

Strike Out, who sparked fireworks in the sport as both a racehorse and sire, had an attitude that matched his fiery chestnut color when it came to being around other stallions. He's shown giving a neighboring sire the evil eye at his longtime home, Castleton Farm, where he died in July.



Ardith Carlton

Make a Wish

The brief brilliance of Strike Out

BY ARDITH CARLTON

HE WAS A BRILLIANT BLAZE OF A PACER, a shooting star whose course arced through the zenith of our sport. Wishes were made on that star, and he carried those hopes high, first on the racetrack and then at stud.

Abundantly talented and tough, the chestnut rolled to win after win, streaking to the lead and rarely being headed. Twice voted divisional champion, he went to stud and again thrilled the sport, his first foals smashing a speed barrier never broken before.

A quarter-century later, that golden horse, Strike Out, is gone, having died on July 4, 1998. His meteoric stardom dimmed years before; now just memories of his greatness remain.

Wishes made on a shooting star can be powerful, though—and some of those he granted helped shape lives and the sport today.

From the second crop of Bret Hanover, and out of the Ensign Hanover mare Golden Miss—from whom stars like Riyadh and Panorama also descend—flaxen chestnut Strike Out was foaled in 1969 at what was then Castleton Farm's Florida station.

"He was kind of out of proportion as a baby," recalled horseman Carter Duer, who served at Castleton until 1980. "He had a bulging forehead and ewe-neck, and was offset in his knees."

Duer prepped the colt for breeders Bill and Madeline Shehan for the 1970 Harness Breeders Sale held at Liberty Bell Park. "Under today's criteria, most yearling sales would have turned him down because he wasn't correct in front," said Duer. "But he sold fairly well as a yearling. At the time I thought \$15,000 was a big price, because I didn't think too much of him."

On the other hand, buyer John G. Hayes Sr. was thrilled to get Strike Out for that sum, landing the colt when the crowd was still buzzing over the \$70,000 sale-topper—at the time, tied as the sport's highest-priced yearling trotting filly—that had immediately preceded him. Strike Out was soon at Hayes' training center near Oshawa, Ontario.

A dairy farmer who had fallen in love with the sport in the mid-1950s, the plain-spoken Hayes got his harness start racing

and his partners in Beejay Stable, brothers Bob and Conrad Shapiro of Quebec, might have the horse that could take them to the mountaintop.

"From the day Strike Out was broke, he was a very gifted animal," recalled Hayes' son. "He could pace free-legged in three weeks."

Hayes startled Ontario horsemen by entering his precocious 2-year-old in an April 27 qualifier at Toronto's Greenwood Raceway. The colt won in 2:07.

"He raced in April because he could," said Hayes' son. "He was good enough that if you wanted to go five seconds faster, he could go five seconds faster. Want to go five more? Go five more!"

Strike Out thumped older horses in his first purse start on May 4, took a brief break, and then returned June 1 to do it again. The next week, Strike Out and Hayes arrived on the Grand Circuit in style, leading every step to win Hazel Park's Geers Stake by seven lengths.

In Blue Bonnets' Golden Blend Pace for freshmen, Strike Out blasted to the front from post eight and set a 2:00.4f

strides.

Strike Out returned with a vengeance, bringing Hayes home seven lengths on top in Brandywine's Tom Hal Pace. But a shocking loss in the Arden Downs followed when Town Leader reeled him in late, paying \$459.20 to win.

An upset of a different kind followed at Batavia Downs. "Father was having some heart trouble, somewhere between a heart attack and angina," recalled the junior Hayes. "As they were taking him out of the paddock, they asked him, 'Who will drive Strike Out?' He pointed at me."

The 23-year-old, licensed for about two years, climbed aboard for the Batavia Downs Stake and the ride of his life. When the starter said "go," rail horse Keystone Apollo fell, triggering a domino effect of swerving, colliding horses.

The wave reached Strike Out in post seven, and his sulky wheel went up and over that of rival colt Moldau. Hayes was nearly pitched from the bike.

"The lines fell down, and Strike Out was pacing a hundred [mph] on the run-away. The only thing that saved me was, he remembered to make the turns," recalled Hayes. "He kept kicking the lines up, and I finally got hold of them between the half and three-quarter pole."

