

Reining In – In Retirement

By Barbara Lee Sherf

(Flourtown, PA – September 6, 2006) — At the age of 72, Dr. Thomas Fitzpatrick of Flourtown, Pennsylvania, made his way into the ring at the esteemed Devon Horse Show for the first time in his life. With the exception of last year, he has been competing in the two-wheeled Carriage Pleasure Class since then. Neighbors and horse friends honored him by throwing an 82nd Birthday Party for him today.

“Wow, the thrill of being at Devon is something you can’t imagine. I’d always gone to watch the competitors, but to be one is something indescribable,” says this lifelong bachelor, whom many describe as being an “old-school gentleman and a dying breed.” Dr. Fitzpatrick, and his longtime groom and trainer, Pat Berkery, took home a Fourth Place ribbon when they first showed at Devon, the same prize they took home this year. Berkery, who was managing the Monastery Stables a decade ago, introduced “Dr. Tom” to carriage driving, and the two have been in the ring ever since. First they competed at Ludwig’s Corner and then Devon. There have been a myriad of shows in between.

“It’s a great way for anyone who rides to stay active with horses, but not necessarily in the saddle,” said Berkery. “He enjoyed the experience the first time out and we searched together for a driving horse for him.”

That horse is ‘Famous Seamus, the Wonder Horse,’ or Seamus for short. Seamus is an American Quarter horse and at 17-years of age, he is still going strong. “Seamus knew a bit about driving, but we had to refine his skills and build his stamina,” said Berkery. “But Tom took right to driving, learning all of the harnesses in about two weeks.”

Each spring, Dr. Tom begins to build muscle on the horse and gets the carriage and harnesses in tip top shape, preparing for the 7-mile ride through the Main Line area and winding up in the ring at Devon. Judges with clipboards jot down every minor infraction along the route, while spectators line the streets.

“The competition is extremely keen. There are two pages of requirements for your dress alone,” he added. The driver must wear a shirt and tie, low shoes that match the harness, brown gloves, derby hats, and no britches. The driver must also carry the whip with him at all times.

In addition to turnout, the judging is based on horsemanship and performance: how well the driver controls his horse in various trot speeds and how quickly the horse responds. Seamus has finally mastered the skill of hearing what the judge says. “When he calls for the park trot for example, I don’t have to give a command; he just goes right into it.”

In 2005, Fitzpatrick bought a new carriage for the show; a restored antique Westchester made by J.J. Derham of Rosemont in 1897, but couldn’t compete due to a heart attack. On May 8, Mother’s Day, at 3 a.m. he tumbled out of bed and, despite feeling as though a bayonet had pieced his chest, drove himself to the emergency room of the local hospital. “I knew time was of the essence and by the time I called 911, it could be over,” he confided.

After the heart attack, he vowed to get back in the ring at Devon. “There are a lot of horse shows in the world,” Fitzpatrick says, “but Devon is a state of mind.”

President of the Philadelphia Saddle Club

Fitzpatrick or “Dr. Tom” as fellow riders and members of the Philadelphia Saddle Club call him, didn’t get into riding seriously until his retirement at the age of 55, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Laboratory, where he worked for nearly 40 years.

About 18 years ago, he was a founding member of the Philadelphia Saddle Club, a group of 12 to 15 members who pay a monthly fee for unlimited riding time on 5 horses. “It’s a great option for anyone who wants to get into or back into riding without paying a lot of money for a horse and its upkeep,” he noted. Indeed, this writer is a member of the Club and thankful for it, as is longtime member, Dr.

Carol Lippa. “I feel indebted to Tom and the Saddle Club. Without him, many others and I would not have had the opportunity to phase back into our life-long passions. Who other than Tom would have recognized the need and had the commitment to dedicate so many hours to running a Club that would allow this to happen?”

She shared a few “Tomisms” that he has said over and over to Saddle Club members.

- “It’s Dr. Tom Fitzpatrick – Dr. for the formal and Tom for the casual.”
- “If you want to gallop, you can find someone else’s horse to do it on.”
- “Take them for a graze – they take you for an hour, you can take them for 10 minutes.”
- “My only absolute rule is that riders use common sense.”

