



And Down The Stretch They Come
In 31 career starts, Bardstown finished in the money 84% of the time he raced... Not bad for a bay gelding that didn't race until the age of four.

Bredⁱⁿthe Bluegrass

BARDSTOWN

The Persistent Protégé

Although he's not exactly a household name, during the 1950's this late bloomer became one of the elite handicap horses in the United States.

by HUNTER CHAVANNE

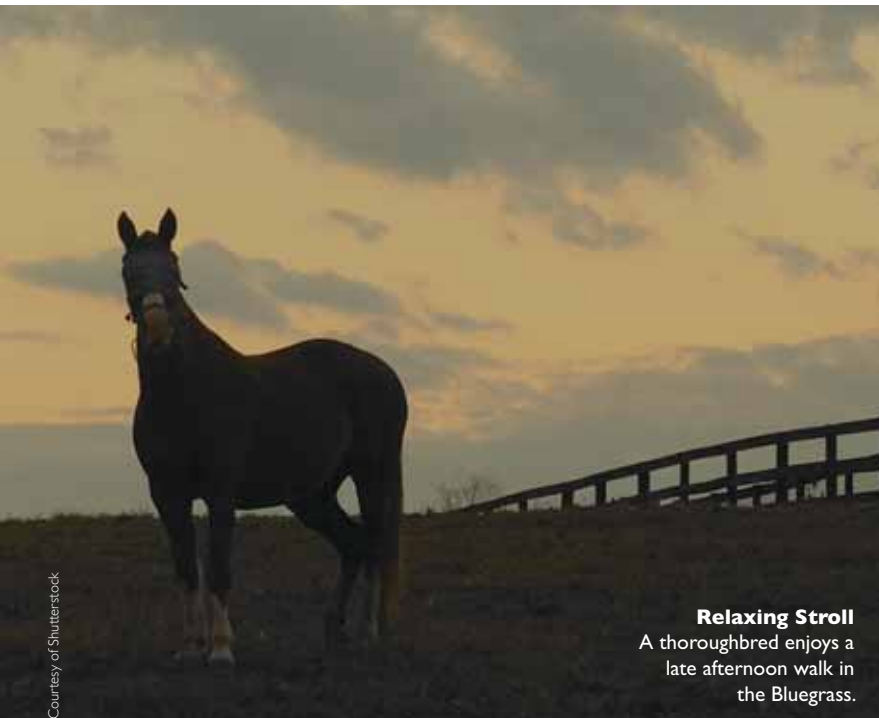
IN HORSE RACING, THERE ARE CERTAIN names that come to mind when one thinks of the all-time greats. Unless you are a horse racing authority and/or historian, Bardstown is not one of them. You think of the stars like Secretariat (has to be listed first, right?), the monstrous War Admiral, Seattle Slew, and, the last thoroughbred to capture the Triple Crown, Affirmed. But, for every one of these stars, there are dozens of other horses who have gotten lost in the mix, so to speak, over time. This is the story of one of those horses, a bay gelding by the name of Bardstown, who refused to give up, no matter what the odds.

To tell the story of any horse you have to start with his mother and father... The bloodlines. Most, if not all, great horsemen will tell you that the bloodlines usually give you a pretty good idea of what you're dealing with.

In 1941, a bay filly named Twilight Tear, call Suzie for short, was foaled. She was sired by the great Bull Lea, who was the leading sire in America an astounding five times, siring some 58 stakes winners, four Horses of the Year, and three Kentucky Derby winners. Twilight Tear's race record is quite impressive. In 24 races she won a remarkable, and almost absurd, 18 times, and, for good measure, took second and third twice, respectively. In 1944 "Suzie" was named Horse of the Year, and in 1963 she was inducted into the National Thoroughbred Racing Hall of Fame.

1952 was the year in which Twilight Tear produced a bay gelding by the name of Bardstown. The bay gelding did not race until the age of four due to a series of ankle and hip problems. Matter of fact, Bardstown was hampered throughout his career by unsoundness. That, however, did not keep Bardstown from compiling a very impressive record at the track. In the racing world, some have the opinion that

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Relaxing Stroll
A thoroughbred enjoys a late afternoon walk in the Bluegrass.

