

# Early Leader

BY ELIZA R.L. McGRAW

**O**ne hundred years ago, a colt was born to a mare named Optime. Until Man o' War came along and rewrote racing history, that colt, Sysonby, was considered the greatest racehorse of the 20th century.

In 1901, London-born financier James Keene, known as the "Silver Fox of Wall Street," bought Optime, a daughter of Orme, who was in turn by Ormonde. Optime was in foal to Melton, who won the English Derby in 1895. Had things gone according to plan, Sysonby would have been owned by Marcus Daly, who arranged his breeding. Daly had made his fortune in the copper mines of Montana, and sent many of his mares, including Optime, to England to be bred. Unfortunately, he died before those foals were born, and Keene bought Optime for \$6,600 at a Daly dispersal sale. Optime gave birth to Sysonby at Keene's Castleton Stud in Kentucky.

*Sysonby was once considered the greatest racehorse of the 20th century*

Keene's son's favorite British hunting lodge, called Sysonby, was located near a town called Melton Mowbray. The "Melton" connection led the son, Foxhall, to name the colt after the lodge. Although James Keene owned the horse, Foxhall was always involved in the family passion and was partial to Sysonby despite the colt's ordinary appearance. Sysonby's groom once said, "He was a common, cheap-looking, lop-eared colt that stood only 15.1 hands as a 3-year-old." Foxhall Keene wrote in his memoirs that his father had considered selling the homely colt as a yearling, but he convinced his father to keep the horse.

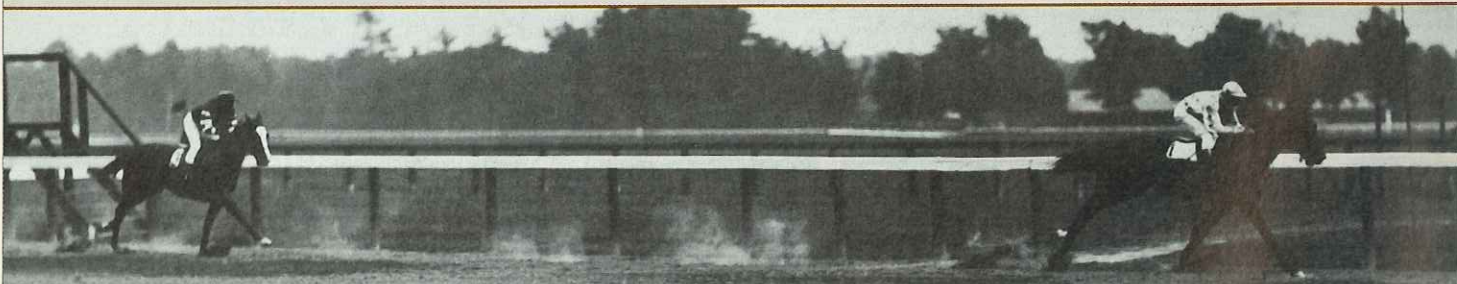
Keene seemed determined to get rid of Sysonby, however, and tried to ship him to England to race as a 2-year-old. But Keene's trainer, James Rowe Sr., admired the colt. Rowe told Keene that Sysonby was too sick to travel, and wrapped him in blankets and bandages to illustrate his illness. Rowe had seen many successful racehorses: he found and trained horses for owners like August Belmont and H.P. Whitney, the financial giants of the new century who bought the best prospects available.

