

# barbaro

A CHAMPION LIVES ON

BY GAIL LUCIANI

**O**n May 6, 2006, a three-year-old colt named Barbaro thundered into the limelight with a decisive win at the Kentucky Derby. Undefeated going into this high-profile race, his margin of victory—six and a half lengths—was the greatest seen at the Derby in more than 50 years.

Those following his incredible saga remember all too well what came next. His promising career was shattered with a misstep at the running of the Preakness Stakes at Pimlico two weeks later. In a stunning turn of events, Barbaro fractured his right hind leg in three places. After immediate life-saving veterinary care at the track, he was rushed by equine ambulance, with a Maryland State Police escort, to Penn's New Bolton Center.

Dr. Dean W. Richardson, an orthopedic surgeon and Chief of Surgery at the Center's George D. Widener Hospital for Large Animals, performed surgery on the colt

the next day, Sunday, May 21. He led an expert surgical team that included anesthesiologists, surgical residents and veterinary technicians in a five-hour procedure that fused the fetlock and pastern joints to repair and stabilize the injured leg. The team implanted a stainless steel plate and 27 screws into the injured right hind leg to span the comminuted fracture and joints. A fiberglass cast was placed over the leg for further support, and Barbaro was taken to the Hospital's recovery pool for the first of many surgery recoveries. Barbaro, ever the athlete, "practically jogged" to his stall, recalled Dr. Richardson.

"Barbaro's case was about as difficult as such an operation could be," said Dr. Richardson at a press conference conducted that evening. "We are optimistic, but right now we are focusing on Barbaro's recovery."

This focus would continue for several months, as Barbaro's condition improved, remained stable, worsened and stabilized again. Dr. Richardson offered regular updates to the media and the public, as the ranks of Barbaro fans and well-wishers increased daily. To many, Barbaro's heroic fight defined what was good and noble about horses and their historical connection to humans. Cards and letters arrived from fans around the world, followed by countless crates of apples and carrots. The colt especially liked the baby carrots with green leafy tops. Bags of mints and horse treats joined boxes of suggested cures; so many people wanted to share information that could possibly help the horse. Some offered their dogs to serve as companions for Barbaro, and they sent photos of their own horses that had survived horrific injuries. So many flowers were delivered that, once empty, vases were returned to the florist only to reappear with new arrangements. TastyKakes and pizza, donuts and chocolates—the tables at the Hospital's admissions desk groaned under the weight of the outpouring of support.

In July, Barbaro developed laminitis in his left hind hoof. A painful and little-understood condition, laminitis afflicts thousands of horses each year. It can result from many causes, including excessive weight bearing in one limb, and occurs when laminae, the strong connecting tissues that attach the pedal bone and the inner hoof wall, are inflamed. For Barbaro, aggressive treatment included hours each day in an equine sling, specially designed to relieve pressure on his hooves. Posted media updates became grim, as Dr. Richardson again emphasized the seriousness of Barbaro's condition.



Photo by Steven Berkowitz/V83



Barbaro remained in the Hospital's Intensive Care Unit, and under the watchful eyes of his medical team, he slowly grew stronger. "He's a smart horse and a good patient," said Dr. Richardson, emphasizing the colt's positive attitude and excellent appetite.

Daily visits by owners Gretchen and Roy Jackson contributed to that appetite—they brought clippings of fresh grass from their nearby farm. Barbaro relished this treat, and by August, he was strong enough to be hand-grazed outside.

Other visitors came—Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell, stopping by to feed the champion a carrot, delivered promised state funding for the School. Penn president Amy Gutmann came, unofficially, on more than one occasion. Reporters paced the halls of the Hospital, a few lucky ones spending time with Barbaro, his star power undiminished. Interpretive dancer Martita Goshen paid tribute to both the equine athlete and his caregivers, with a performance in the Hospital lobby called "I Could Not Ask for More."

In early January, talk was heard of discharging Barbaro, and sending him to a horse farm in Kentucky, where the warm climate and open fields would mean more room and greater freedom. But complications in his laminitic left hind foot halted those plans; an abscess in the healed right hind foot was followed quickly by laminitis in his two front feet. From the earliest days, Barbaro's owners had not wanted him to suffer—the decision to end the fight was made in consultation with Dr. Richardson. With his owners at his side, Barbaro was euthanized on Monday, January 29, 2007.

While the loss of any patient is painful, Barbaro's loss cast a pall over New Bolton Center. "Certainly, grief is the price we pay for love," said Gretchen Jackson at the press conference announcing his death later that day.

Barbaro leaves us a champion's legacy. In life, he demonstrated power and elegance by doing so well what horses love most: running with all his strength. Treatment following his injury allowed the world to see just how far equine medicine has advanced. And his death rekindled an interest in fighting laminitis, the condition that ultimately took him—and thousands of other horses. The Jacksons recently endowed a chair for equine disease research at the School. "We are very pleased to make this commitment in support of the School of Veterinary Medicine's research of equine diseases," Gretchen Jackson said. "Our close relationship with Dr. Richardson over the last eight months persuaded us to name the chair in his honor. We are indeed grateful to him, and we especially look forward to a future without laminitis." ♥

## Honoring Barbaro's Memory

**T**he heartbreaking end to Barbaro's saga was all too familiar to those who love horses, but the true meaning behind the story is, as Roy Jackson has said, full of hope and inspiration.

At Penn Vet, we will continue the fight against laminitis. What better way to memorialize this charismatic champion than with a focused effort to beat the condition that took him from us. No tribute could be more fitting to his indomitable spirit, or to the millions of people whose imagination he captured, than to achieve this goal. We must use this opportunity—we may not get another—to raise funds to move forward on equine diseases such as this.

On behalf of those closest to Barbaro, I would like to thank everyone, from the professionals in the media to his fans around the world, for their support and kindness throughout his stay at New Bolton Center. Now, by working together to fight laminitis, we can honor Barbaro's memory as a champion, both on the track and off.

—JOAN HENDRICKS, V'79, GR'80  
THE GILBERT S. KAHN DEAN OF  
VETERINARY MEDICINE