Ahead, the only two horses unaffected by the accident had set sail for home. Strike Out caught one of them before the mile was through.

The elder Hayes was back aboard when Strike Out went after the era's most coveted prize for freshman pacers, the Fox Stake. Post 11 was no hindrance in their 1:58.4 first-heat win, but Hayes' heart, ailing between heats, was another matter. Ted Taylor was tapped to fill in for him in the second heat, and Strike Out led at every call to win in 1:58.

After the colt was fourth in the Matron for Hayes, Buddy Gilmour catch-drove in Strike Out's next two starts, winning the Roosevelt Futurity and the Hanover Colt Stake.

Canadian driving wizard Keith Waples got the call for Blue Bonnets' Canadian Juvenile Circuit Pace, but the chestnut faded to seventh, earning himself a Florida vacation. After a two-month break at the Bruce Nickells Stable at Pompano Park, Strike Out romped in the Dec. 18 Florida Breeders Stake for Nickells, ending his 19-14-3-0 season on a high note.

With a \$155,627 bankroll that made him the year's richest freshman pacer, Strike Out was voted the champion 2-

"He raced in April [at age 2] because he could. He was good enough that if you wanted to go five seconds faster, he could go five seconds faster. Want to go five more? Go five more!"

—Dr. John Hayes Jr.

castoff stock. By the late 1960s he was investing in U.S.-bred yearlings, and soon was venturing where relatively few Canadians at that time were: the Grand Circuit. His ultimate goal was to win the Little Brown Jug.

"He said he'd rather win the Jug than go to heaven," said his son, Dr. John Hayes Jr., trainer and co-owner of 1998 Cleveland Classic and James B. Dancer Memorial winner Memphis Flash.

The elder Hayes soon realized that he

Canadian record. Open-length victories in the Hanover-Hempt, Reynolds Memorial and Count B Stakes lengthened his skein to eight straight wins.

At Montreal half-miler Richelieu Park, Hayes' maxim that "the best place for the best horse is in front" kept Strike Out battling three-wide through the Juvenile Circuit Pace's opening quarter before reaching the lead. But hometown hero Silent Majority forced another duel at the half, and edged past the golden colt in the final



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year-old pacing colt by 61 votes over Entrepreneur.

The ever-sound Strike Out helped make it one of the easiest championship seasons a groom has ever enjoyed, said his caretaker, Murray Cope.

"Strike Out and Super Bowl were the same age, and [Super Bowl's groom] Johnny Barker had to work very hard—he was all the time poulticing and fussing, and working on that horse's feet. Meanwhile, here's me, just doing nothing!" Cope recalled with a laugh.

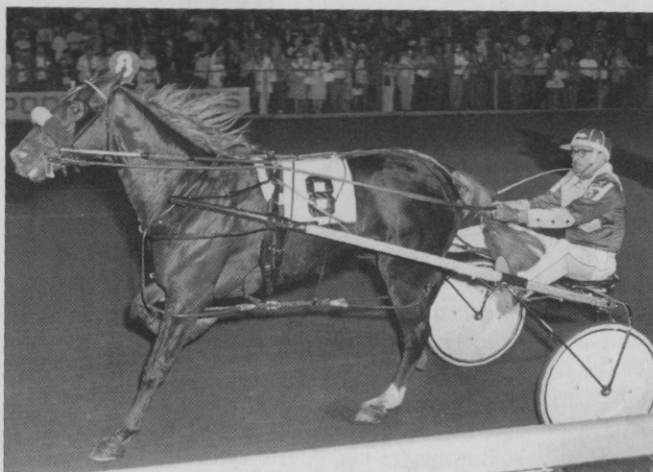
"I used to do his legs up, but that was more for protection than anything. He just needed the basic essentials, and that was pretty much it."

Cope said that Strike Out was "very simple" to shoe, and wore the same basic equipment from the beginning to end of his career. His hobble length eventually reached 60 inches.

For a front-end specialist, the colt was surprisingly responsive to drive. Catch-driver Gilmour found that out when he gave Strike Out his head at the start of a race; rather than blast to the front as Gilmour expected, the colt waited for instructions.

