

# QUEEN

BY ELIZA R.L. MCGRAW

**B**efore Azeri and Xtra Heat, before Winning Colors and even before Regret, there was Imp, one of the most successful and experienced race mares of all time. Her fans called her the "Coal Black Lady," and the press called her the "Queen of the Turf." Imp was born in 1894 and ran 171 races from 1896-1901. She won 62 of them, was second 35 times, and ran third in 29 events.

Imp was a leggy black mare with a white diamond on her forehead. She resembled her sire, the imported stallion Wagner, in her color, large frame, and broad head. Her dam was a mare named Fondling, by Fonso. Ironically for the parents of such a heavily-raced filly, Wagner and Fondling both raced just once. Imp was owned by Daniel "Uncle Dan" Harness, an Ohioan who had shared ownership in post-bellum champions like General Duke (a Belmont winner), Vauxhall, and Bayonet.

Charles Brossman trained Imp for most of her career. Brossman had trained many horses around small-time Ohio fairs. His first success was with a horse named Bessie Bissland, and the year after she won the Harlem Cup, Brossman began training Imp as a yearling. Imp did not have a particularly impressive 2-year-old season, winning three of her 11 starts in Midwestern races. But the next year, she ran 50 times and finished in the top three 33 times, winning 14.

Imp was famous for her "sleeping stunt." She raced with her head low, and looked deceptively sluggish as she ran. Her groom, Tom Tandy, used to shout at jockeys from the rail to "Let her sleep. Don't wake her up!" At the Ocean Handicap at Sheepshead Bay Aug. 30, 1899, *The Thoroughbred Record* reported, "Still (jockey Pete) Clay sat motionless, allowing the mare to 'sleep,' and only in the last few strides did he bend low over her neck and appear to ask her to 'sleep harder.'" She won by a half-length.

Imp's "sleepy" habits helped her earlier in 1899, when she became the first filly to win the Suburban Handicap. It took so long for the other horses to prepare for the start that her jockey, Nash Turner, rested his

foot on the rail for a while to give Imp a break. She was carrying 114 pounds, while the favorite, Banastar, carried 122. Turner kept Imp behind the early trailblazers in the 1/4-mile race and waited. Imp led the field of 12 from the five-eighths pole, and Turner (unnecessarily, according to one reporter) only went to the whip once. As the horses thundered by the crowd, all the people pushed up against the fence to get a better view and forced it to collapse, and Turner had to veer to keep Imp from getting stuck in the mess as the rails fell down. Her closest rival, Bannockburn, never got closer than two lengths.

Harness was thrilled about Imp's Suburban victory. As soon as the win was certain, a messenger on horseback carried the news out to him in Ohio. *The Thoroughbred Record's* Ohio correspondent quoted him as saying, "I don't give a damn about the money, I just wanted to show them Kentucky boys that we can grow a race horse in Ohio now and then." Harness was very fond of Imp, who had been born on his High Bank Farm. He had named her Imp because of the mischievous way she gambled around the paddock as a foal. He rejected a deluge of offers to buy the mare

"There ain't no other fellow that can hope to cut a figure with this lady friend of mine. When we start a-walkin', we just set 'em all to talkin'. We are winners every time."

The "Coal Black Lady" carried the top weight of 115 pounds in the Brighton Handicap on July 6, 1899. Ethelbert, a 3-year-old champion, had just won the Lawrence Realization, and was favored to win. Martimas, a Futurity winner, also had plenty of support. The stands were packed, since "it is not often a race crowd has the chance to see a Futurity winner, a Realization winner, and a Suburban winner arrayed against one another in a single contest," as the *New York Telegram* reported. Ethelbert had an inside position, and he started out at the lead. Although Ethelbert had beaten Imp badly in the Metropolitan Mile, she chased and then passed him in the Brighton. He never caught up. Imp won by a length in 2:05½, and won \$8,420, her biggest payday.

