

# The Legacy of a Champion

Nine months after he won the Kentucky Derby, the Thoroughbred Barbaro succumbed to a tragic injury. Barbaro's owner, Roy Jackson '55, talks about what he, his wife, Gretchen, and a surprising number of Barbaro's fans are doing to perpetuate the good that has come from the honored colt's life.

by Jana F. Brown, SPS writer



Roy Jackson '55 holds high his 2006 Kentucky Derby trophy to celebrate his horse Barbaro's stunning victory.

Thousands of letters of sympathy poured into the mailbox of Roy Jackson '55 and his wife, Gretchen, after they endured a very public loss in early 2007.

Perhaps most touching was that a large percentage of the messages came from folks with no connection to horse racing. That was a surprise to the family who owned 2006 Kentucky Derby winning horse Barbaro, whose courageous fight for life ended on January 29, 2007, when he succumbed to complications from a racetrack injury sustained eight months earlier.

"None of us can put a finger on how widespread it was, but we got letters and cards from well-wishers from all over the world," said Jackson.

The Jacksons kept every communication they received as their most well-known horse fought valiantly to recover from a devastating injury to his right hind leg, suffered at the Preakness Stakes two weeks after his crowning moment at Churchill Downs. Among the most cherished is a series of drawings done by a sixth-grade class from Old Forge, N.Y. The Jacksons also have a special place for an American flag they received that once flew over the base of a Special Forces unit in Afghanistan. The horse himself received crates of carrots and fresh grass clippings from scores of strangers as he struggled to get well.

Well-wishes were just one outgrowth of what followed Barbaro's rise to glory and subsequent battle to regain his health. Speaking from his 120-acre Lael Farm outside Philadelphia, Jackson described the Barbaro experience, despite the colt's eventual death, as a positive one overall.

"There is a group working on anti-slaughter awareness, there is a new research fund for laminitis, there is more talk about the installation of artificial surfaces on race-tracks," said Jackson. "We've been trying to do what we can to perpetuate the good that has come from all of this."

Despite a lifelong affiliation with horses, Jackson has received an intensive education on the humane treatment of the animals since Barbaro's rise to fame. As a child in Philadelphia, Jackson rode horses and was introduced to racing by his parents, including a stepfather who got into the business in the 1950s. His father, Roy Sr., who passed away when Roy was only eight, was a well-known fox-hound breeder and outdoor enthusiast. Like his father, Jackson was always an avid sportsman, competing in football, basketball, baseball, and track during his St. Paul's days. After college, while working at a brokerage firm, he met a lawyer for Major League Baseball's Philadelphia Phillies. The introduction led to a position with the organization, ownership of two minor league baseball teams, and management of the AAA Pacific Coast League.

Jackson eventually formed Convest, Inc., a sports

management firm that represented minor and major league baseball players. Among those whom Jackson represented were Seattle Mariners designated hitter Edgar Martinez and New York Yankees catcher Jorge Posada. Always on the back burner for Jackson and his wife, however, was the horse racing business.

"As [New York Yankees owner] George Steinbrenner said, horses don't talk back and they don't have agents," Jackson said of his eventual decision to focus on horses.

The Jacksons had owned racehorses since the late 1960s but made a greater investment in the sport in 1998. Their current totals include close to 70 horses, including 25 breed mares in the U.S., England, and Ireland. Among the mares is Barbaro's mother, La Ville Rouge, a former racehorse herself. The Jacksons also own Barbaro's two full brothers—a two-year-old racehorse-in-training named Nicanor and an unnamed foal born this year at Mill Ridge Farm in Kentucky. A connection to Jackson's childhood can be found in the names of his horses. Both Barbaro and Nicanor come from family lithographs of fox-hounds — like the ones his father loved — sharing the same names.

It wasn't until Barbaro's birth in 2003 that the Jacksons had their first big-time winner. Soon after the horse turned two, a Florida trainer responsible for breaking in Barbaro predicted, "You will have some fun with this horse." Comparing racehorses to great athletes, Jackson explained, "You never know whether they have heart or not. Like athletes, some don't fulfill their potential — they don't have the perseverance or guts. Barbaro had the right combination. He had a good attitude about him."

At the time of his career-ending injury at the Preakness, Barbaro had earned a perfect 6-0 career racing record. At the Kentucky Derby in 2006, the Jacksons had not one, but two undefeated horses competing. The lesser-known Showing Up finished sixth in horse racing's grand event that year.

"To have bred a horse that won the Kentucky Derby was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream," said Jackson of the May 6, 2006, event. "We had eight of our 10 grandchildren and three of our four children there. We enjoyed the experience to the fullest."

Two weeks later, on May 20, 2006, Barbaro was favored to win the second leg of the Triple Crown at the Preakness. But shortly after the start of the race, as millions followed the decorated Thoroughbred's every movement, Barbaro came up lame. Soon the full gravity of the situation was known: The champion horse had fractured three bones in his right hind leg — a catastrophic event for his species.

For months, Dr. Dean Richardson, chief of surgery at the New Bolton Center's Widener Hospital for Large Animals at the University of Pennsylvania, used the latest treatments and technologies to give the horse a chance at survival. In a post-surgery procedure designed to prevent him from re-injuring himself, Barbaro awoke from anesthesia in a large rubber rehab pool. The surgery itself used an innovative fusion technique implemented primarily in humans. As the world watched, Barbaro's chances of survival wavered daily between possible and unlikely. Jackson described the eight-month roller-coaster aftermath of the horse's injury as a "tremendous lesson in living day-to-day." In the end, it was laminitis, an inflammatory disease of the hoof common to horses, that forced Barbaro's medical team to euthanize the former Derby winner.

Since Barbaro's death in January 2007, much good has emerged. The University of Pennsylvania established the Laminitis Research Fund, guided by a permanent research chair endowed in Dr. Richardson's name by Roy and Gretchen Jackson. Its mission is to track the causes, prevention, and treatment of the disabling equine ailment. The program includes efforts to find a genetic marker that determines if a horse is predisposed to laminitis and a test for early detection of the onset of the disease. The ease with which Dr. Richardson translated complicated medical terms for the average listener in his frequent public Barbaro updates created broader awareness of the advances in veterinary medicine and furthered the cause of humane treatment of animals. The publicity surrounding Barbaro's bout with deadly laminitis and the Jacksons' gift to fund laminitis research have also inspired others to give toward finding a cure.

A group that calls itself "Fans of Barbaro" has begun a campaign against horse slaughter and equine neglect, successfully closing down the final three slaughterhouses in the U.S., rescuing horses from feed lots, and placing them in the care of loving owners. Measures to protect horses, jockeys, and track workers have been pushed to the forefront by the publicity surrounding Barbaro's plight specifically and horse racing in general.

"After Barbaro was injured, it was a bit difficult because you never knew what the next day would bring," said Jackson. "But all the things that have come out of it have been great. My wife and I are both positive people and we have never looked back."

“We’ve been trying to do what we can to perpetuate the good that has come from all of this.”



Born: April 29, 2003 – Died: January 29, 2007. Barbaro won the Kentucky Derby in 2006, then shattered three bones in his leg while running the Preakness Stakes. He never recovered.