

Final Days For A Hall Of Famer

Memory Lane

(Note: In the last issue of "Post Time USA," Bill Mooney wrote about Precisionist and his new home in Kentucky. Unfortunately, the horse subsequently developed inoperable tumors and had to be euthanized. Mooney was on hand when this occurred, and wrote this report.)

They put down Precisionist on Sept. 27. The termination of his life occurred at the Old Friends thoroughbred retirement facility in Scott County, Kentucky, where he had been a pensioner since early June of this year.

He died on a beautiful early autumn day - sunny, breezy, warm. The leaves on the pair of oak trees that flanked his grave site were just beginning to change their colors. Nine people were present, including Michael Blown, the founder and president of Old Friends, and Dr. Holly S. Aldinger, a veterinarian with the Hagyard Equine Medical Institute in Lexington.

Precisionist - winner of the 1985 Breeders' Cup Sprint at Aqueduct, recipient of that year's Eclipse Award as North America's champion sprinter, a Hall of Fame inductee in Saratoga Springs in 2003. Heart was something he never lacked, and on the last day of his life, Precisionist walked the 100 yards from his barn to the grave that awaited him.

There, at 12:42 p.m., Aldinger gently inserted a syringe into Precisionist neck. "What I did," she later explained, "was inject him with what we call a 'euthanasia solution.' In essence, it's an overdose of barbiturates. What it does is dislocate his brain from the rest of his system."

Within seconds, Precisionist let out a heavy gasp, slowly knelt down and rolled over on his left side. Already, he was brain dead, although he continued to reflexively breathe, and there was also some reflex action in his legs. As Blown cradled Precisionist's head in his arms, Aldinger administered a second barbiturate-laden syringe to the horse's neck. Three minutes later, all reflexive movement had ceased. Precisionist was gone.

Aldinger stood up, dabbed a tear from her eye and hugged Blown. A graduate of Ohio State University's veterinary school, Aldinger is 28 years old and has been with Hagyard for a little over a year. The treatment she provided throughout the 3½-month stay for Precisionist at Old Friends had been done without charge.

His own eyes streaming with tears, Blown tried to speak, but couldn't find any words to say. Neither could anyone else. In the distance, faint sounds from a flock of geese could be heard. Otherwise, silence descended on the Old Friends property.

Precisionist's death had been dignified and painless. It had also been necessary. A series of cancerous tumors had invaded his soft palate and nasal passages. They had effectively merged into a single huge tumor that was inoperable.

"We first realized something was wrong about six weeks earlier," said Blown. "Precisionist had developed a really awful case of bad breath. We thought the cause was an abscessed tooth, and he did have an abscessed tooth. But, when X-rays were taken, the tumors were revealed."

The tumors were diagnosed as squamous cell carcinoma, an aggressive, fast-spreading form of cancer. Humans develop it. Less frequently, horses can be afflicted with it, too.

"The veterinarians at Hagyard tried to treat it with antibiotics, but the tumors keep multiplying," Blown said.

On Sept. 25 at Hagyard, a team supervised by Dr. Jorge Gomez had performed a tracheotomy on Precisionist. The surgery was done by an intern, Dr. J. T. Goodwin. "This allowed Precisionist to breathe more easily, but the affect could only be temporary," said Blown. "Blood clots kept forming in his nasal passages; and the clots were drooling out of his nose."

After returning to Old Friends, Precisionist kept rub-



Where Are They Now?

By Bill Mooney

bing his nose on the walls of his stall, trying to relieve himself from the irritation of the blood clots. In 10, 20, eventually dozens of places, the walls contained smears from the blood.

Champion racehorses are not culled from a single mold. Some are front-runners. Others are closers. Some are dirt specialists, and some are turf specialists. Some are best at sprint distances, others at middle distances, and others at routes. And some - the truly great ones - have combinations of abilities.

The one defining characteristic all of them seem to possess is intelligence. "Precisionist was exceptionally smart," said Blown. "During his final 48 hours he'd look at me and his eyes seemed to say, 'Yes, I know what has to be done. Don't fret over it. I understand.' You could see it in his body language. He was ready."

Other pensioners at Old Friends took notice. People who don't spend time around equine stock may scoff at this, but thoroughbreds can sense when one of their brethren isn't well.