It turned out that Foxhall Keene and Rowe's instincts

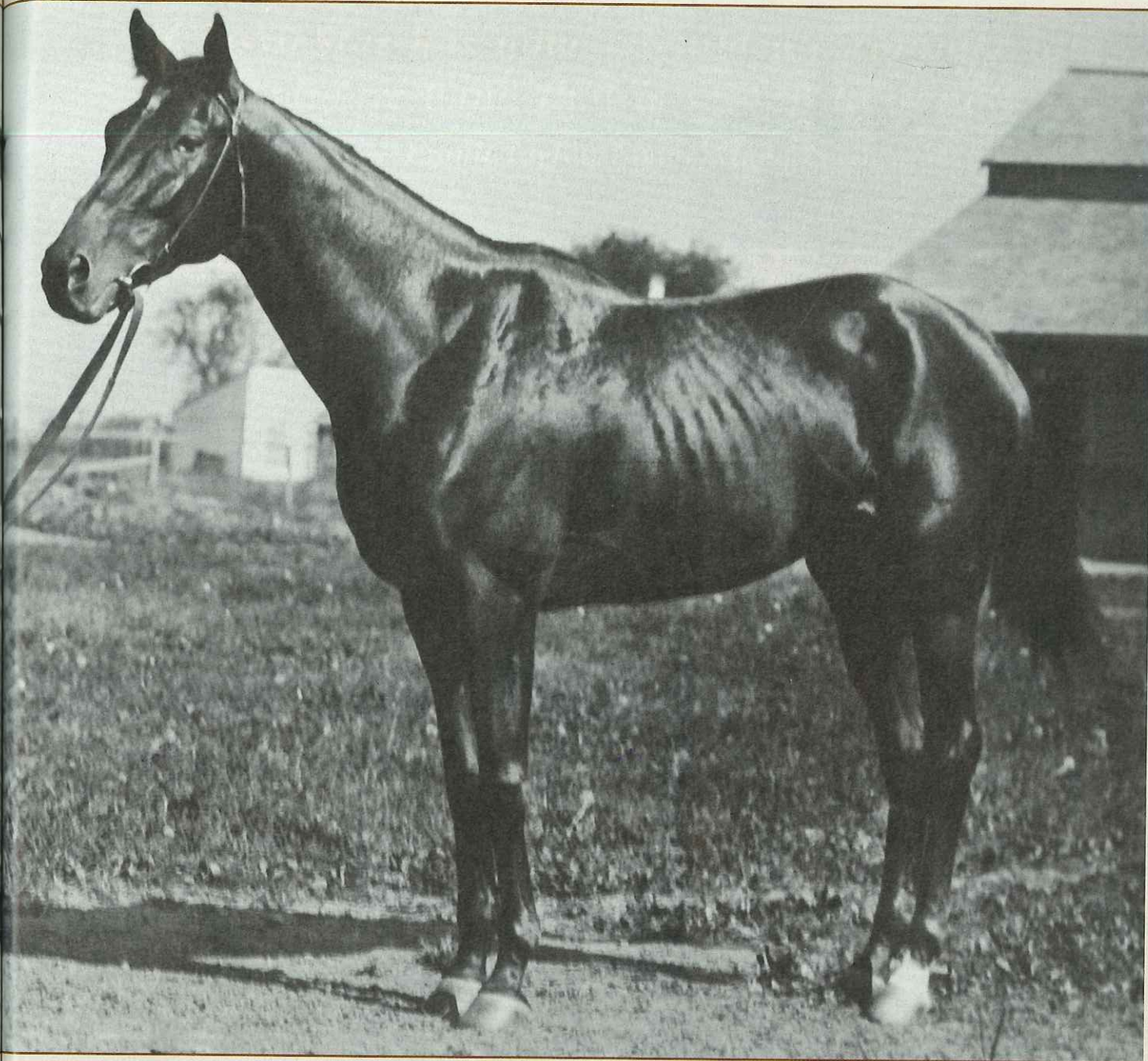


**Below, Sysonby winning the Saratoga Special on Aug. 6, 1904; opposite, taking the Junior Champion Stakes on Sept. 19, 1904**

about their ugly duckling were correct. The awkward colt's 2-year-old debut was at Brighton Beach, in a 5½-furlong maiden race. He led wire to wire, winning by 10 lengths. He won his second race, the \$15,000 Brighton Junior Stakes, as well. The *New York Times* wrote, "Horsemen who have been sighing for the sight of a real good 2-year-old this season were more than half willing to recall the early verdict that there are no good horses of that age when the English-bred Sysonby galloped in away off before his field." By the first furlong pole of the



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six-furlong race, Sysonby was second, and by the next, he was out in front. He ran on ahead, winning by four lengths in 1:13, one of the fastest times by a 2-year-old during the 1904 season. At Saratoga that summer, Sysonby won the 5½-furlong Flash Stakes in 1:06½ by 10 lengths, then took the Saratoga Special, also at 5½ furlongs, in 1:07 by the same margin.

