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WHEN CREDIBILITY MATTERS

SARATOGA SPRINGS

Will's Way remembered for Travers, Whitney wins ... and his personality

By Mike MacAdam | August 2, 2021



PHOTOGRAPHER: ERICA MILLER

Will's Way, who won the 1996 Travers and 1997 Whitney, resided at Old Friends at Cabin Creek in Greenfield Center until he died last Christmas Eve.

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JoAnn Pepper remembers the two retired racehorses having their "Travers races."

Old boy Will's Way, the 1996 Travers winner, and his older buddy, Thunder Rumble (1992 Travers), occupied adjoining paddocks at Old Friends at Cabin Creek in Greenfield Center, and they would race each other up and down the fenceline, an echo to past glory.

what is believed to be a virus that his 27-year-old bones just couldn't shake.

"They were best friends, and after Thunder died about six years ago, Will missed him for weeks," said Pepper, co-owner and general manager of Old Friends with her husband Mark. "He looked for him and stood there just looking at the empty paddock.

"It was heartbreaking, and then to lose Will, too, it left a big hole here, for sure."

One way to fill that hole is to remember Will's Way this week in the approach to Saturday's \$1 million Whitney at Saratoga, because even more compelling than Will's Way's Travers victory was his ferocious duel against Formal Gold to win the 1997 Whitney.

Trainer Jim Bond calls Will's Way "probably the best horse I'll ever train."

Unfortunately, Will's Way was also difficult to keep in one piece.

But when he was right, he was very good. Especially at Saratoga, where Will's Way enjoyed the only stakes victories of a 13-race career that nearly produced \$1 million in purse earnings.

To kick off Whitney Week this year, Bond was only too happy to recount Will's Way's exploits at the Spa.

"He was an amazing horse," he said. "He had so much talent. He was not the soundest horse. He used to keep me up at night, and I was scared to take his bandages off sometimes in the mornings.

"But he actually threw his heart out and chased it. He was probably the most brilliant racehorse that I've ever trained. He was unbelievable.

"He would walk to the track like an old plug. And as soon as he got on the racetrack, he would take ahold and train like an amazing horse. He put everything into his races and training. The Travers, I woke him up one hour before the race, I put him over in the corner in the 3 spot that is here in Saratoga, and he walked around like an old pony. You could've put a 3-year-old child on him to give pony rides. And when that gate opened, he would leave there like a racehorse. He was so competitive. If I had him right, he'd win."

Will's Way first caught Bond's eye at the Keeneland yearling sales.

Bond calls "my highlight horses," the ones he truly covets at a sale and would be willing to bid a little over-budget for.

He made three visits to the barn at Keeneland on one extremely hot day, and by 5 p.m., Will's Way was showing no signs of the long day.

"I thought, 'A horse that has this much energy, being out of the stall as much as he has, in 100-degree weather, I need to own,'" Bond said. "So I went back to Mr. Rudder and Mr. Clifton and said, 'Guys, I'm going to chase this horse a little heavy.' No worries."

Bond bought Will's Way for \$95,000 on behalf of Donald and Anne Rudder of Rudlein Stable, and William Clifton Jr.

A series of small physical issues kept Will's Way unraced as a 2-year-old.

In 1996, he won his first two career starts at 3 and finished second in the Jim Dandy at Saratoga to Louis Quatorze, who had run in all three Triple Crown races, winning the Preakness.

Ridden by Jorge Chavez, Will's Way turned the tables, passing Louis Quatorze with a long, sustained drive in the Travers to win by three-quarters of a length, with future Hall of Famer Skip Away in third.

"In the Travers, I knew Skip Away was a big horse, and he was down inside, and I had told Jorge, 'We've got to get to the outside of him, and hopefully the speed will collapse. And we can't let him out. You've got to make first run,'" Bond said. "I don't think Skip Away liked the racetrack.

"We kind of diagrammed the race for two days before, and I gave him every scenario I thought of. And I was right to hold him in, so he couldn't get out and make that run at us, because he was a big, long-striding horse, and we had to get the jump on him, and we did.

