

2006 Maryland Horseman of the Year

Joe Aitcheson

Singular Career 'Between the Flags' Yields Legacy for the Ages by Laurel Scott

Editor's note: Every year, the Maryland Horse Council recognizes a professional who has enjoyed an outstanding and influential career in the Maryland horse industry. The recognition of this individual as the Horseman or Horsewoman of the Year is designed to inspire young people to combine their love of horses with their chosen careers. Joe Aitcheson is one of those rare individuals who parlayed homegrown talent into a national stardom never likely to be achieved again. But through good times and bad, he's remained the same modest man Marylanders have known and loved – and an example to us all.

If steeplechasing is a game of hard knocks – and most agree that it is – then Joe Aitcheson is surely the hardest-knocking jockey in the sport's American history.

He's also the winningest, with 440 jump wins from 2,457 mounts over a career spanning more than two decades. (That's 42 more than the next guy, the late Alfred P. "Paddy" Smithwick.) In addition, this Maryland marvel holds the mark for most jump wins in one season (40). And, given the brevity of modern jump jockeys' careers, both records may never be equaled.

Along with the quantity came quality. Aitcheson won eight Virginia Gold Cups, seven Carolina Cups, and six International Gold Cups, also clinching five Temple Gwathmeys, five Noel Laings, five Midsummers and five Manlys – just to name a few. He earned seven riding championships between 1961 and 1970. And in 1976, he became the only professional jockey to receive the National Steeplechase Association's coveted F. Ambrose Clark Award for lifetime service to the sport.

Elected to Thoroughbred racing's Hall of Fame in 1978, he's also the only living jump jock to be honored with a stakes race (the rich Joe Aitcheson Novice Stakes, run at Baltimore's Pimlico Race Course 1997-2002). And how many jockeys have horses named after them? Aitcheson has at least two (Joe At Six, which recalls his punctuality at the track; and Aitcheson Lane, named for a road near his former homestead).

But there's a lot more to this national treasure than facts and figures.

'Fast Little Pony'

A gentle, unassuming man of quiet dignity and astounding ability, Joseph L. Aitcheson Jr. entered this world on July 31, 1928, at the family farm near Burtonsville.

He grew up during the Great Depression, wearing hand-me-downs, working in the fields and milking cows. Equines of all sorts – from plow horses to ponies – were always part of Aitcheson's childhood. Yet he was the first in his immediate family to make them his livelihood.

His father Joe Sr. (who went by his middle name, Leiter) was a professional baseball player who fell on hard times after the stock market crash of '29. Leiter worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps, also helping his brother Whitney found the Iron Bridge Hounds and serving as its Master of Foxhounds for many years.

Introduced to the saddle at age 3, Aitcheson recalls riding a "fast little



pony" named Nancy. She taught him the basics, toting him around horse shows and junior races. In his mind's eye, the veteran can still picture a long-ago race aboard Nancy. Though he was just 5 at the time, "One of my earliest memories was at the end of this race," he recounted. "When the other ponies pulled up at the finish line, my pony pulled up really short, and I fell off! I remember my dad picking me up and swinging me around and around, like you do [to] a little kid to stop them from crying."

It was the first of many races, and many falls; but Aitcheson learned from the outset to "kick on." The rest, he said, he pretty much picked up himself. "My dad taught me about things, just putting me on horses," he explained. "Get bucked off enough, you learn how to sit tight on them!"

In the years that followed, Aitcheson foxhunted with his father and uncle, indulging his growing passion for jumping.

"We built a lot of fences on the trails in the woods, and whenever we came up around that area, we got to jump all of them. And I loved that!" he said.

He also worked weekends at his uncle Whitney's riding stables, cleaning the barn and guiding trail rides for \$1 a day. "My uncle had a lot of people there on Saturday and Sundays; it was just \$1 a horse, and they'd ride for an hour," he recalled.

From Wartime to Post Time

Life is funny, though. One moment, you're riding a horse, and the next, you're in the military.