"So I spoke to him. Just like that, we were on top!" Gilmour told Cope.

Off the track, Strike Out was "lively—not rough, but he was not a pet," said the



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Top: A chestnut son of Bret Hanover, Strike Out was the horse of a lifetime for John G. Hayes Sr. The Canadian horseman once said he'd rather win the Jug than go to heaven, and Strike Out obliged by winning the 1972 Jug in world-record time. In 1990, Hayes was honored as the Little Brown Jug Wall of Fame Man of the Year.

Bottom: Strike Out launched his career with an eight-race winning streak for trainer-driver and co-owner Hayes, with Pocono Downs' Hanover-Hempt among those victories. Health problems later forced Hayes from the bike. Hayes was inducted into the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame in 1991.

younger Hayes. "He'd grab you as soon as look at you. He had his degree of macho in him, but he didn't have vices. He blossomed into a gorgeous animal, big and thick and chestnut."

After growing to 15.3 hands, the colt

began his second season just three months after his first had ended, winning the March 18 Florida Breeders Stake at Pompano in 1:59.4.

"Strike Out's career was somewhat defined by Father's personality," explained Hayes. "Father prided himself on doing it his way and didn't care about someone else's schedule."

"I was criticized, but I couldn't care less," the elder Hayes told the press. "I wasn't training him for somebody else; I was training him for me."

"I don't believe at all in luck, but I do believe in the law of averages and in working hard. And if you use good animal practices and good business practices, and get up early in the morning and work hard, it should work out," he asserted.

His plan called for Strike Out to start early and stay late, with Waples to pilot as often as possible. "Father knew [his] health was going to be a concern, and that he had also achieved a situation that maybe needed more than him," said his son. "And Keith was regarded as the premier driver in Canada."

"I don't drive Strike Out for the simple reason that I had previously asked Keith Waples to drive him," Hayes told an interviewer when the colt was 3. "He's for damn sure the best driver in Canada, so why shouldn't he be driving the best horse?"

Strike Out shipped north in April, but soon hit choppy water. After finishing fourth to

Silent Majority at Rockingham Park, Strike Out contracted a persistent case of seconditis, placing in the Hanover-Hempt, the Cane Pace, the Commodore Pace, the Battle of Brandywine and the Matron.

"It seemed to take several starts to get him acclimatized," noted Cope. "We ended up turning him out for two weeks. I'd take him to the track just to jog or train, and turned him out in between."

Strike Out roared back to win five of his next six starts, including the Battle of Saratoga, Reynolds Memorial, Best Of All Pace and Gaines Memorial.

The favorite in the Adios, Strike Out was nosed out in his elimination heat by Lynden Bye Bye, with Jay Time third. In the final, Strike Out and Jay Time traded places throughout the mile before a des-



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In the first heat of the Jug, Strike Out (10) and Keith Waples outdueled Jay Time and Gene Riegle (distanced, at far left) through what was then the fastest opening quarter in Jug history, and then withstood the final rush of rivals Good Bye Columbus and driver Jim Ferguson at the rail; Cory (6), in rein to Bill Haughton; and Hilarious Way (7), flying on the outside for John Simpson Jr.

perate final sprint for the orchids. They hit the wire in a dead heat.

Strike Out sent his connections' national pride soaring by defeating Silent Majority in Canada's first-ever \$100,000 horse race, Blue Bonnets' Prix d'Ete. Another Beejay Stables colt, Alley Fighter, was eighth in the mile for the elder Hayes after duking it out early with Silent Majority, and the stablemates then headed to Delaware for the Little Brown Jug.

Despite Strike Out being the top colt of his entry, Hayes never considered switching seats with Waples. "If I were to take Keith off after I was able to [drive again] myself, I wouldn't be much of a man," he said.

The grooms drew for Jug post positions, and Cope's lucky touch brought Strike Out the rail.

"The reality of Delaware is, the race is over for 50 percent of the horses as soon as the posts are drawn," observed Dr. John Hayes Jr. "Strike Out could leave like hell, and it was somebody else's problem beating him on his terms."

