



JAMES WALTON PRODUCTIONS

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PHOTO FINISH

THE RACE OF THE CENTURY

FILM LENGTH: 120 min. | STATUS: Pre-production | DESIRED LEAD: Pharrell Williams
WRITERS: James Walton, Leon Nichols & Calvin Davis | GENRES: Documentary, Sports
Doc, Historical Nonfiction, Biography, African American Historical Biography, BLM

FILM SYNOPSIS | PHOTO FINISH: The Race of the Century

LOGLINE

In June 1890, amid intense racial and political unrest, jockey Isaac Burns Murphy—the central figure in a frenzied and electrifying “black vs. white” race in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn (New York)—aims for the BIG prize, leading Hall of Famer Salvator down the track on a quest to trample injustice while taking home \$10,000. With “white” and “colored” signs popping up in response to newly minted Jim Crow laws, all eyes are on Murphy and his rival as one seals America’s fate for generations to come in this photo-finish race dubbed by *The New York Times* as “the greatest in the history of thoroughbred racing.”

SYNOPSIS

1890: Jim Crow laws recently enacted, signs denoting “white” and “colored” begin littering the American landscape and not just in the rural South. The racial and political unrest stirred up by these events are palpable, intense. In the midst of the turmoil, two horseracing rivals (one “white,” “colored”) find themselves once again face-to-face for a much anticipated Match of the Century: a horserace that would seal the fate of not only African Americans but of America, as a whole, for generations to come.

The biographical, American sports film *PHOTO FINISH: Race of the Century* captures events leading up to and following a contentious June 25, 1890, rematch between Isaac Burns Murphy and Ed “Snapper” Garrison. Murphy goes on to be considered one of the greatest athletes and dynamic sports figures of the 19th Century, while Garrison remains widely known for holding back for most of a race and then finishing at top speed. Both are adept at competing passionately and at dazzling audiences to deliver thrilling victories.

The son of a former slave, Murphy rises to prominence in a field then dominated by African Americans. (Notably, 13 of the 15 jockeys who took part in 1875’s inaugural Kentucky Derby run were Black.) By his own accounts, Murphy wins just shy of half of all his career races. In doing so, he sets a standard no other jockey would come close to achieving. Year after year, Murphy handily forges a reputation as a born and bred winner. He wins the Kentucky Derby three times: first in 1884 and then again in both 1890 and 1891.

Murphy also wins the Latonia Derby ... an impressive five times. In addition, he wins four of the first five runnings of the American Derby, once the richest “3-year-old” equine race in America. Murphy, known for his skill on the racetrack, is likewise renowned for his deep-seated loyalty and honesty. (He once refused to let champion Falsetto lose the 1879 Kenner Stakes, though many a gambler enticed him with generous bribes.) Among other champion horses, Murphy rides: Emperor of Norfolk, Kingston, Firenze and Salvator.

It is astride Salvator, while competing in the summer of 1890 Match of the Century Suburban Handicap in Sheepshead Bay that Murphy goes up against Ed “Snapper” Garrison atop Tenny—for a second time. Having been forced into a frenzied rematch against his White counterpart, Murphy is challenged to settle the national debate over which rider is the better jockey. By being entered into a contest rich in racial overtones and long-term implications, it is critical that Murphy do whatever it takes to reign victorious.

Garrison, a lanky jockey, typically rides in a high-crouch position and favors the whip when looking to deliver a memorable finish. In stark contrast, Murphy is one of the first jockeys to pace his horse for an ultimate charge down the homestretch using a technique that would soon become known as the “grandstand finish.” He does this riding upright and urging his mounts on with soft words and a spur rather than using, as Garrison and many others do (especially sardonic given the times), a whip.

Garrison and Murphy would meet and face off for the first time at the inaugural running of the Realization Stakes, riding Tenny and Salvator respectively. Tenny, known as “The Swayback” for being low-slung, is Salvator’s closest rival for 3-year-old honors. At the start of his 4-year-old season, Tenny wins four races in succession while Salvator sits out with a leg injury. Yet, in his first race as a 4-year-old thoroughbred, Salvator is led (by Murphy) to a decisive win over Tenny in the April 1890 7th running of the Suburban Handicap held in Sheepshead Bay.

