

Dust Devil

Laag - Patsy Almahurst, by Ralph Hanover
April 29, 1990 Glen Gardner, New Jersey

"*D*evil Dusts Daisy," read the headline on November 20, 1994. The four-year-old pacing gelding Dust Devil had just done a very ungentlemanly thing – he beat a girl. Not just any girl. Dust Devil, a flea-bitten gray Standardbred, who'd been bought out of a \$27,000 claiming race just three months earlier, had beaten Shady Daisy, the mare soon to be named Pacing Mare of the Year for the third consecutive time.

And he snuck up on her, as he was wont to do, coming from fourth place at the head of the very short stretch at Freehold Raceway in New Jersey. Robert DiNozzi, his owner during the two-year form spree in which he beat Shady Daisy, said the gray horse seemed to thrive on giving himself a disadvantage.

"He'd be last at the quarter, last at the half, and then the driver started moving somewhere past the half," said DiNozzi. "He'd go the last half mile parked every step of the way and just go right by."

The unexpected win against Shady Daisy came in the first of the two best years of a racing career spanning eight years and 182 starts for Dust

Devil. In those two years, he won seventeen races, earned hundreds of thousands of dollars and the enduring respect of all he encountered.

"In his very first start for us," said trainer Harry Marsh, "he was charted seventh in a seven-horse field at the head of the stretch. He was six-and-a-half lengths from the leader, and he won the race. When he went by me, I don't think he had a foot touching the ground."

Dust Devil, who only *seemed* to fly, was an unimposing horse – physically impressive only for the nickel-sized brown spots on his white body. He had a problematic hind ankle that prompted one veterinarian to advise DiNozzi and Marsh to put him back in the revolving door of claiming races right after they bought him.

"You'd jog him on Monday morning [after a weekend race]," said Marsh, "and sometimes you'd wonder how you were going to race him on Saturday." Marsh let Dust Devil decide the exercise protocol. "He'd walk all the way round the Meadowlands Racetrack, maybe three-quarters of a mile, before he'd start to jog," said Marsh. "Then he'd pull

up and I'd let him walk another quarter of a mile. The second mile, he'd start off at a walk but he'd go ahead and jog."

With a few days to recover, Marsh said the change by race day was almost visible. "By Saturday, he seemed to be about two inches taller than he was any other day of the week."

Dust Devil won seven races for DiNozzi and Marsh the first year and rarely missed a check when he didn't win. Marsh and his wife, LuAnn, gave Dust Devil hours of attention every day, working to keep him fit for racing. He paid them back at the end of the week. He made forty-five starts in 1994, the year he was claimed by DiNozzi.

*"I used to say that Dust Devil
had more heart than most
foreign countries, and he did."*

In 1995, as a five-year-old, he came back for thirty-one starts and \$114,670, primarily against hard-knocking racehorses, not pampered stakes colts, on the New York/New Jersey circuit. He usually overachieved relative to his modest \$27,000 price tag.

"If you did not get beat by Dust Devil at some point in his racing career, it was generally because you had not raced against him," said Marsh. "He made me look smart no matter what the weather conditions were, no matter the racetrack where you raced. He was easy on himself and on me. The only people who disliked him were the ones who had to race against him."

By late 1996, the inevitable downside of claiming races came to be – Dust Devil was claimed from a claiming race. Every horse in such a race is for sale – for a price marked in the program. Owners and trainers may hope it doesn't happen, but if a claiming race is where a horse can win, that's where they race.

Now in the stable of another trainer for new owners, Dust Devil raced twenty-five times in 1997. He could still win and he could still race as fast as he once did, but he couldn't do it as consistently as in the past.

Maybe he missed Harry Marsh rubbing his legs and working on his head. "I got between his ears," said Marsh. "We became friends, we became pals. He was so willing to race, even with aches and pains, just to please me. That's something I've not had happen to me a lot – from people or animals."

Dust Devil was out of DiNozzi's stable, but not out of his mind. "This horse was my favorite horse of all the horses I've owned and I've owned 200," said DiNozzi. When Dust Devil's claiming price, and his racing form, dropped three times in four weeks, he was ready. DiNozzi wrote a check for \$5,000 to get Dust Devil back.

