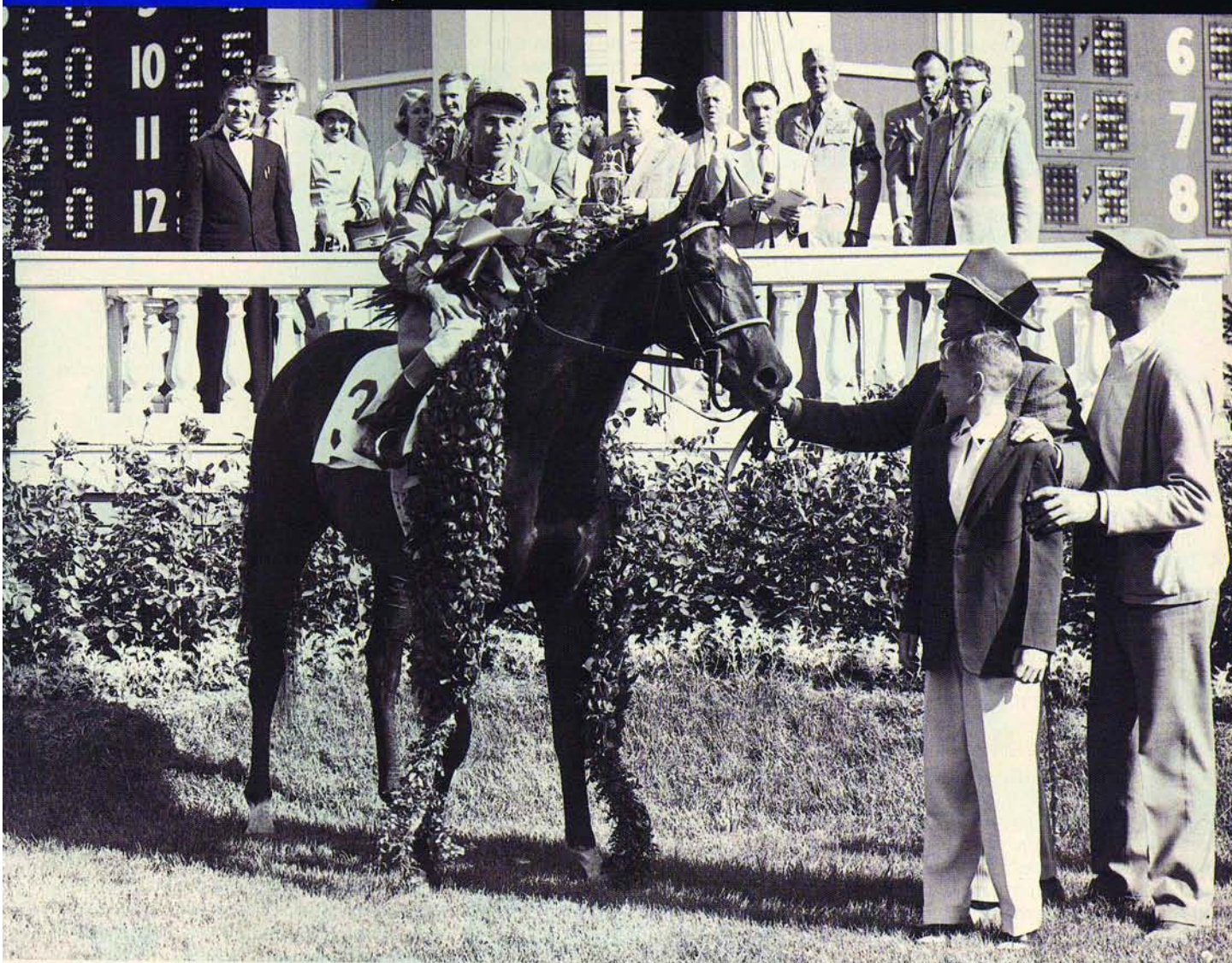




NATIONAL MUSEUM OF RACING &

HALL OF FAME



Needles helped put the Florida breeding program on the map when he won the 1956 Kentucky Derby

SKEETS MEADORS

Florida's First Star

BY DAVID SCHMITZ

Needles sharpened the racing fan's awareness that a good horse could come out of Florida. Bred by William E. Leach and foaled and raised at his Dickey Farm in the Sunshine State, Needles not only took the state's two big races for 3-year-olds, the Flamingo Stakes and Florida Derby, but became the first Florida-bred to win the Kentucky Derby and Belmont Stakes and earn a national championship. It was the high point for owners Jackson Dudley and Bonnie Heath, and they can credit trainer Hugh Fontaine for persuading them to spend the \$20,000 necessary to purchase Needles as a 2-year-old.

"They sort of balked because they were thinking about getting out of the business," said Heath's son, Bonnie Heath III. "Mr. Fontaine said if you don't buy him I'll sell my car, I'll mortgage my house, and all the other things people say to get someone to do something. My dad and Mr. Dudley said, 'If that's the way you feel, we'll buy the horse,' and they did."