From post two, local favorite Jay Time and trainer-driver Gene Riegle would try. The senior Hayes, asked how he would feel if his colt beat Ohio hope Jay Time, replied, "I didn't come to Ohio to run for governor. I've come to try to win the Jug."

The first heat had fans roaring from the start as Strike Out parked Jay Time through a 27-second opening quarter, at the time the fastest in Jug history. As Jay Time weakened, Strike Out paced on to win in 1:58.1, holding off a furiously closing Good Bye Columbus and Cory, with Hayes and Alley Fighter 11th after riding

first-over past the half. Jay Time faded to finish 12th, and was scratched from the next heat with a 105-degree fever.

In the second heat, Strike Out repelled challenge after challenge but was never headed. Looping the Delaware oval with a comet-tail of rivals in his wake, he hit the wire 1¼ lengths in front of Fast Clip in 1:56.3, breaking his sire's 1:57 world record set winning the Jug seven years earlier. Hayes' dream had come true.

"I'm tickled to death! I made this colt!" an ecstatic Hayes told the press. "Some animals and some people have inherent ability, and some others don't have it. The ones that don't have it are the ones that I can beat.

"If they were all Haughtons in this game, I'd have a tough time making a living. But they're not. And they're not all Strike Outs, either!"

"I hated to beat Bret Hanover's record and take it off the board," Waples said. "But I never worry about records; I just like money."

After the Jug, Carter Duer, then Castleton Farm's general manager, made a serious overture to make the one-time ugly duckling a Castleton stallion.

Castleton was home to Strike Out's sire, Bret Hanover, as well as a harem that would complement a Bret son whose dam's cross of Ensign Hanover and McKinney Scott blood wasn't likely to be duplicated.

"Strike Out was a great-gaited, tough racehorse, and he was from such a great maternal line," said Duer. "He could follow right on Bret's coattails."

For an undisclosed sum, Castleton owner Frederick Van Lennep bought half of Strike Out from Hayes and the Shapiros, securing the future for both the chestnut and his owners.

"It wasn't too many years before that. Father milked Holsteins for a living," said the younger Hayes. "You race a horse for six figures and sell him for six figures, that's a lot of nights sitting with a milking machine."

"If they were all Haughtons in this game, I'd have a tough time making a living. But they're not. And they're not all Strike Outs, either!"

—John G. Hayes Sr.

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Meanwhile, Strike Out wowed the Lexington crowd by taking the Tattersalls Pace for Waples over a gooeey oval. His 1:58.2 clocking in the final heat was the only mile faster than 2:01 that day. Hayes hoped to time-trial his star the next week, but the weather did not cooperate.

Neither did the fates. At Batavia, long-shot Cory snapped Strike Out's winning streak at seven races. It was the last time Strike Out had Waples aboard; the Canadian Hall of Famer was unable to make it to the chestnut's remaining races.

Although Strike Out rebounded to take the Hanover Colt Stake for the elder Hayes by a neck, "we knew something was wrong," said Cope. "But the vets would say, 'We can overcome this in the next week or two.'"

The colt's problems had not been overcome by the Messenger Stake Nov. 11 at Roosevelt, where he faded to eighth behind winner Silent Majority. "When he came by the paddock, just past the quarter, you could hear him breathing," recalled Cope. "You knew he was all done."

With that mile, Strike Out ended his 25-15-6-1 season and his racing career. Before the announcement came that he had been voted the top 3-year-old pacer of 1972, Strike Out was already at Castleton Farm of Kentucky.

"Everybody said, 'It must have been the saddest day of your life, leaving him at Castleton,'" recalled Cope. "But, no, it was the happiest day of my life. He was going to embark on something new. I knew in my heart he was going to be a great sire. I was anxious to see that happen."

Breeders across North America were just as eager, and Duer was optimistic, too.

"He had a very high sperm count, and initially under the microscope, it looked very good," he said. "He did a pretty decent job his first year getting mares in foal. Since he was offset in his knees, you just had to be very careful about the type of mare you bred to him, to avoid that."

With his first crop's arrival at the races in 1976, Strike Out became a white-hot sire. Never before had the sport seen a 1:55 2-year-old; his 55-foal first crop had two, Striking Image and Fulla Strikes.

