



Cigar

April 18, 1990–October 7, 2014

Photographs by Lydia A. Williams

As the name suggests, the North Street Hotel used to be a hotel. Now, it's a dive bar—with class and character—in Elkton, Md. Sixteen years ago, I walked in the place hoping to see history.

And was not disappointed.

North Street was the Thursday night hangout for newspaper staffers just getting off work, for cops at the end of their shifts, for oldtimers with no place else to be, for people wanting a pint in a brown bag.

On March 27, 1996, North Street was the center of the Thoroughbred racing universe for me. The first Dubai World Cup was on. North Street had ESPN or ESPN2 or whatever it was. Hardly anyone else did.

The place was deserted—but open—and I sat down at a stool in front of the television (low def, definitely low def) on the shelf behind the bar. Jimmy and Phil asked what was up. Instinctively, Phil poured me a beer. I asked if they could put on the race. No, not NASCAR, I told them. They found the channel, and a few minutes later the mighty Cigar roared through the Arabian night to win the world's richest race. Phil cheered. Jimmy cheered. I cheered. I remember thinking, "He did it." The victory was the Maryland-bred's 14th in a streak that would reach 16 and it struck a mighty blow for American racing on a big stage.

Cigar, born Country Life Farm in Bel Air, became household news through that winning streak. He won all 10 starts in 1995 to claim the Horse of the Year crown for owner Allen Paulson, trainer Bill Mott and jockey Jerry Bailey. The wins came at Gulfstream Park, Oaklawn Park, Pimlico, Suffolk Downs, Hollywood Park and Belmont Park.

The success continued in 1996 as Mott mapped out the Dubai trip and a repeat win in the Massachusetts Handicap for Boston's fans at Suffolk Downs. Cigar tied the great Citation with a 16th consecutive win at Arlington Park in July. Though the streak ended a race later at Del Mar, Cigar battled on with a win in the Woodward and then lost the final two starts of his career—by a head (each) in the Jockey Club Gold Cup and Breeders' Cup Classic.

Cigar retired as the sport's career earnings leader with \$9,999,815 from 19 wins in 33 starts. He finished first, second or third in his final 21 races.



He retired to what was supposed to be a rich life as a stallion, but proved to be infertile. Instead, retirement meant a life as a resident legend at the Kentucky Horse Park. As he did on the race-track, he spent the rest of his days nobly serving the industry. He died Oct. 7 at age 24, after surgery to help correct osteoarthritis.

While it's sad to lose a Thoroughbred, Cigar's legacy remains firmly alive. The Maryland-bred (his dam was at Country Life to

be bred to Corridor Key) lifted an industry. The state stood tall as the producer of such a horse. The region came along for the ride. Cigar traveled. He took on the world's best. In one of racing's best public-relations moves—ever—he paraded at the National Horse Show in New York's Madison Square Garden.

And he even won over the North Street Hotel. Rest in peace.

—Joe Clancy



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