Needles, who had received his name from Leach's wife because

of the many injections he had received to combat a severe case of pneumonia when he was five weeks old, began his racing career for the partners' D and H Stable at Gulfstream Park in March of his 2-year-old season. Sent off at 6-5, Needles took the lead soon after the start in the 4½-furlong race and won by five lengths. It was the only race in his career in which he set the pace. Two races later at Gulfstream, Needles set the first of three career track records, winning in :52½ for 4½ furlongs.

Sent north, Needles captured the Sapling Stakes at Monmouth Park in August for his first added-money score, then won the Hopeful Stakes at Saratoga. Following a third-place finish in the World's Playground Stakes, Needles won a mile prep at Garden State for the rich Garden State Stakes in track-record time of 1:37½ after trailing by 15 lengths at the beginning. Supplemented to the Garden State for \$10,000, Needles trailed by 14 lengths after the first quarter-mile, but got up to finish within a length of Prince John at the end of the 1¼-mile race.

Needles had won six of 10 races and earned \$129,805, and once gave his owners an experience that had them thinking they were back in the country. "In one of his races, they were staying at a place and couldn't get a cab or anything to take them to the track," Bonnie Heath III said. "So they got a ride on the back of a pickup truck."

Needles shared champion 2-year-old honors with the year's top juvenile money-earner, Nail, but the two were weighted a pound below Experimental highweight Career Boy.

Needles had been ridden in all but one of his races by John Choquette, but all that would change. Dave Erb had been aboard Polly's Jet in the Garden State Stakes and was impressed by the way Needles passed him at the three-eighths pole. "I asked my agent if he could get in touch with Fontaine about riding Needles," Erb said from his Saratoga Springs, N.Y., home. "Fontaine said I'd need to get familiar with the horse by riding him in the mornings."

Erb began exercising Needles at Gulfstream Park in the winter of 1956 and was aboard the colt when he finished second in his 3-year-old debut at Hialeah in February. "He was not a temperamental colt like everyone thought; he was just set in his ways and you had to coax him," Erb said.

Needles next won the Flamingo at Hialeah, then set a track record of 1:48½ in the 1¼-mile Florida Derby at Gulfstream in his final Kentucky Derby prep. (It's hard to believe, but Florida-breds at that time were allowed a five-pound weight allowance in Florida races because the racing commission was trying to help a fledgling breeding program. The ruling later was rescinded.)

There were six weeks to go before the Run for the Roses, and Fontaine and Needles settled in at Churchill. Erb, who was riding at Keeneland in April, traveled to Churchill to ride Needles in the morning. Heath and Dudley got into the Derby spirit on opening day at Churchill when one of their horses paid \$93.20 to win.

The big day came and Needles was sent away the 8-5 favorite against 16 rivals. Trailing by 24 lengths after the first quarter-mile, Needles began his move around the far turn and went on to win by three-quarters of a length in 2:03½ over Calumet Farm's Fabius. Ironically, it was Calumet stallion Ponder who sired Needles.

The victory proved historic in that it completed the second male-line Derby triple. Ponder's sire, Pensive, had won the 1944 Derby, and Ponder had captured the 1949 running. The triple hasn't been accomplished since.

Needles' win wasn't the only excitement for his connections. "After the Derby, they're walking off, and there's a federal marshal," said Bonnie Heath III. "He 'cuffs Mr. Fontaine, and takes him back to the barn. It turned out to be alimony, worth several thousands. The marshal said he needs the money now, and Dad and Mr. Dudley agreed to write out a check. The marshal says he needs cash, so they reach into their pockets and give him money earned from the winner on opening day and from bet-


ting on Needles.

"Well, the money never was repaid. About three days before Mr. Fontaine's death (in 1978), they found out he also had some money on the horse who won on opening day. He had his wad, and wasn't coming off it.

"I asked Dad how it made him feel, and he laughed, and said, 'Any other way and it wouldn't have been Fontaine.' "

Needles' closing kick failed to catch Fabius in the Preakness, but it served him well in the Belmont Stakes in a 2:29½ win over Career Boy and Fabius. Needles raced twice at Washington Park in August, but missed the remainder of the year because of a problem tendon. He was named champion 3-year-old male. At four, Needles equaled a track record of 1:42 in the 1¼-mile Fort Lauderdale Handicap and ran third in the Gulfstream Park Handicap prior to his retirement that year.

Needles entered stud at Bonnie Heath Farm near Ocala, Fla., in 1957 and sired 21 stakes winners, including 1970 Belmont Stakes runner-up Needles n Pens. Needles was pensioned in 1977 and was found dead in his stall on Oct. 15, 1984.

Dudley, who wore the same conservative gray suit and white, button-down Oxford shirt for all of Needles' races, died on Oct. 13, 1998. Bonnie Heath still resides near Ocala. 

NEEDLES

Bay, 1953, Ponder—Noodle Soup, by Jack High

- Breeder: William E. Leach
- Owner: D and H Stable
- Trainer: Hugh Fontaine
- Raced 3 years, 21 starts, 11 wins, \$600,355
- Co-champion 2-year-old male and champion 3-year-old male
- Major wins: Kentucky Derby, Belmont S., Flamingo S., Florida Derby, Hopeful S., Sapling S., Fort Lauderdale H.



BERT & RICHARD MORGAN

Needles takes it easy with feline friend "Boots"