Duer was watching from the paddock at Springfield, Ill., when Striking Image became history's first 1:55 juvenile in winning the Review Futurity.

"I'll remember it as long as I live,"

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Strike Out

Duer reflected. "Going into the last turn, Striking Image was out and going, Racy Goods was following him, and they were throwing dirt 100 feet in the air! I'd never seen 2-year-olds pace like that, and neither had anyone else.

"If not for a few little things that happened in his career, Striking Image would have been the best horse I've had anything to do with. But in a wreck in the Fox Stake, Striking Image hurt some muscles in his back, and he never was the same horse again."

Later that year, Fulla Strikes fanned the flames by time-trialing in 1:54.1. But despite the demand, Strike Out's stud career was starting to flounder—at the source.

"He had the ability to produce speed and good horses, maybe even better than his sire. He had a very good shot because he had a good book of mares his second and third year," said Duer. "But it all deteriorated. He started to go downhill with fertility problems his second year, and as it got worse, his libido went too, and he became very hard to collect."

Strike Out sired exceptional pacers nonetheless. Half the field in the 1979 Little Brown Jug's final heat were from his third crop, with son Hot Hitter p,3,1:54f (\$963,574) the winner.

In 1984, Dr. John Hayes Jr., carrying on the racing stable for his father, teamed with Strike Out son Legal Notice to win the inaugural North America Cup and their Jug first-heat elimination. In the Jug's final heat, they got locked in and couldn't reach Colt Fortysix, finishing second. "I think about that a lot," he admitted.

After Strike Out went to stud, the elder Hayes and Shapiro brothers' Beejay Stable moved into the breeding business, supporting their prize pacer with top mares. After a decade as a commercial breeding venture, though, the stable sold its sizeable broodmare band to Walnut Hall. Just down the road was Hayes' pride and joy, and his annual trip to the Jug and on to Lexington for the sales was not complete without a visit to Strike Out.

"Mr. Hayes is one of the best friends I've ever had, the most helpful of anybody to me in my career, and Strike Out brought us together," said Duer. "When I went out on my own in 1980, he was my biggest supporter, even when it wasn't the thing he should have done."

Strike Out kept breeding as best he could, siring 21 in 1:55 and 67 \$100,000

winner, led by 1982 Meadowlands Pace winner Hilarion, Cue Light, League Leader, Melvins Strike and Ring Of Light, all \$600,000 winners. But his foal crops dwindled to single digits in 1987 and stayed there.

Despite his breeding difficulties, though, Strike Out's home was never in jeopardy at Castleton.

"Until his dying day, he got the best," Duer noted, "and people ought to be commended for that."

Described by stallioneer Kenny Miller as "a gentleman" to work with, Strike Out was hyper-territorial around other stallions, and was usually kept in an isolated paddock. He walked its fence almost constantly, pounding a worn trail of dirt into dust.

"On our [yearling] show days, quite a few people would come by that wanted to see him," Miller said. "They remembered when he won the Little Brown Jug."

Strike Out's final foals arrived last spring, long after he had awed the harness world. On the warm summer evening of July 4, as brief, brilliant Independence Day fireworks dazzled night skies from coast to coast, the golden pacer who had done the same for harness racing passed away at age 29.

Dr. John Hayes Jr. thought his father should know.

The senior Hayes had suffered a number of small strokes over the last few years. "They just kept coming, and every one took a toll," said his son. "His functional ability in many areas was very impaired. If you mentioned something that happened last night, or that a horse raced, he'd give us a reaction, but seconds later it was gone.

"But all you had to do was mention Strike Out, and it was his day. Strike Out was the light of his life."

The family gently told Hayes about Strike Out's passing—and within a number of days, said his son, "he regressed to the point that he could no longer live at home. He spent four months at a local hospital, and missed going to the Jug for the first time in years and years. In October, he was introduced to an assisted-care facility." He passed away Dec. 8.

"Strike Out was his ticket to be where he wanted to be, to do what he wanted to do. When Strike Out died, chronologically, there was a huge relationship between Father's subsequent health status and that moment in time," said his son.

"I think that's maybe a statement of what Strike Out meant." HB