At 17, our hero – having earned enough credits to graduate from high school – joined the Navy for a two-year hitch. Upon his return, Aitcheson worked as a carpenter's helper, a truck driver, you name it.

As a child, he'd dreamed of being a jump jockey, even hitchhiking to Laurel to watch the races. "The first [steeplechase] race I ever saw – a [black] jockey rode it, and his name was Colonel 'Not' Brooks," he said. "He was a good rider; he used to ride real long, and he was my idol."

But as a 144-pound teenager, Aitcheson had believed he was too big to ride in steeplechases.

Still, he competed in point-to-points and amateur timber contests. The 1950 Maryland Hunt Cup was particularly memorable. As John Ellis Russell Jr. recounted in *The Maryland Hunt Cup: Past and Present*, Aitcheson's mount, Little Springs, was in last position when he "ran headlong into the big 13th fence, tearing two panels down to ground level. Somehow, he stood up; but rider Aitcheson went rolling on the turf, and the pair raced no more that day."

According to Aitcheson, the horse was in over its head, and he was too green to know it. "He just breasted it," the intrepid rider said. "There was a big picture in the *Baltimore Sun* showing him busting through there, and sailing me off the front."

That same year marked the start of the Korean War. Gung-ho from the get-go, Aitcheson returned to the Navy, so impatient to see

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action that he even “jumped ship” at one point. Eventually, he got the action he sought. On his second tour, serving as gunner’s mate on an aircraft carrier, he narrowly escaped injury from a deadly “hung” bomb that bounced off a returning plane.

After his discharge in 1954, Aitcheson returned to the Maryland countryside and an unexpected riding opportunity. “My father got a horse to break that bucked a lot,” he explained. “I broke it after a few spills, but it was still too spooky for the owner to foxhunt, so my dad talked him into running the horse at Saturday jump meets.” The



Douglas Lees

Aitcheson and Top Bid, right, eye the finish in the 1973 Grand National at Fair Hill. Known for his blinding speed, the Phipps horse was national champion in 1970.

horse was Grand Chal, who would go on to become national timber champion in 1958.

An entry of Alfred H. Smith of Upper Marlboro, Grand Chal wasn’t terribly keen on men. So, according to Smith’s daughter Marilyn Ketts, he was worked by Aitcheson’s sister Jane, herself an accomplished horsewoman. “And then he’d let Joe get on him and ride him [in races]!” Ketts said, laughing.

But for this twist of fortune – and his father’s encouragement – Aitcheson’s legendary career might not have happened. Until then, he’d worked primarily with his hands, in carpentry, bricklaying, and the like – even playing high school football and boxing during a semester at the University of Maryland. “I think I eventually would have been a farmer or something, but I didn’t have any jobs that worthwhile,” he said. “And I just sort of fell into jump racing.”

Finally, those hands had found their calling. “He had wonderful hands,” recalled Ketts. “He also had a good sense of timing, excellent balance ... and a good head on his shoulders. Just a tremendous amount of talent!”

Still, in those days, there wasn’t much money in timber racing, let alone *amateur* timber racing. So, at 28 – an age when most jump jocks are contemplating retirement – Aitcheson decided to turn pro.

He had to reduce to meet the 130-pound minimum. Then, hustling rides like a man possessed, he climbed aboard whatever came his way. But, when 1956 drew to a close, he had little to show for his trouble. “I could only hustle 10 rides all year, and four of them fell,” he said. “I broke the same collarbone twice, and ended the year with my arm in a sling and no job.”

Fortunately, fate wasn’t through with Aitcheson. His big break came the next year, when he landed a job with trainer D.M. “Mikey” Smithwick of Hydes. “Just by luck, I’d roomed on the racetrack with a guy who worked for [trainer] Gene Weymouth, and Gene Weymouth put in a word for me to get a job with Smithwick,” he explained. “I started out just mucking stalls and getting on a horse or two. They found out I could ride good, and jump over fences good. My first year with them – which was my second year riding [professionally] – I was fourth leading rider!”