"It was my first Grade I. I will cherish it. The clients, Mr. and Mrs. Rudder, unfortunately are gone now. They were so good to me, to let me have the tools to buy those type of horses and train them. I still have Mr. Clifton with a few left. It was the best of times."

Whitney victory

one of the highlights in the history of the Whitney, which was first run in 1928.

This time, Will's Way was ridden by Jerry Bailey, from post No. 4 in a six-horse field that again included 1996 Eclipse Award winner Skip Away, and Formal Gold had Kent Desormeaux in the irons, breaking from the rail. Desormeaux apparently had other horses on his mind, as he angled outward from the 1 post, forcing Skip Away and Shane Sellers to cut toward the rail from the 2 post, then fanning Will's Way wide on the first turn.

"Kent Desormeaux tried to do a little bit of a dirty bit going into the first turn, he tried to park him a little bit, and needless to say, Jerry was on him that day and Jerry rode his usual smart race, kept after him, kept after him," Bond said. "He leaned on him. When you take back, you lose everything. You're outside of a horse, you've got to do what you've got to do. But the horse was just amazing."

He needed to be, to get past Formal Gold at the wire.

The two horses were glued together from midway through the second turn, with Will's Way still on the outside of Formal Gold.

They stayed like that through the length of the stretch, before Bailey coaxed Will's Way for one little extra burst of energy to prevail by a nose. Skip Away, again, was third, 6 1/2 lengths behind Formal Gold.

For the effort, Will's Way and Formal Gold each earned a Beyer speed figure of 126, a number you really don't see anymore.

"In this game, you're never supposed to count your chickens, but I knew it was going to take a real good horse to beat that horse that day, and the number proves he was a runner," Bond said.

Then, he wasn't. Will's Way finished third in the Woodward at Belmont Park, then never raced again, hounded by bad ankles.

He's one of eight horses to have won both the Travers and Whitney, and represents the third generation of that double, having been sired by Easy Goer (1989 Whitney and

Java Gold (1987) and Eight Thirty (1939) won both races as 3-year-olds.

Those who, like Will's Way, pulled the rare sweep by winning the Travers at 3 and Whitney at 4, were Medaglia d'Oro (2002, 2003), Lemon Drop Kid (1999, 2000) and Fenelon (1940, 1941).

Will's Way enjoyed a pretty good, yet short, stud career, siring Grade I Cigar Mile winner Lion Tamer, who, ironically, also won a graded stakes at Monmouth Park named after Formal Gold.

When Will's Way was retired from stallion duty, he spent a year at Old Friends headquarters in Georgetown, Kentucky, before being shipped to Cabin Creek.

"Michael Blowen sent him up here saying that he was a New York horse because of his Travers and Whitney, but I think he was just biting everybody so bad that they were like, 'Let's send him to New York,'" JoAnn Pepper said with a laugh.

Will's Way was a hit at Cabin Creek, where they keep 15-20 retirees from a wide spectrum of racing success, with horses like Will's Way and Thunder Rumble at the top end.

"We used to go during holiday time. I always had peppermints, and I could rattle a peppermint 75 feet away, and he would come running," Bond said. "And he had something he really loved to do at the barn, and they said he did it over there, too. He used to love to play with a towel. You would throw a towel up, he would grab it and play tug-o-war, or he'd catch it in the air.

"He was just a cool dude. Grooming him [as a racehorse]? That poor groom. He was tough on him. That was the only thing about him. He'd bully him around and bite at him, just playful, but he was a stallion. Slept all the time."

"He loved that, and you could never leave a shirt on the fence," Pepper said. "He'd just take it and run. He loved tug-o-war. In the early days, that was the only way I could pick his feet, when his mouth was busy with a towel. We used to call him 'The Shark' when he first got here, but he mellowed over the years and wasn't such a biter."

Pepper said she loved hearing stories from visitors who were at Saratoga for Will's Way's Travers and Whitney wins.