"When Precisionist first got sick, and I would bring him back to his stall after hand-grazing him in the pasture, his barn-mates, a pair of geldings named Popcorn Deelites and Special Ring, would just stand there and stare at him," Blown said.

Blown didn't need to describe the heartbreak he was feeling. On the evening before Precisionist's death, the horse wouldn't eat. But Blown kept a half-filled bucket of carrots at Precisionist's stall. "When he was healthy, he'd eat gallons of carrots," Blown said.

As the hours passed, Blown frequently entered the stall with a box of Handi Wipes, to clean the blood clots from Precisionist's nose, and to stroke the horse's head. "Hey, big boy, you look ready," he said to Precisionist. "How about us giving the fourth race at Turfway a try? Is there still time to enter?"

Outside, a huge red sky to the west faded into night-fall. A low, thin fog descended over the Central Kentucky countryside. The setting was peaceful, tranquil, appropriate. At 11 p.m., Blown checked Precisionist, then went to bed. But he got up and checked on the horse again at 2 a.m. And again at 4 a.m., "at which point Precisionist allowed me to feed him some hay out of my hand," said Blown.

An hour or so after dawn, Steve Johnson, the co-owner of neighboring Margaux Farm, sent over a back-hoe and a man who knew how to use it, to dig the grave. "It needs to be seven feet deep," Blown said. "Steve's charging us nothing for it." As the man did his work with the back-hoe, creating piles of brown clay from the soft earth, Popcorn Deelites and Special Ring, along with a pair of mares named Bonnie's Poker and Narrow Escape, watched silently from their paddocks. "I think they want to be pall bearers," said Blown.

It took several hours to dig the grave. Two radio reporters came by, to get information and quotes from Blown, and express their sympathies. One of the radio reporters had to leave, but the other stayed, as did a print journalist who had arrived earlier that morning.

Just before noon, Blown led Precisionist out of his stall, took a brush and groomed the horse's coat. Precisionist was snuggling his blood-drenched nose

against Blown's leg, when the cell phone rang. "It was Holly Aldinger," Blown said, after a brief conversation. "She told me she'd be here in 15 minutes."

The slow walk to the grave site began, with Blown leading Precisionist. Halfway, the pair stopped. Blown wiped the horse's nose one more time. "Could you please get me a hoof pick?" he said to a farm assistant. "I want to clean Precisionist's hooves."

An hour later, Blown sat on the veranda outside the main house at Old Friends. He had Precisionist's foal papers, and was reading them aloud. "Foaled, February 28, 1981, in Florida," said Blown. "Registered with The Jockey Club, November 17, 1982. Chestnut colt by Crozier out of Excellently, the latter a daughter of Forli. Bred and owned by Fred W. Hooper."

There's other information that will always be attached to Precisionist's name, too. He made 46 career starts, and won or placed in 34 of them. He earned \$3.49 million. He swept the Strub Series at Santa Anita "He was a Gr. I winner at six furlongs, one mile, a mile and one-eighth, and a mile and one-quarter," said Blown. "Precisionist looked fast even when he was standing still."

But one thing Precisionist couldn't do was breed. His seasons at stud resulted in only four impregnations. Tests showed that, while the sperm in his semen was alive, they failed to make contact with mares' eggs. "Big mystery, never solved," Blown said. "There won't ever be a Precisionist line."

He gazed at the mound of clay over Precisionist's grave, shook his head and sighed. The clay would settle when the first rain came, and after that a grave marker would be erected.

"Old Friends is a unit for equine geriatrics," Blown said. "Every horse here will eventually go from the paddock to the grave. And the same will be true for their successors. Emotionally, I have to accept this, but I don't know if I'll ever get used to it."

In Blown's hand was Precisionist's halter. "Hand-made by Glenn Castle at Midway Leather. Didn't charge us anything for it," Blown said. "I've also got a video-tape of Precisionist's Breeders' Cup Sprint win, and I've been promised a tape of his Strub sweep. I hope to get it soon. I'd love to show those races to visitors when they come here during the coming years, so they can see for themselves what a wonderful racehorse Precisionist was."

Bill Mooney is an Eclipse Award winner and four-time winner for Best Story Writer from American Horse Publications.



Photo by Bill Mooney