

## Where Did the “Triple Crown” Come From?

From my recollection, there have always been two theories on the origin of the Triple Crown in thoroughbred racing— the winning of the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont in succession. One was that its use largely derived from 1937 when Joe “Ducky” Medwick won the Triple Crown in the National League by leading the league in batting average, home runs, and runs batted in and War Admiral won the horse racing Triple Crown. The other was that the “Triple Crown “ usage was ascribable to Charles Hatton, a columnist for the Daily Racing Form, who started using the term after Gallant Fox won the Triple Crown in 1930.<sup>1</sup>

It appears that neither version is particularly true. The Medwick connection is most assuredly inaccurate, and the term Triple Crown was used to describe the Derby, Preakness, and the Belmont both before and at the very time that Gallant Fox won the three races in 1930. It may be that Charles Hatton helped to popularize the phrase, but he certainly did not invent it.

For as long as anyone can recall, the term Triple Crown was used to describe the three classic races for England for three year olds.<sup>2</sup> There races were the Two Thousand Guineas, the English Derby, and the St. Leger. By 1930, the New York Times was calling this Triple Crown “the highest glory one can achieve upon the turf.”<sup>3</sup>

There were previous Triple Crowns in American horse racing. When jockey Fred Taral swept the three major spring events of 1894,<sup>4</sup> he was said to have a “triple crown as no jockey has ever won.”<sup>5</sup>

The Coney Island Jockey Club which races at Sheepshead Bay inaugurated its triple crown in 1907 which featured its major races for three year olds, the Tidal, the Lawrence Realization, and the Coney Island Jockey Club Stakes.<sup>6</sup> If any one horse swept,

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<sup>1</sup> “Charles Hatton, 69, A Racing Columnist,” New York Times, Pg 55, March 16, 1975; Steven Crist, “A Rigorous Challenge for 3-Year Olds,” New York Times, June 6, 1981 Pg. 15. “After Gallant Fox won the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness, and the Belmont Stakes in 1930, the Daily Racing Form columnist Charles Hatton dubbed the victories a ‘Triple Crown.’”; S. Lee Kanner, “Question Box,” New York Times, July 20, 1981 Pg. C11. “Charles Hatton, a racing columnist for the Daily Racing Form dubbed the three races the Triple Crown after Gallant Fox’s feat in 1930.”

<sup>2</sup> See “Volodyovski Was Beaten,” New York Times, September 12, 1901 Pg. 8; “Triple Crown for Championship Colt,” New York Times, June 17, 1907 Pg. 8; “Joel Is to Release Claim on Donoghue,” New York Times, September 12, 1923 Pg. 15; “Record Derby Entry Made by Americans,” New York Times, December 23, 1923 Pg. 17; “English Turf Origin of the Triple Crown,” New York Times, June 8, 1930 Pg. 151

<sup>3</sup> “English Turf Origin of the Triple Crown,” Id.

<sup>4</sup> He won the Brooklyn, Metropolitan, and Suburban Handicaps. See “Ramapo’s Complete Triumph,” New York Times, June 22, 1894 Pg. 3

<sup>5</sup> “A Suburban for Ramapo,” New York Times, June 22, 1894 Pg. 3. See also, “A Great Racing Spectacle,” New York Times, September 6, 1894 Pg. 3.

<sup>6</sup> “Triple Crown for Championship Colt,” New York Times, June 17, 1907 Pg. 8.

the series, there would be an additional \$10,000 paid out as prize to the champion.<sup>7</sup> The Triple Crown bonus was also offered by the Coney Island Jockey Club in 1908.<sup>8</sup>

### Sorry Duck Wucky

The main argument against the association of the Triple Crown in thoroughbred racing with the Triple Crown in baseball is that nobody was using the term Triple Crown to describe Medwick's accomplishment. The New York Times first mentioned Medwick as a Triple Crown winner in 1956.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the first time that the New York Times used the term "Triple Crown" in association with baseball was in 1942 when Triple Crown winner Ted Williams did not win the most valuable player award in the American League.<sup>10</sup> By 1937, the Triple Crown in thoroughbred racing had long been established. It rather looks like baseball's Triple Crown derives from racing's Triple Crown.