He also won the Virginia Gold Cup with Grand Chal, beating Mikey’s brother Paddy on Ricacho.

“Then, the second year I was with them, [trainer] Pete Bostwick had retired, and that left Mrs. Phipps’ horses,” Aitcheson said. “Paddy was leading rider that year, so she gave her horses to Mikey. He had a big stable of horses, and just by luck, I came in there as a galloping boy, and got to be second rider.”

It was a turning point for Aitcheson; and the rest, as they say, is history. “Mikey and Paddy taught me a lot about racing,” he reflected.

‘Master Tactician’

Aitcheson rode with his stirrups shorter than most, displaying steely determination and near-perfect equitation over even the hairiest fences.

In the era of natural hurdles and brush, he steered some of the sport’s greats – including national champions Peal (1961), Amber Diver (1963), Bon Nouvel (1964, 1965 and 1968), Tuscalee (1966), Top Bid (1970) and Soothsayer (1972).

Of these, he considers Alfred H. Smith’s Tuscalee – who was trained by his father – the gamest. “He won more races than any other jumper... and he’d run his heart out,” Aitcheson said. Indeed, Tuscalee’s career record of 37 hurdle/steeplechase wins has yet to be matched.

Top Bid was Aitcheson’s fastest mount. A former work horse for the legendary Buckpasser, he’d had his spirit broken by that speedball, so was turned into a ‘chaser – but still required finessing to run his best. “I won more stakes races on Top Bid than anyone else,” Aitcheson noted. That includes the 1970 Colonial Cup, the first steeplechase to boast a \$100,000 purse.

Then there was Peal, who counted the prestigious Temple Gwathmey among his spoils. “He won it the easiest I’d ever won it, by about 10 lengths,” Aitcheson said. “He may have been the best horse I ever rode, but he didn’t get that much publicity.”

And though Grand Chal was in a class by himself, Aitcheson piloted other timber greats, too, such as King of Spades and Leeds Don.

When asked about his favorite courses, Aitcheson said he misses the New York tracks – but mostly for their atmosphere in the old days. He also respected the old Broadview layout; the former home of



Douglas Lees

Mrs. A. C. Randolph’s Walrus clears the 12th fence en route to victory in the 1968 Virginia Gold Cup. This was the sixth of Aitcheson’s eight wins in this timber classic.

the Virginia Gold Cup in Warrenton, it was a true rider’s course, and Aitcheson its undisputed master. “You’d have to angle the fences and pull out and drop in on the beacons. So the best jockeys sometimes won, not always the best horses,” he commented.

It was all in a day’s work for the jockey former NSA racing official Charlie Colgan called a “master tactician.”

“If every jockey rode races like Joe Aitcheson, there would be little need for officials,” said Colgan, who is now executive director

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of the National Steeplechase Foundation. “He was as competitive as they come, yet there wasn’t a mean bone in his body. At every stage of a race, he knew where he was in relation to the entire field, and he was careful never to put another rider in harm’s way.

“He had an uncanny knack [for] finding the shortest way home, and he won a lot of races by simply saving more ground than anyone else.”

Grit and Determination

As every jump jockey knows, what goes up must come down – and sometimes, the descent is far from graceful. Aitcheson reckons that along with his record for wins, he owns the record for falls (at least 150). Among his worst injuries: a skull fracture that knocked him out for 18 hours, multiple breaks to his collarbone and nose, and “lots of ribs.”

But one spill in particular nearly cost this brave jockey his life. In 1965, the year after he rode a record 40 winners, a horse fell on him during a race at New York’s Aqueduct Racetrack. Initially diagnosed with broken ribs, he was later found to have also sustained a punctured lung, a ruptured spleen and kidney damage. Rushed into exploratory surgery, he reportedly went into shock and was not expected to last through the night.