Dr. Tom, who has served as President of the Saddle Club for 18 years, is at the stable at least once and more like twice a day, checking in on four of his five horses that make up the Saddle Club. He checks the blackboard for any injuries and just keeps up on who went out and when. As President of the organization, he recruits new members, shows them how to tack up, and insists on at least one lesson in the ring to determine their expertise.

Fitzpatrick, whose grandfather operated the current Northwestern Equestrian Facility in the late 1800s, in the Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia, remembers riding as a kid.

“There were several stables in the Wissahickon Valley where you could rent horses for an afternoon,” he said. “We really didn’t know what we were doing, but we did a fair amount of that. My grandfather rented carriages to doctors and wagons for commercial use.”

The Annual Wissahickon Day Parade

Tom, Pat Berkery and Seamus made a comeback this spring; initially by placing 1st in the two-wheeled carriage class at the 85th Annual Wissahickon Day Parade at the end of April. “An axle on our regular carriage broke days before the show,” he reminisced. “We decided to use the new carriage – which we had been saving for Devon. It must have impressed the judge. We took home a First Place ribbon.” They also took home the “Bob Dougherty Memorial Trophy.” Bob “Doc” Dougherty, a retired mounted Philadelphia police officer, passed away in January 2003, from injuries suffered in a carriage accident. He taught many how to drive and ride in the Wissahickon Valley, and ran a carriage service from his “Outback Farm.”

Fitzpatrick ran the Wissahickon Day Parade in 2005. Joan Ziejewski remembers. “We didn’t have much notice about putting on the parade. It sort of fell into his lap. We knew we had to keep it going, and while it was small, it still carried on the tradition. He is an old-school gentleman to deal with...a dying breed.”

The Wissahickon Day Parade is believed to be the oldest continual equine parade in the country. In 1921, a proposal was introduced to open the main park paths to the new “automobile” of the day. In protest, a “Save the Wissahickon” campaign began. In support, over 600 riders participated in a parade with over 10,000 spectators rallying their support to keep the park free from the automobile. It was because of the defeat of the proposal that the main path became known as “Forbidden Drive.”

“You wouldn’t find 600 horses in the Wissahickon today,” said Fitzpatrick, “but it’s important to maintain an equestrian presence in the park. Horses are such an important part of our region’s history and they provide a special presence in the park.”



Ziejewski once owned and operated Northwestern Tack Shop. She turned to Tom when a fellow horseman, Jimmy McPeak, also a retired mounted police officer, passed away.

“Everyone wanted Jimmy’s dog, Max, a lovely Border Collie. But I knew he would best with Tom. Jimmy was a longtime bachelor like Tom. I knew they would be a good fit,” she confided. When she recently needed a trapper to catch two foxes near her farm, she called Tom. “He’s all about the outdoors and hunting and fishing, I knew he’d put me in touch with a trapper and he did,” she added.

Fitzpatrick hunted antelope out west and caribou up in the Arctic. He owns a hunting lodge in the Pocono Mountains, fly fishes in the summer and hunts bear and deer in the autumn.

WW II Veteran

In 1943, at the age of 18, Fitzpatrick enlisted in the US Army Air Corps as a radio navigator and gunner. He flew in missions in a B-17 over Nazi-occupied Europe, staying until the war was over in 1946. He served in the North African and Mediterranean European Theaters, receiving an Air Medal three times, a Good Conduct Medal, a Theater of Operation Medal, a Victory Medal and five Bronze Battle Stars. After the war, he returned to the US Department of Agriculture doing scientific research, and received his PhD in biochemistry from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. He received a Masters Degree from the University of Maryland. He did his undergraduate work at Penn State University, where he also rented horses in his down time.

However, he didn’t get his first horse until he was 62-years-old and well into his retirement. “For the people who don’t know what to do in their retirement years,” he said. “I can tell them what to do. They say, ‘What are you going to do with this life you’ve been given?’ and I say, “Well...everything.”