But Sysonby's winning streak ended with his loss in the Futurity Stakes, run on Aug. 27 at Sheepshead Bay. Three formerly unbeaten horses—Sysonby, Tradition, and

Tanya—were in the race, but Sysonby was the favorite. Bettor support notwithstanding, Sysonby ran into trouble and finished third. "Sysonby (was) ridden as well as Redfern could ride him, trying in his own impetuous way to shake off his opponents, and win with the electrical burst of speed that in his earlier races smothered his fields, but with all his dash and power being unable to gain an inch," reported the *Times*. Beginning the run down the straightaway, jockey Arthur Redfern called on Sysonby, but even under the whip he could not pass Artful, a powerful filly

**Sysonby won  
14 of 15 starts**



who broke her maiden that day. Some disappointed Sysonby fans blamed the jockey, who was recently back in the irons after an injury, and some blamed the fact their horse was carrying 127 pounds to Artful's 114.

Artful turned out to have a star career of her own, and losing to her was not shameful. Beyond the filly's strength, however, there was another reason for Sysonby's loss. Foxhall Keene claimed to the end of his life that Rowe had spotted Sysonby's groom with a roll of bills "as big as your arm," and that the groom confessed to drugging his charge with a soporific called bromidian. Given Sysonby's record, it seems plausible the colt was doped, especially given the corrupt climate of racing in the early days of that century. The record stands, however, with Artful's win. Sysonby seemed undaunted by what turned out to be his only loss. Three weeks later, in the six-furlong Junior Champion Stakes at Gravesend, he returned to form and won by three lengths in 1:09½.

His 3-year-old debut (and his first time going longer than six furlongs) was in the one-mile Metropolitan Handicap, held at the opening of Belmont on May 4, 1905. Opinion was mixed regarding the new track, at which August Belmont himself was in attendance, because, as the *Times* wrote, "Beautiful it was and packed it was, but breezy? Well, ask almost any man you meet today who has a cold." There was, however, "but one verdict regarding the Metropolitan itself. It was a horse race from the rise of the barrier to heartbreaking finish."

Beyond the first furlong pole, Sysonby passed Race King,

passed the judges' stand, Oiseau was in the lead. But Sysonby kept gaining, and pulled ahead around the turn. His jockey eased up at the sixteenth pole, and he won by three lengths. Next he won the 1½-mile Century Stakes by three lengths, and beat Oiseau and Broomstick again in the grueling 2¼-mile Annual Champion Stakes, which he won by four lengths.

After victories like that, Sysonby went into the off-season a hero. But he never raced again. Rowe noticed a bleeding pimple on one of the horse's ankles, and Sysonby's body was soon covered with similar lesions. Miserable, he fretted mercilessly at the sores. At first Sysonby's condition seemed like a cosmetic problem, but as it got worse and worse, his handlers realized how sick their horse was. Added to the skin symptoms was a foot abscess. Reporters also gave variola as a cause of death. In any case, most accounts of Sysonby's illness indicate the infections that began with his skin disease, whether symptoms of a disease or a disease in themselves, were the primary cause of his death. *The Thoroughbred Record* reported he died from septic poisoning.

Sysonby died June 17, 1906, at Keene's training stable at Sheepshead Bay. Although the press had been reporting his worsening condition since the middle of April, Keene and Rowe tried to reassure everyone that the horse was recovering. In turn, Rowe and the rest of the training stable staff were trying to protect the aging Keene from hearing of Sysonby's decline. Once he actually died, and everyone was notified, Keene mourned publicly for the colt he once wanted to send to England. An autopsy showed Sysonby's lungs and kidneys were twice as big as those of an average horse.