But Aitcheson’s will to live was apparently as strong as his will to win. Unfortunately, after four weeks in the hospital and 3 ½ months in recovery, trainers were inclined to write him off. Suddenly, the nation’s top jock couldn’t get a mount. Some even tried to steer him towards training, but he held out, riding leftovers. “Some of them fell, but I didn’t get hurt any more that year,” he reported.

His perseverance eventually paid off. In 1967, trainers sat up and took notice after a deft ride on a mediocre horse ended in victory. Jockey Tommy Walsh had also retired, and soon, Aitcheson was back at Smithwick Stables and riding high on the charts again.

By the 1970s, he’d endured many injuries that would have finished another jock.

A study in courage with a stubborn work ethic, he simply refused to give up. “The man could work through pain,” said Mary Ann Steele, who grew up foxhunting with the Aitchesons. “To see him wrapped up like a mummy, because he’d broken such-and-such bone one day, and such-and-such bone on another day – and still be out there! He was an iron man.”

Marilyn Ketts concurs. “He was just a really gritty, determined person,” she said. “He never had a whole lot to say; he just showed up and did his work, and it didn’t matter how much agony he was in. He had broken his collarbone [something like] nine times, and it didn’t seem to bother him; he wanted to get right back out there and ride, whether it was broken or not.”

It was Aitcheson’s daughter Jody who convinced him to hang up his tack in 1977, at age 49. “I’d been to Rolling Rock [PA], and I’d had a fall – nothing bad, but I had a banged-up leg,” he recalled. “My daughter came over to see me ... and she said, ‘Oh, Daddy, *please* don’t ride races anymore.’ I was planning on riding another year or two, but that’s what really did it.”

He went out in true Aitcheson style.

That summer, a bad fall at Saratoga Race Course (NY) left him with a neck swollen to 1 ½ times its normal size. But the season highlight, the New York Turf Writers Cup, was just days away – and no one but Aitcheson could ride Happy Intellectual the way he needed to be ridden. “He’d been running on the lead and dying off in the stretch run,” he explained.

Aitcheson couldn’t gallop on the medication he was given. So, determined to ride, he persuaded a vet to give him equine pain pills instead.

The race was one for the history books.

Aitcheson was unable to mount on his own, so trainer Smithwick

led “Happy” into the enclosure, where he picked the jock up “like a sack of oats” and placed him on top of the horse.

Everything went fine until the final turn, when Aitcheson’s legs gave out and exhaustion finally overcame him. “I just grabbed the mane and held on,” he recalled. “I wasn’t squeezing or helping him along at all – I was just sitting there.

“I could hear whips popping behind me, and knew they were closing in the stretch, and that Happy would quit when they caught him, like he usually [did].”

Then a remarkable thing occurred. The first horse to reach them was way on the outside rail. Aitcheson knew “Happy” could see him, but rather than quit running as expected, he “just shifted gears and wouldn’t let that horse past,” he

recalled. Call it Lady Luck, divine intervention or what you will, the pair won the Turf Writers by 1 ½ lengths, setting a new course record.

“I don’t know what happened that day,” the veteran mused, his voice fraught with emotion. “But horses are so much smarter than people think they are.”

It was the last stakes win of Aitcheson’s career, and one of his biggest thrills. (This from a man who’s also raced in the daunting French Grand National, competed in five rodeos, and parachuted from a plane.) “I forget the names of the people I work with every day, but I’ll never forget Happy Intellectual!” he proclaimed.

A lot has changed in the “infield sport” since Aitcheson first put foot to stirrup. The New York Turf Writers Cup, worth little more than \$20,000 in 1977, now carries a purse of \$150,000-plus. Chasers rarely race at the 130-pound minimum anymore. Body protectors are mandatory equipment. And hurdles and brush have been replaced by portable National Fences (a change Aitcheson understands, though he misses the brush).

‘He was as competitive as they come, yet there wasn’t a mean bone in his body.’
– former National Steeplechase Association official Charlie Colgan



Courtesy of Joe Aitcheson

The race of a lifetime: The 1977 New York Turf Writers Cup, with Mrs. Ogden Phipps’ victorious Happy Intellectual and a tired but equally happy Aitcheson

Through it all, he’s never regretted the path he’d chosen. “I loved it!” he exclaimed. “And I rode *everything*.”