Bardstown ranked second only to the 1947 Horse of the Year, Armed, as the best gelding ever to race for the legendary Calumet Farm and the stable's devil's-red-and-blue silks. As one historian put it, "one wonders what he might have done had he been more physically durable."

Unfortunately, Bardstown inherited his father, Alibhai's, physical issues. Alibhai broke down in his training as a yearling and did not race. Some have pointed out that another source of potential unsoundness in Bardstown's pedigree was his mom, Twilight Tear's, maternal grandsire (or grandfather), Blue Larkspur, who was sidelined by a bowed tendon at the age of four due to reinjury. So while the pedigree and bloodlines were quite good, there was without question a history of unsoundness.

Through old pictures and descriptions you can see that the horse had a sprinter's build – chesty, wide-bodied and a powerful looking horse. Bardstown was under the legendary trainer Jimmy Jones' care. Not long after handily defeating a nice colt by the name of Trentonian, Bardstown developed ankle troubles and was sent back to Calumet Farm to have both of his front ankles fired. "Firing" is a process whereby the horse is given an aesthetic and a tranquilizer as the ankles are painted with iodine, and then a hot iron is applied, leaving a checkerboard pattern and a solid, sealed mass where there had been swelling and leakage in the horse's ankles. The idea behind doing this is to bolster the tendons and reduce the chance of future breakdowns. Around the same time, the horse was gelded thanks to a nasty temperament.

In the summer of 1955 Jimmy Jones had a plan in mind for Bardstown. Jones wanted to work with him at the Arlington Park meeting. Problems arose before Bardstown even got to the starting gate. A hind end injury was the culprit this time. Bardstown was forced to pull up during a routine workout and was taken from the track in a horse ambulance. It was six weeks before Bardstown could take the few steps necessary to get into the van to be transported back to Calumet Farm. Six months would pass before the bay gelding would be able to seriously train again.

Although the horse's most recent injury was a little bit of a mystery (it was never exactly nailed down what the problem was), it did eventually

heal. However, as a result of the hind end injury, Bardstown was left with a somewhat bizarre trait: he could no longer back up. Some observed that at about this time he developed a very low-headed style of moving, perhaps to accommodate the injury he suffered. In the fall of 1955, Jimmy's father, Ben "B.A." Jones, stayed back in Kentucky to keep an eye on some of the Calumet horses while Jimmy was taking some thoroughbreds up to New York for the fall meet. One day a buyer showed up at Calumet and was offering \$10,000 for Bardstown. Ben phoned his son that night at his hotel room in New York to ask what his answer was.

The way the story goes, Jimmy thought back to Bardstown's wonderful workout against Trentonian, who had turned out to be a rather good stakes horse since his defeat to Bardstown. Because of this, Jimmy believed Bardstown had some real potential. The big question regarding the bay gelding was the horse's health going forward. Jimmy wanted his father to gallop the horse, followed by a quarter-mile breeze to see how the horse responded to some mild pressure. A couple days later B.A. called his son back to inform him that the bay gelding responded well, and, a few months later, in January of 1956, Bardstown was back on the racing circuit for Calumet Farm, at Gulfstream Park in Florida.

MARCH OF 1956 MARKED BARDSTOWN'S official return to racing. He did not win the race, but he finished in the money. Later that spring, Garden State Park in Camden County, New Jersey was the site of where Bardstown broke his maiden. By that summer he was winning allowance races in Chicago. Seeing this, Jimmy Jones entered the horse in the Equipose Mile, and Bardstown won rather easily, marking his first ever stakes win. At four years old, Bardstown won five stakes races, including setting a track record in the Buckeye Handicap at Cleveland's old Randall Park, as well as winning the Trenton Handicap by defeating a top of the line thoroughbred in Summer Tan (Bardstown conceded four pounds in the race). Bardstown's winnings for the season totaled \$173,050 and was ranked third among all handicap males for 1956, only behind Horse of the Year, Swaps, and the 1955 Horse of the Year, Nashua. Pretty impressive considering the status of Bardstown in January of '56 was this: a four-year-old, injury-prone maiden, with potential. And, as Adolph Rupp, the world famous coach of the Kentucky Wildcats said, "Potential never put a point on the scoreboard."

