



Life *After* Racing

A look at the lives of Standardbreds away from the track



A Horse of a Certain Color

Now 31, Sergeant York (Allaboard Jules) retires after serving as riderless horse for U.S. Army

story by **Megan Rider**

Allaboard Jules, a jet-black, 15-hand Standardbred gelding sired by Royce, was foaled in 1991 and raced from 1994 through 1996, primarily at Freehold Raceway and Yonkers Raceway. His accomplishments on the track were modest as he won only five of his 23 starts, with earn-

ings of \$14,881 and a lifetime mark of 1:58.4h.

While Allaboard Jules may not have distinguished himself as a pacer, his personality and appearance, along with a serendipitous connection, ended up being of great importance once he left racing.

When the day came for Allaboard Jules to retire, trainer Dave Brandwine approached Marie Dobrisky, who worked for the state of New Jersey in the detention barn at Freehold Raceway. Brandwine explained that Allaboard Jules was a friendly little horse that tried hard but was not meant to be a racehorse.

Allaboard Jules' size and stature stood out. Compared to the other horses, who were mostly drafts, he looked like a miniature horse.

It just so happened that Marie's son, Sgt. Francis "Frank" Dobrisky, was a decorated member of the U.S. Army Caisson Platoon at the time (1995-2001). The Caisson Platoon manages and trains the harnessed and ridden horses that participate in funeral ceremonies and processions of U.S. Presidents and high-ranking members of the Army and Marines. The caisson horses are mostly gray or jet black in color, and the platoon attempts to sign on horses regularly.

Allaboard Jules indeed checked the boxes regarding his color and temperament; however, timing was not on his side. When Marie contacted the Caisson Platoon and her son about Allaboard Jules, she was told only gray horses were needed at that time. Still, Marie persevered and sent Allaboard Jules to a nearby farm where he learned to be a riding horse, and waited for opportunity to strike.

Allaboard Jules' stay at the farm stretched a little over a year, leading into the summer of 1997, when the platoon leaders traveled to New Jersey for a meet-and-greet with the black pacer. It was determined that, although he was petite, Allaboard Jules could become a riding horse, and it was decided that he would join the U.S. Army.

Immediately, Allaboard Jules' size and stature stood out. Compared to the other horses, who were mostly drafts, he looked like a miniature horse. The gelding's racing name also did not quite fit the bill, as he was now among the likes of horses named after high-ranking historical figures. So the Caisson Platoon decided to rename him Sergeant York, after Sgt. Alvin York, the World War I hero who single-handedly took out an enemy machine gun nest and, with the aid of his small unit, eventually rounded up more than 130 enemy soldiers that same day.

Sergeant York, the pacer, was perhaps underestimated at the start of his

time with the Caisson Platoon, but he proved himself worthy of his namesake, as the more that was asked of him, the better he became. He had a fun, goofy personality, and was considered a happy-go-lucky horse.

Sergeant York rose to the top of the ranks and quickly became the horse used to train new soldiers. "Versatile" is a word often used to describe the Standardbred breed, and Sergeant York lived up to that description as well. He was never intended to be part of funeral processions, but he performed so well at other tasks that the unit decided to train him for riderless-horse duty.

A riderless horse, which may be caparisoned—or decked out—in ornamental coverings, follows the caisson carrying the casket. It is a single horse, without a rider, and with boots reversed in the stirrups.

It may seem as if becoming and being a riderless horse is an effortless task, but it takes a very special horse with the appropriate personality, temperament and trainability. Sergeant York was a natural in the demeanor



A LIFE OF SERVICE / Opposite: His military career behind him, pacer Sergeant York now enjoys his days at Equine Advocates, a national, 140-acre nonprofit 501(c)(3) equine protection facility located in upstate New York that currently cares for over 80 equines.

Above: After former U.S. President Ronald Reagan died in 2004, Sergeant York carried the president's boots, facing backward and toward the west, as he followed the casket down Constitution Ave. en route to the U.S. Capitol, where the president would lie in state.



department and his prior racetrack experience prepared him for the distractions that came along with doing a job without a rider in a funeral procession.

When the Caisson Platoon's primary riderless horse became lame just before an event, Sergeant York was the only horse available, and he was quickly thrust into action. He dazzled the platoon with his confidence and composure. The primary riderless horse returned but, sadly, passed away shortly thereafter, and Sergeant York became the chief riderless horse for the Caisson Platoon, which is tasked with bringing departed military members from all branches and dignitaries to their final resting spots at Arlington National Cemetery.

Sergeant York served as the riderless horse in countless ceremonies over the last 25 years, including the funeral procession of President Ronald Reagan in June 2004 and, most recently, Gen.

“Sergeant York will help to educate the public about the lives of military working horses and the historic part he played as one of the most well known and adored riderless horses to serve in the U.S. military.”

Susan Wagner

Colin Powell in 2021.

Earlier this year, the 31-year-old Sergeant York was retired from his duties with the U.S. Army. The platoon reached out to Equine Advocates, a national, nonprofit 501(c)(3) equine protection organization founded by Susan Wagner in 2004. It is a 140-acre facility located in upstate New York that currently cares for over 80 equines. According to Wagner, it is an equine village where horses are afforded the ability to live out their lives in a natural environment that allows them to socialize with each other.

Sergeant York arrived at the sanctuary on June 15, 2022, following a short stay at Cornell University Hospital for Animals, where he underwent a physical exam. Wagner explained that Sergeant York's days will be quieter in this new stage of his life, but he will still have a role to play.

“Sergeant York will help to educate the public about the lives of military



OLD SOLDIER / At 31, the diminutive Sergeant York still sports the jet-black coat that, along with his pleasing temperament, made him the perfect candidate for the U.S. Army Caisson Platoon, which he joined in 1997.

working horses and the historic part he played as one of the most well known and adored riderless horses to serve in the U.S. military," she said. "He will be visited by new and old admirers, as well as by current military members and veterans who had the pleasure to know and work with him during his quarter century of service."

Sergeant York's permanent residency at Equine Advocates is sponsored in full by a supporter from Wynantskill, N.Y. **HB**

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