Aitcheson’s humble about his accomplishments, too. Nevermind that his winning record, as jump rider-turned-journalist Sean Clancy affirmed, is like “Everest” to generations of American jockeys. “I know he’s proud of what he accomplished and knows it was something big, but he’ll never brag about any of it,” Clancy said.

Gretchen Mobberley, who’s galloped horses with Aitcheson, agrees. “Even when he was a big name and doing all those good things, it never went to his head,” she said. “He has always been Joe – with no affectations, no nothing. Plain old Joe, the Joe we love.”

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Lifelong Career in the Saddle

A doctor once told Aitcheson, "I wish I had your heart; it's so *strong*." Surely, the strength of that heart – combined with his love for animals – contributed to Aitcheson's success.

"Joe truly loves horses," Mobberley confirmed. "I have never seen Joe lose his temper with a horse. I've never seen him snatch a horse, kick a horse or anything – he always seems to soothe them and get along with them... he's kind to horses, and horses are kind to Joe."

After retirement, Aitcheson tried his hand at training for a year. But he started to get attached to his charges; and heartbreak, it seemed, was inevitable. "You have to treat them like machinery to train them," he opined. "You have to drop them down to where they can win races, and forget about them when they get claimed. And I didn't like that. I love animals, and sometimes you'd wonder how well they'd be treated."

So back to galloping he went, one of the rare few to make a lifelong career out of riding. Since the sale of the family farm, he's moved to a Silver Spring retirement community not far from his sister Jane (who is married to Ron Cartwright, a former jump jockey recently retired from a training career). But age hasn't slowed Aitcheson down. Still committed to keeping fit at 77, he requested sixth-floor accommodations, so he could walk briskly up all those stairs. He still jogs, too, and gallops for trainer Tim Keefe at Laurel. "I feel so much better when I'm in good shape," he said. "It also gives me something to do."

Aitcheson's enthusiasm for racing remains undimmed. You'll still find him on the rail at jump meetings. He's even ridden the odd race since "retiring" – and would gladly have ridden more, if the NSA hadn't capped the race-riding age at 59.

That degree of devotion is inspiring. Just ask Sean Clancy, champion steeplechase jockey in 1998. He grew up idolizing "Jumpin' Joe" the way other kids idolize football or baseball stars. And why not? Even Hall of Fame flat jockeys like Angel Cordero speak of Aitcheson with reverence.

As Clancy related in the Aug. 7 issue of *The Saratoga Special*, he and Aitcheson ran into Cordero, with whom Aitcheson once shared a valet, during a visit to Saratoga Springs (NY) last summer. "He'd come in busted, bruised, neck wrapped up, shoulder strapped up," Cordero recounted to Clancy and others. "I'd say, 'There's no way this guy's gonna ride today.' Then he'd go out and win."

Aitcheson was surprised that racing folk even recognized him. But, as Clancy noted, "When you're the best of the best, they know."

A true gentleman, Aitcheson helps others whenever he can. "He is a very, very nice person ... and so considerate of everybody on the racetrack," said Mobberley. "If you're having trouble with a horse, and Joe is around, he'll say, 'Here, I'll give you a lead.' Or if you have a horse that maybe isn't going to go off really well, he'll start off with you. He's just very thoughtful, very considerate – and I'm sure he's helped a lot of riders starting out."

As a youngster, Mary Anne Steele was in awe of such greatness – and still is. "I was just this kid agog at the time," she said. "And to all the younger people, he was always so kind and giving. Just a decent soul. I don't think he's ever had a bad word for anybody."

Perhaps Mobberley put it best when she called Aitcheson a "complete horseman." Certainly, as long as people race horses, his legacy of courage, dedication and kindness – not to mention professionalism – will continue to inspire. ■

'He's kind to horses, and horses are kind to Joe.'

– Gretchen Mobberley

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