At five, Bardstown won the Widener, Gulfstream Park, Tropical and Appleton handicaps and ran second to the fast Speedy Tan in the McLennan Handicap during the Florida winter season. His ankles started to show wear and tear and he raced only once outside Florida in '57, finishing second to Third Brother in the Camden Handicap, held in Lexington, Kentucky. So the 1957 summary sheet for Bardstown read like this: Four wins and two second-place finishes in six starts. For Bardstown, the quantity of races might not have been exceptionally high, but the quality was undeniably there. The publication *Blood-Horse* put Bardstown at the top of the handicap ranks with 130 pounds in the annual Free Handicap, placed ahead of the official handicap champion, Dedicate.

Compared to the prior year, 1958 was a bit of an off year for Bardstown, and, most likely, some corners thought his best years at the track were behind him. In '58 he won the Quaker City Handicap and placed in four other handicaps. Bardstown, however, was not done, and he was determined to go out on a strong note. It seems that persistence was the name of the game for this bay gelding. He finished up his career

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Bardstown Bound Clockwise from Bottom:
Artist John Ruthven's *Bardstown of Calumet*;
A tight race; Bardstown winning in '57;
Bardstown after a win.

Clockwise from top left: Shutterstock Keeneland Archives; Keeneland Archives; KBD Archives

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as a seven-year-old by returning to his old form from that wonderful '57 racing season. Bardstown dominated the winter season in Florida, winning the Widener, Tropical Park and Orange Bowl handicaps. After winning three of his five 1959 starts, he was injured once again and was unable to return to training. His lifetime record was an impressive eighteen wins, seven second-place finishes, and one third in thirty-one starts. Bardstown's lifetime earnings were \$628,752 which is over \$19 million in today's dollars, and he was pensioned at Calumet Farm, where he died in 1972. The Calumet Farm horse cemetery is where he was laid to rest, joining his dam, Twilight Tear. Although not a superstar champion himself, he was a worthy son of his remarkable mother and was highly thought of by many.

Of particular note, his lifetime exercise rider, Tony Bencivenga, made the decision to make a career out of working with horses after arriving at Calumet Farm in Kentucky and riding Bardstown. The two developed a wonderful rapport and Tony early on became the only one

to exercise him, as most other riders were unable to handle the strength of Bardstown. Tony fondly spoke of the bay gelding years later saying, "Bardstown was quite a character. He was nicknamed 'Shorty' because he was smaller than the average thoroughbred, but he was powerful. Bardstown made me realize that I felt at home in the saddle, upon a powerful horse, ready to unleash the fire within." 🐾

BLUEGRASS 101

Magic Soil On the surface of the ground in Kentucky is a dark brown soil, nourished by the limestone beneath it and uncommonly rich in phosphate from millions of deposits of shells and skeletons. Kentucky soil contains an abundance of calcium, but it is the phosphate, normally found at such concentration only on ocean floors, that has dazzled geologists for centuries. The grass that grows from the soil is unique in its ability to nurture strong bones in the animals that graze upon it. In the center of this area where the best soil can be found is Fayette County, the place Bardstown called home.



Handsome Fella

Bardstown critiques artist John Ruthven's *Bardstown of Calumet*; Holding the portrait, in the middle, is Thompson Willert.

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OLD BARDSTOWN



KENTUCKY STRAIGHT BOURBON WHISKEY

Rating **95** Jim Murray's
Whisky Bible
OLD BARDSTOWN ESTATE

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“This is what great Bourbon
is all about... Go Get!”

- Jim Murray's Whisky Bible