"He was a great horse and he really didn't belong in someone's barn who didn't think so," said DiNozzi. "The guy who had him had tried as hard as he could to get the horse to go the way he did when we had him."

"I used to say that Dust Devil had more heart than most foreign countries, and he did," said DiNozzi. "He had a great disposition. My daughter was then about five or six and she used to play with the horse, literally went in the stall, and lay down with him. We took him back and we took care of him."

Back in Harry Marsh's care, Dust Devil was clearly not meant for the races again. With only a big heart and generous nature to offer, Dust Devil needed a job.

Marsh's home on the eastern shore of Maryland is near Horse Lovers United, an equine adoption program run by Lorraine Truitt. It was Truitt who helped Dust Devil find his new job and his new home.

Mike Thomas loaded up his two-horse trailer for the trip to pick up a Thoroughbred he'd adopted from Horse Lovers United for his

children, Jennifer and Michael, then twelve and ten. With a 100-acre farm and miles of trails, Thomas had horses as a young adult when his family moved to the eastern shore from Brentwood, on Long Island in New York. He wanted his children to have the same experience.

"We went to pick up a Thoroughbred named Chester, he's out in the muddy field that's about ankle deep and here's Dusty," said Thomas. "I thought he was an Appaloosa. I called Lorraine and said, 'We can't just take one. We've got to take both; they look like they are very close.'"

Dust Devil settled right in to his new job of packing folks around the Thomas farm, the only adjustment was the addition of a nickname. "He'd never had a saddle on him, just like the other Standardbreds we got. It's remarkable, and every one of them is the same. The bridle is no problem, it's just put the blanket on and then the saddle. Then they turn to you and say, 'Okay, what's next? What do I do now?'"

"No bucking, no hot to trot, they just go," said Thomas. "No drama."

"Even though it's been sixteen years, I still think about him, almost every day. I actually speak to my horses and tell them about him and tell them they could have learned a little something from him."

Dust Devil and the Thomas family have been together for sixteen years now. Michael and Jennifer are adults, and Dust Devil, now twenty-four, is growing old gracefully. The ankle LuAnn and Harry Marsh worked so hard to keep pliable bothers him only when it's raining, said Thomas.


There are still people to take for trail rides around the farm, plus two horse friends and a pig in Dust Devil's barn. He's got seniority in years and attitude, said Thomas. "When Lucky passed [another adopted Standardbred, registered name I'm Confused], Dusty was top dog." It didn't matter to Dust Devil that his stablemate, the younger and more muscular paint horse, Pancho, was a more likely contender.

"Whatever Dusty says, goes," said Thomas "He'll back Pancho up against the barn if he has to. At feeding time, if Pancho tries to cut in a little bit, that ain't happening. He won't kick or anything, but he'll back him up against the barn and let him know: 'I'm first.'"

Thomas doesn't hesitate to hand over any rider to Dusty's care. "I would trust anybody on that horse," he said. "It's been a few months since I got on him, but I could go out there right now and saddle him up and go. He's that docile. He puts one foot in front of another and never, and I mean never, flinches an inch."

Dust Devil hasn't gone a fast mile or earned a dime for decades, but he continues to give to those who have given to him. DiNozzi, who drives in harness races as a hobby, has his image painted on the back of his helmet.

Marsh continues to train horses and holds every horse up to the bright light Dust Devil shone in his life. "Even though it's been sixteen years, I still think about him, almost every day," said Marsh. "I actually speak to my horses and tell them about him and tell them they could have learned a little something from him. He was willing to give me more than his all; he would reach in and find it somewhere."

For Thomas, who never saw Dust Devil race or even cashed a \$2 ticket on him, the years of devotion give him an escape from worldly pressures. "He gives me a lot of enjoyment," he said. "There are a lot of times you have a hard day or bills coming due and I just saddle up and ride. With Dusty, it seems like everything else is forgotten." 

Dust Devil and Mike Thomas

