johnstown was instantly forgotten as the people gathered around to celebrate Challedon as the first Maryland horse to win the Preakness since Refund in 1888. He also became the Horse of the Year for 1939, and

again in 1940. Louis Schaefer became the first man in history to ride a Preakness winner and saddle another. After the race, he said he felt like he had ridden Challedon "every jump of the way." Brann accepted the Woodlawn Vase happily. He had never apologized for Challedon after his colt lost the Derby, and seemed pleased the rest of the world recognized the greatness of his homebred colt at last. Brann served champagne to Challedon's whole team, including his exercise boy.

Maryland itself became a character in the Challedon story. Brann was celebrated for bringing renown to the Frederick region where he kept the colt.

"He came back today," wrote Haight, "back from a defeat in the Derby to bring lasting glory to the clear water and the grassy slopes up Frederick, Md., way, where owner Brann picked the spot to shape the destiny of a great colt. Mighty is Challedon."

The adoration did not stop with the newspapers. After the race, a song parody appeared. It was sung to the tune of "Maryland, My Maryland," and went: "You shall not cower in the dust, Challedon, my Challedon. Your gleaming plates shall never

rust, Challedon, my Challedon. You stood off Johnstown's vaunted rush, You left Ciencia in the slush, And we went home plenty flush! Challedon, my Challedon."

In turn, Grantland Rice wrote his own parody, "Challedon's heels on Johnstown's neck—Maryland, my Maryland. Bill Brann has left the field a wreck, Maryland, my Maryland."

Maryland finally had a local hero it could adore. Marylanders stayed loyal to the colt whom, at first glance, they had not backed on his home turf.

During his career, Challedon met Johnstown four times: in the Derby, Preakness, Dwyer, and Classic Stakes. They each defeated the other twice, but Challedon won their last meeting, which was at the Classic in

Chicago in July of 1939. Johnstown never raced again. His handlers cited respiratory problems. Challedon traveled all over the country, winning races from the Havre de Grace Handicap at home in Maryland to the Hawthorne Gold Cup in Chicago. At Keeneland, he set a world record of 1:54¾ for 1½ miles in winning the Tranter Purse. **U**

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Challedon's trainer Louis Schaefer