### Charles Hatton's Triple Crown

It is hard to claim Charles Hatton as the inventor of the Triple Crown because the phrase was in use before and during the period that Gallant Fox won the three races in 1930.

The New York Times first used "Triple Crown" to describe the Derby, Preakness, and Belmont in 1923 at a time when Hatton was at most 17 years old. The Times wrote in a year where the Preakness preceded the Derby, "Thomas J. Healey had Walter J. Salmon's Preakness winner, Vigil, and his owner wired today that he would be here {Louisville} Friday to see his colt try to capture his second classic in the triple crown of the American turf."<sup>11</sup>

As Gallant Fox was trying to win the Belmont in 1930, the Times wrote, "In America, the idea of the Triple Crown being duplicated came when the Preakness, the Kentucky Derby, and the Belmont Stakes reached such prominence as to overshadow all other Spring 3-year-old events in this country. And as in England, to win the Triple Crown in America carries with it the utmost that can be won on our race courses."<sup>12</sup>

When Gallant Fox won the Belmont, the Times proclaimed "Woodward's Preakness Derby winner ties Sir Barton as Triple Crown hero."<sup>13</sup> Jockey Earl Sande "gave all the credit to his mount which by winning the Preakness, Kentucky Derby, and

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<sup>7</sup> Id. See also "The Prosperous Race Tracks," New York Times, June 20, 1907 Pg. 6.

<sup>8</sup> "Good Week's Racing at Sheepshead Bay," New York Times, Jun 22, 1908 Pg. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Daley, "Sports of the Times: Who Else?" New York Times, November 19, 1956 Pg. 54.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Daley, "Gordon Tops Williams for Award as American League's Most Valuable Player," New York Times, November 4, 1942, Pg. 31

<sup>11</sup> "Horses from East Arrive for Derby," New York Times, May 15, 1923 Pg. 17.

<sup>12</sup> "English Turf Origin of the Triple Crown," supra note 2

<sup>13</sup> Bryan Field, "Gallant Fox Beats Whichone 4 Lengths in \$81,340 Belmont," New York Times, June 8, 1930 Pg. 147.

Belmont had equaled the feat of Sir Barton. These two horses are the only ones to win the ‘triple crown.’”<sup>14</sup>

Now it maybe that Hatton, while not coining the Triple Crown phrase, may have played a role in popularizing it.<sup>15</sup> The fact was that few other New York papers talked about Gallant Fox’s victory as the culmination of the Triple Crown. The World, the American, the Daily News, and the Herald Tribune made no mention of any Triple Crown. The Herald Tribune did make mention of the fact that only Gallant Fox and Sir Barton had won the Preakness and the Derby,<sup>16</sup> but suggested that there was a “sensational quadruple” of winning the Derby, Preakness, Withers, and Belmont that Sir Barton had accomplished but which Gallant Fox could not accomplish since he did not race in the Withers.<sup>17</sup>

While Damon Runyan covering the race for the American did not mention a Triple Crown, he did note that “Belmont Park is devoted to the millionaire anyway. It is too big, and the class distinction is too pronounced for yours truly, but it goes big socially.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, while the Belmont received considerable press coverage in 1930, its coverage was dwarfed by the overall sports coverage of the Max Schmeling/Jack Sharkey heavyweight title fight scheduled for Thursday June 12.

By the time Omaha won the Triple Crown in 1935, there were regular references to the Triple Crown in the media. It had been popularized. But the fact is that the term “Triple Crown” was used before and during the time that Gallant Fox won the Triple Crown. Charles Hatton may, in fact, have popularized the expression. He certainly did not coin it.

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<sup>14</sup> Id.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Crist, “The Kings of the Sport,” New York Times, April 28, 1986. Pg. C 11 at 17.

<sup>16</sup> W.J. MacBeth, “Master of Belair Stud,” New York Herald Tribune, June 3, 1930 Pg.26.

<sup>17</sup> Id.

<sup>18</sup> Damon Runyan, “Belair Colt, Sande Up Wins Belmont, Beats Favorite Before 50, 000,” New York American, June 8, 1930 Pg 1.