Regardless, Tenny’s owner David T. Pulsifer—a stable owner said to be fond of facilitating side bets and of brokering each “deal in monosyllables”—is so personally outraged by the outcome that he challenges Salvator’s owner James Ben Ali Haggin—an American attorney, rancher, breeder, investor and art collector—to a rematch. The two bicker over details but eventually agree that two months later, on June 25, 1890 to be exact: Murphy, Garrison and the two thoroughbreds would meet on the very same track to compete in a 1:1 race of epic proportions (aka The Match of the Century).

With a \$10,000 prize attached, some 20,000 onlookers flock to the Coney Island racetrack to witness the event, which is whipped into a frenzy after being pitched by the press as a pure contest of “black vs. white.” Whichever rival prevails, he and his corresponding sponsor will walk away richer. In addition, the winning jockey will lay claim to the title of “superior” sportsman on behalf of his people. The race is as high-stakes as they come, yet it remains anyone’s guess as to who will walk away the true winners.

This is undoubtedly the most memorable contest of Murphy’s life, a sporting competition of national importance given its ties to prevailing notions of racial hierarchy. If he loses, African Americans nationwide will be summarily thrust into the lowest rungs of society.

Newly-enacted, government-sanctioned Jim Crow laws meant to further ostracize Negroes and widen the racial divide, through acts of exclusion, will be thought to have merit. Murphy has no choice but to lead Salvator down the track on a quest to trample injustice.

Were it not for a photographer poised to capture the last gallop from alongside the finish line, the race and its outcome could very well be disputed for all eternity. With the image developed, the winner is confirmed as having taken the lead by a nose in one of horseracing's first official "photo finishes." Murphy goes on to be the first jockey (Black or White) to be inducted into the National Museum of Racing Hall of Fame. Salvator, of course, follows in his famed jockey's footsteps and also becomes an inductee.

Murphy owns and trains horses throughout his career, dying of pneumonia at age 36. For years, his grave is left untouched and nearly forgotten in an abandoned cemetery in Lexington, Kentucky: African Cemetery No. 2. After a grueling search that ends in 1967, his remains are found, exhumed and reburied at the old burial site of American thoroughbred Man o' War (1917-1947), winner of 20 out of 21 career races. Prior to its opening in 1978, Murphy's remains are moved again to Kentucky Horse Park along with those of Man o' War and his illustrious descendants. A champion among champions, Murphy and his legacy spur a 21st-Century renaissance.

KEY CHARACTERS

ISAAC BURNS MURPHY (b. April 16, 1861 | d. Feb. 12, 1896): Graced with matinee idol looks, Murphy is a renowned Black jockey who later becomes a horse owner and trainer. He is the first inductee, regardless of race, into the National Museum of Racing Hall of Fame. Murphy is considered to be one of the greatest Jockeys in American thoroughbred racing history, riding in 11 Kentucky Derbies and winning three: 1884 (astride Buchanan), 1890 (atop Riley) and 1891 (Kingman). By his own calculations, Murphy wins 628 of his 1,412 starts, a 44% win rate which is said to have never been equaled. Of Murphy, fellow jockey and Hall of Fame inductee Eddie Arcaro says: "There is no chance that his record of winning will ever be surpassed!" Revered for his strict honesty, Murphy is equally and widely respected for his uncompromising integrity and his racing skills. He is inducted into the NMR Hall of Fame in 1955.

ED "SNAPPER" GARRISON (b. Feb. 9, 1868 | d. Oct. 28, 1930): Garrison, born in New Haven, Connecticut, eventually dies in Brooklyn. The lanky White jockey makes a habit of coming on slow and finishing at top speed, so much so that the tactic would go on to be referred to as a "Garrison finish." He rides in the East Coast circuit for 16 years (1882 to 1897) and, while no official records document all his career races, estimates that he rode to more than 700 wins. Two spectacular examples occur in the 1892 Suburban Handicap (atop Montana) and in 1893 on the Guttenberg track (atop Tammany). Still, one of his most memorable races will remain the Match of the Century on June 25, 1890. Garrison is among an inaugural group of Class of 1955 inductees into the NMR Hall of Fame.

SALVATOR (b. 1886 | d. 1909): A beautiful dark bay chestnut, this Hall of Fame thoroughbred scores a reputation as one of the best racehorses of the late 19th Century. Bred by Daniel Swigert of Elmendorf Farm (Lexington, Ky.), Salvator is trained by Mathew Byrnes and owned by James Ben Ali Hagan. Sired by Prince Charlie out of Salina, Salvator's lineage traces back to the prodigious mare Pocahontas. On his dam's side, he carries the blood of Boston. Salvator dies at age 23 just days before his old rival Tenny ... to "finish first" once again. After competing in the April 1890 Suburban Handicap and the June 1890 Match of the Century, the two horses face off once more in the Champion Stakes at Monmouth Park, Salvator galloping to an easy four-length victory.

