

The Block House Has Heart

By Sally Walker

It was a day for success to raise its pretty head.

A \$700 horse won its first outing for a nice-guy veterinarian owner-rider, a 19-year-old gangly, smiley kid named Michael Walsh hurried three different mounts down the back stretch to the big wins of the day, and our comparatively small, old-fashioned country race meet called the Block House Steeplechase beat the pants off big-brother Atlanta's Steeplechase, which had tried to trounce on Tryon's traditional racing date.

April 7 was Steeplechase Day last year. Most other hurdle races have gone to trendier tags like "race meet", "hunt meet", or simply "races." But for 33 years it'd been called a steeplechase in Tryon, and Steeplechase it would stay.

ALL NATURAL COURSE

With the only all-natural course remaining on the Dixie Circuit, the Block House has, ironically, become avant-garde. It's run over real brush hurdles and a length of spring grass to provide better cushioning and footing for the horses.

The course is hilly, with tricky turns to some of the jumps. There's even one killer called "Heartbreak Hill", perhaps unparalleled in modern steeplechasing. "By the time a horse gets to the top of Heartbreak Hill", says rider Dave Lambert, "he's had a lot of the steam taken out of him. It's good for a young horse — it slows him down a bit."

Last year Tryon Race Officials were walking all around the big, beautiful course, trying to stifle big, 'go to hell Atlanta' grins. Because, as National Steeplechase & Hunt Official Bill Gallo put it, "everyone came to Tryon." Almost everyone, anyway. Trainer Dale Thiel was kind enough to switch his entry at the last minute so that Atlanta wouldn't have to cancel its big race.

"We'd worried all along last year that both Atlanta and Tryon would suffer," says Tryon's Steeplechase Co-Chairman Tim Brannon. "And that would have meant that steeplechasing would suffer."

BIG NAMES

"But when we heard the Monday before the races that

champion jock Jerry Fishback would be riding in Tryon, we knew things had swung in our favor." Fishback, who had been riding the hottest win streak in steeplechasing, had been scheduled all along to go to Atlanta. When entries were submitted to the National office the Monday before the races, it became apparent that the top names in racing were heading for the hills of Tryon.

"I've been coming to Tryon ever seen it started", said trainer M. G. Walsh. "Either I've come myself with the horses, or someone else in the family has come. I wouldn't miss Tryon for anything. And I don't think it was a nice thing for Atlanta to run on the same day."

Walsh, one of steeplechasing's most famous names, has a shock of gray hair that frames a ruddy complexion, and the kind of twinkly gray eyes it's hard to dislike. He talks about his horses with affection. "That Red Brick House", he says, pointing to the horse that won Tryon's feature event in both 1978 and 1979, "now he's a horse that always tries. He'll give you his best whenever he can."

THE RACE

Red Brick House's best was a thriller last year. Although he'd won the Block House Race the year before, he was the second - favorite. Augustin Stable's Tall Award went off a 2-1 favorite.

The start read like a script. Closely bunched were Red Brick House, Tall Award, and Prime Motive, another past Block House winner. Up Heartbreak Hill they stuck together like glue. Red Brick House was running easily with his big, loose stride. He ate the hills like candy. Rider Michael Walsh III was riding with a near-loose rein. Both horse and rider looked like they were having a good time. Red Brick House nosed ahead. Each time Tall Award would close in to bid for the lead, Red Brick House would draw away, just enough. In the final stretch drive, Tall Award made one last gallant effort to slide by on the inside, but Harry M. Rhett's big chestnut Red Brick House fought off the challenge to finish a popular first to a widely cheering crowd.

Again, Atlanta is running on Tryon's date this year, Saturday, April 5. They've offered even larger purses. Asked if he thinks Atlanta's challenge will effect

Tryon's Block House Races, Brannon smiles and says, "Just think of us as Red Brick House. We always give our best, and somehow seem to come out a nose ahead."

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