That year, Imp also won the mile-long Islip Stakes, and then the mile-long Ocean Handicap. At Gravesend, she won the 1/4-mile First Special, and then on Sept. 23, she took the 1/2-mile Second Special. "Imp, the 'sleepy' black mare from Chillicothe, ran one of the best races that was ever run by a mare

*Imp was the original "iron mare," winning 62 of 171 starts*

after her Suburban win. "I am an old man and there is no pocket in a shroud," he said. "Imp is all I want."

After the Suburban, Imp's fame grew. The turn of the century press was not noted for its reticence, and the *New York Press* extolled Imp: "No greater mare ever was saddled on this continent...Imp is the queen of the equine queens—a perfect racing machine; one of the best Thoroughbreds ever has been the good fortune of American turfmen to look upon. She is something more than the best mare in training. She has earned a higher honor—that of being the best Thoroughbred, horse or mare, now racing in America."

Now, whenever Imp won a race, the band would strike up a popular tune of the day called "My Coal Black Lady." The song was written by W. T. Jefferson in 1896, and went,

on an Eastern racecourse," said the *New York Telegraph*. Although Ethelbert was not entered, the race vindicated him after his defeat in the Brighton. Many racing fans had been disgusted with the 3-year-old champion for being beaten by a filly, but Imp's victory over Ben Holladay, known as a distance runner, showed there was no shame in losing to her. By the bend of the stretch, Ben Holladay had only two lengths between him and Imp, but he never got closer. It was a case of "Imp first and the rest nowhere," wrote one reporter, hearkening back to the Eclipse line in the mare's male line.

Imp's hometown fans were delighted with their heroine. At the end of the racing season, Chillicothe, Ohio, threw her a victory parade, during which she acted very much the queen. She wore a wreath of flowers and was accompanied by police, a

# of the Turf

brass band, and the mayor. The local *Gazette* wrote that under all the attention she was "playful as a school girl (and) agile as a kitten...She shared the generous applause that hundreds of admiring spectators were only too glad to give. Imp seemed to realize that she was on dress parade, and acted accordingly by dancing over the street, her easy, graceful motion arousing the enthusiasm of her observers."

Imp's success declined somewhat as she got older. In 1900, she lost the 1½-mile Brookdale Handicap to Jean Beraud.


Imp was a sentimental favorite in 1901 and was still winning some races. At a race at Morris Park on Oct. 22, *The Thoroughbred Record* reported that the mare had favorable terms for racing, as she was handicapped at 109 pounds, or 14 pounds less than weight for age, and faced a field of unimpressive

challengers. Imp won by a head, and the reporter wrote: "The roof of the grandstand resounded with shouts of the public, winners and losers alike appearing to view with the greatest possible enthusiasm the victory of the veteran mare. When she returned to the scales a couple of thousand people who had gathered around the stewards' stand, clapped their hands and showed the appreciation for several minutes, while the band played 'My Coal Black Lady.'"

Her last race was at Sheepshead Bay on Nov. 9, 1901, and although she tried, she finished a distant last. She was as game as ever, and started out in the front of the pack, but simply could not keep up. She finished a sixteenth of a mile behind the other five horses in the race. Her lifetime winnings totaled \$70,119.

When Daniel Harness died in 1902, his

executors sold the mare to Ed A. Tipton, the head of the auction firm, for \$4,100. Imp was up for auction at Fasig-Tipton's Sheepshead Bay fall sales in 1902. She was sold to John E. Madden for \$6,000, and had six foals at Madden's Hamburg Place, the most notable of which was a stakes winner named Faust.

Imp died in 1909, shortly after giving birth to her sixth foal, which was never named, and apparently died as well. She is buried in a private horse cemetery on Hamburg Place near Lexington. 

*Eliza R.L. McGraw is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C. She wishes to thank the National Museum of Racing and the Ross County Historical Society in Chillicothe, Ohio, for their help in researching this article.*



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