TENNY (b. 1886 | d. 1908): The "ungainly swaybacked" Tenny is sired by French stallion Rayon d'Or and the American mare Belle of Maywood. Due to his unconventional and unfavorable conformation, he is sold for \$100 as a yearling—much like the "people's horse" Seabiscuit decades later. He becomes extremely popular, his "ugly features" merely endearing him to the public. A brilliant thoroughbred in his own right, Tenny goes on to be widely remembered for his bitter rivalry with the two-time "Horse of the Year" Salvator. At the start of 1890, Tenny runs to victory in his first four races while Salvator sits out with injuries.

JAMES BEN ALI HAGGIN: American attorney, rancher, breeder, investor and art collector. Owner of Salvator.

DAVID T. PULSIFER: American stable owner and breeder fond of facilitating side bets and speaking in monosyllables. Owner of Tenny.

SAMPLE DIALOGUE

I. Murphy and Garrison dismount Salvator and Tenny, respectively, and begin walking their horses to the Winner's Circle. Each jockey is convinced that he just won the April 1890 Suburban Handicap.

GARRISON: I think I beat you.
MURPHY: I'm certain I beat you.

II. After his April 1890 win at Sheepshead Bay and before winning the Kentucky Derby for a second time, Isaac Burns Murphy grants an interview to Black journalist T. Thomas Fortune.

FORTUNE: Is this your way of putting an end to racism?
MURPHY: Let's just say I ride to win.

MAJOR ACTION

I. The April 1890 Suburban Handicap is over. With Salvator officially posted in 1st Place, gamblers either scramble to claim their winnings or grumble under their breath. The opposing owner paces outside the stables, calling interference and insisting on a rematch.

PULSIFER: There's no way my Tenny could've lost to that little nigger!

II. June 25, 1890 (Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn): The Match of the Century is about to begin. Newspaper stands are littered with publications touting the rematch as a “black vs. white” event. Patrons, having mobbed the racetrack, embrace the tension as all 20,000 of them scramble into the stands to witness the action. The buzz hits a fever pitch as both horses are guided to the starting line by their jockeys. Isaac Burns Murphy and his White counterpart, Ed “Snapper” Garrison, are lost in concentration. Each is determined to seal their fate as the superior jockey ... *and they're off!*

True to form, Garrison favors his signature high-crouch position and a whip, while Murphy rests lightly atop Salvator. The horses run side-by-side for three furlongs—until Salvator pulls ahead two lengths. Murphy makes a habit of opening big leads, Garrison urging Tenny on to close the gaps not once but twice. Coming into the homestretch, Salvator races ahead once again. Just as quickly, Garrison whips Tenny into a ferocious gallop. The thoroughbred comes within a head of overtaking Salvator. By now, patrons are on their feet and are urging on their choice for winning thoroughbred.

The two horses hit the wire seemingly as one, a photographer poised at the finish line catching the winner ahead by a nose. Judges ultimately declare Salvator the winner by “half a head.” His time of 2:05 sets a new American record for 1.25 miles. Murphy's historic photo-finish win further divides the nation and the horseracing community.

KEY SET PIECES

I. The April 1890 Suburban Handicap has begun. Given widespread racial disharmony, White jockeys make a habit of running down their Black counterparts: boxing them in, smacking them with their riding crops and riding them into the rails as racing officials openly look the other way. Still, Isaac Burns Murphy and Salvator storm to victory unscathed. The outcome dismays D.T. Pulsifer, who falsely claims that his horse, Tenny, had been tampered with.



II. Turn of the century Jim Crow and other measures serve a major blow to horseracing itself—the Black majority of jockeys edged out. One after another, the obituaries pile up: High-profile Blacks suffer indignity, depression and desperation as the pride they once took in applying their highly-revered skills is snatched away by mounting calls for segregated tracks. Soup Perkins, who won the Kentucky Derby at age 15, drinks himself to death by age 31. Tommy Britton, who could no longer secure work as a jockey, commits suicide by swallowing acid. A third, Albert Isom, buys a pistol at a nearby pawnshop and shoots himself in the head in front of a clerk.

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