

## CIGAR AND FRIEND

*April 29, 2002*

They are blasphemous, unholy heretics, representing all that dare question the worship of the Triple Crown. And here they were together, nose to nose through a steel grate, thick as thieves and sharing a private joke.

Cigar and John Henry have led remarkable lives of great accomplishment and celebrity. They did not need the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness, or the Belmont Stakes to get them there. Their claim to everlasting fame was built over the long haul, crafted from hard work and consistency at the highest levels.

In May of 1978, when John Henry was 3, he was 3 for 17 and had just been sold to Sam Rubin to race in New York. Then, at Belmont Park on June 1, John Henry made his first start on turf, winning by 14 lengths. Nine days later Affirmed won the Belmont Stakes and the Triple Crown.

In May of 1993, Cigar was 3 and in California, training at San Luis Rey Downs. To that point he had made one start. On May 1, Sea Hero won the Kentucky Derby. On May 9, Cigar won a maiden race at Hollywood Park.

John Henry has been in racing's Hall of Fame since 1990, his first year of eligibility. Cigar, eligible for the first time this year, now will be enshrined alongside ol' John. Between them they earned nearly \$16.5 million, in addition to 11 Eclipse Awards and Horse of the Year titles in 1981, 1984, 1995, and 1996.

They also live right across the breezeway from each other in the Hall of Champions at the Kentucky Horse Park, just north of Lexington. It is a happy coincidence for the thousands of visitors each year who show up expecting to see a few nice horses and go home bragging that they got to brush close to the very best.

There was a crowd of about 75 on hand early Tuesday afternoon, when 12-year-old Cigar made his public debut as a bona fide Hall of Famer. He is the first one on stage during the Horse Park's daily Parade of Champions, something that John Henry, who waltzes out second, accepts grudgingly.

Of course, John Henry does everything grudgingly. At the age of 27, he was already a national treasure and a world-class grouch. Now he's a medical miracle as well. He has bounced back from an operation that removed 18 feet of twisted intestine earlier this year, which, in the words of Hall of Champions assistant di-

rector Tammy Sifers, “had about a 7 percent chance of success.”

“John stands a very small but nasty 15.1 hands, and he lost about 150 pounds,” Sifers told her audience. “But now he’s rearing, bucking, and trying to kill people again.”

That is good news, especially to Cigar, who has a relationship with John Henry that manifests itself as a weird stew of hero worship and schoolyard smack, as in, “Hey, old man, I got your Arlington Million right here. Do the words ‘Dubai World Cup’ mean anything to you?”

“When John went to the clinic, Cigar stood at his stall door and stared across at John’s stall for days,” said Cathy Roby, who runs the Hall of Champions. “Then, when John returned, he wouldn’t go into his stall until he’d stopped to say ‘I’m back’ to Cigar.”

While Bill Mott trained him for Allen and Madeleine Paulson, Cigar was a hard, lean gladiator, tolerant of both extensive travel as well as a chronic foot problem that would have stopped most horses cold.

Now he is a horse in full, a robust 1,350 pounds. He eats three pounds of sweet feed each day, a healthy ration of timothy hay, and all the Starlite peppermints he can chew and swallow.

Cigar lives in the roomy, paneled stall once occupied by Forego, who died in 1997. He spends his nights out roaming his private paddock, but his favorite time of day is late afternoon, when the draft horses finish their duties pulling Horse Park tour carts and walk home along Cigar’s far fence line.

“He loves to give them a hard time,” Sifers said. “He’ll lay back, then make a run right at them and stop at the fence, acting like he’s never seen horses like them before. Who knows what he’s thinking?”

“He gives himself a lot of exercise,” Roby noted. “And he’s been very healthy, knock on wood. He did pull a hip muscle once that needed attention. And because he’s so active, we have a chiropractor work on him regularly.

“He’s also the world’s biggest ham. Last year an ESPN crew came here. He ran around, rolled, reared, then came up to them as if to say, ‘You get that okay? I can do it again.’”

Sifers led Cigar from the sunlight back into the Champions barn and up to John Henry’s stall. She was hoping for a Hall of Fame moment. John Henry was staring out his back door.

## HORSE HEROES

“C’mon, John,” Roby pleaded. “Come over and see your pal.”

John Henry did not budge.

“Okay,” Roby said. “Have it your way. Stay there.”

John Henry turned slowly and shuffled to the grate, then sniffed at Cigar’s offered nose. Cigar’s breath was minty fresh . . . and Hall of Fame sweet.