The *New York Times* treated the matter of Sysonby's worth—and thus, the loss to Keene of his potential stud—delicately: "Aside from the blow to Mr. Keene in its sentimental aspect, the financial loss through the death of the greatest race horse of his time, and a horse that many Turfmen have declared to be the greatest ever seen in America, is a severe one."

At the time of his death, Sysonby was worth around \$200,000. He had won more than \$180,000 over the course of his career with 14 wins from 15 starts.

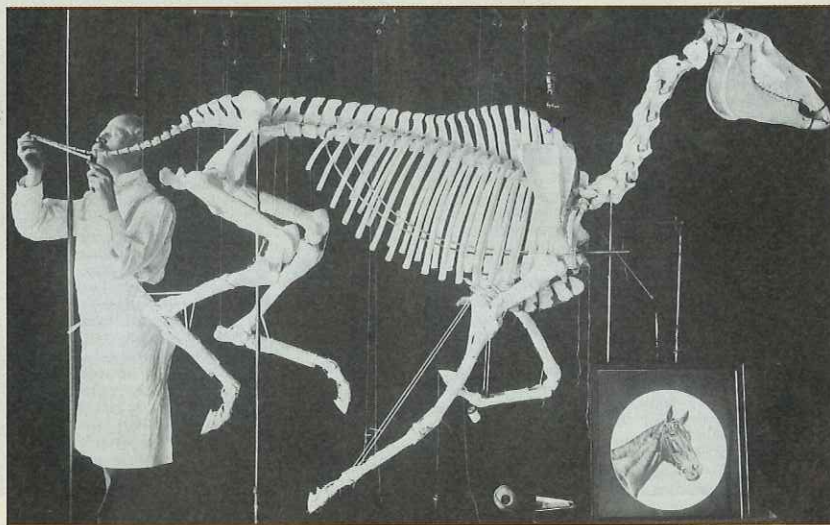
Sysonby was buried at Sheepshead Bay, where mourners

gathered to pay their respects. Eventually, his body was exhumed and an anatomist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York used his skeleton as a study of a running horse. Currently, Sysonby's skeleton is in off-site museum storage.

When Sysonby died, eulogists were quick to call him the greatest horse of the American Turf, and in those days, when mentions of his name exceeded those of any of his rivals, it seemed as if the racing world had lost its crown prince. Although today Sysonby's name is not as well known as those of his contemporaries, Man o' War or even Keene's undefeated Colin, he remains an American legend. When he died, one reporter wrote: "Sysonby is the horse of whom Keene said at the Sheepshead Bay race track last fall, after he had won the Annual Champion Stakes, 'The world has never seen his like,' and horsemen generally agreed with the proud owner at that time." □

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Sysonby's skeleton was displayed as a study of the running horse at the American Museum of Natural History in New York



COURTESY OF AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

leading past the quarter by a half-length, which he increased to 1½ lengths at one point. On the turn, though, Race King made his move, and closed the gap. Sysonby, under a hand ride by Willie Shaw, kept his head in front. The two ran together down the stretch and at the wire, they nodded simultaneously. It was called a dead heat, although many spectators said they thought Sysonby had the edge. The time was 1:41½.

That race seemed to stoke Sysonby's competitive spirit, because he never again let a competitor near. Over the course of his 3-year-old campaign, Sysonby won races like the 1¼-mile Tidal Stakes by four lengths in 2:05, and the 1¼-mile Commonwealth Handicap by four lengths in 2:07. He took the 1½-mile Lawrence Realization by six lengths in 2:47, the 1¼-mile Iroquois Stakes by two lengths in 2:06½, and the 1½-mile Brighton Derby by four lengths in 2:33½.

During the Great Republic Stakes in August at Saratoga, Sysonby was left at the post. The crowd was sure he could never catch up to celebrated runners of the day like Diamond Jim Brady's Oiseau and Broomstick. As the horses