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## Black trainer has earned respect

**By Larry Muhammad**

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Never heard of Johnny Dawson?

In the world of the saddlebred, the quintessential show horse and Kentucky's oldest native breed, Dawson is revered in the pantheon of fabled African-American trainers.

He was mentored by the great Joe Walker at Kalarama Farm, worked under Walter Murphy at Emerald Farm and was a protégé of Frank "Walk-Trot" Thomas.

He trained famous breeding stallions such as Mr. Fitzgerald and Starheart's Gem.

"Practically everybody's gone now," said Dawson, 82. "I guess my time is coming."

Black trainers such as Tom Bass, who rode in the inaugural parade of President Grover Cleveland, and Walker, who trained the phenomenal stakes winner and outstanding sire Kalarama Rex, remain largely unknown outside the sport despite their monumental contribution.

Dawson has a mention, though brief, in "Who's Who in Horsedom," the multi-volume reference work for equestrian devotees. A section on the old Ashland, Ohio-based Countryside Horse Farm in the 1970-1972 volume stated, "John Dawson, with his light hands, has proved his exceptional talent at breaking and training young horses."

Photographs of Dawson and other noted trainers were displayed in Lexington at last year's American Saddlebred Museum exhibit, "Out of the Shadows: Bringing to Light Black Horsemen in Saddlebred History."

"At Emerald Farm, Johnny Dawson was considered a co-trainer when Walter Murphy became head trainer," said Saddlebred Museum curator Kim Skipton. "And of course, most people know his work at Countryside," now Ashwood Farms in Wadsworth, Ohio.

Lonnie Lavery, the Akron, Ohio-based horseman who hosts the Internet forum "Ask the Trainer Online," said, "Without question, Countryside was one of the largest breeding farms in the U.S. in the 1950s and '60s, and Johnny Dawson developed a lot of nice horses for the owner, Mary Miller Johnson, was her private trainer for at least 30 years and a wonderfully nice man. There were more black trainers up in Ohio than you could possibly imagine."

Willie Turner, a retired Columbus, Ohio, trainer, said of Dawson, "You would have to rank John right up there with 'Trot' (Thomas). You'd have to rank him with Walter Murphy. John was a good horseman; very, very, very patient with young horses."

Goya, a colt that Dawson trained under Murphy at Emerald Farm was one, Turner said. "She was meant to be one of the greats. With her, you took a lot of time, and John gave her the time, had her in the back barns, and when she was ready, Walter had her sent up front. But once she got there, she started having problems and had to go back. She was very temperamental, which was one of her

problems, but she really trusted John. She was his mare, his baby."

Lee Downing, son of Middletown, Ky., horseman Tom Downing, who interviewed Dawson for his 2006 book, "A Forgotten Horseman: A Son's Weekend Memoir," said, "Finally, we are beginning to shed some light on what extraordinary horsemen these men really were."

Born in Springfield, Ky., Dawson started his career at age 9, cleaning stalls at Kalarama Farm.

"I'd get out of school, go to the barn to clean stalls, and I started liking horses," he said in a telephone interview from his home in Mansfield, Ohio. "The owner used to go to horse shows, and I'd go with them to groom the horses and get them ready for the show. Mr. Joe Walker was the trainer then, a black guy, and he'd let me get on horses that had never been rode, to break them. He would show me a lot about how to work a horse and gait them, and I caught on pretty quickly."

In 1948, after serving in World War II, Dawson landed a training job under Walter Murphy in Delaware, Ohio, at Emerald Farm, which was owned by the late sportsman Austin Knowlton.

"I got my first big break at Emerald," he said. "Even though Walter was the trainer and I was second trainer, the owner wanted Walter to show horses, but he didn't want to show. And we had some good horses. We won at Lexington, New York, everywhere, with a mare named Carolina Caroline. Another one was Emerald's Future."

After 13 years with Emerald and a brief stint in Canada training horses for owners in Detroit, Dawson went to Countryside as manager and trainer until 1998, when he retired.

"I did all the training and all the showing," he said, naming one of his big successes as Starheart's Gem, a five-gaited chestnut stallion with four white legs. "I showed him in Michigan and won, in Pennsylvania and won, all through Ohio, and won."

Mr. Fitzgerald, despite a bloodline to Wing Commander, considered to be the greatest performing five-gaited horse in breed history, was a top breeding stallion, but a show-horse disappointment for Dawson.

"I broke that horse, gaited him, but never got to show him in the ring," Dawson said. "He had a problem with his throat, and we had a veterinarian do surgery. I got the horse as a 2-year-old, brought him home, got him going, and when he got (to be) 3 years old, he started making that noise."

Along the way, he also worked with Thomas, the first black man to show a saddlebred horse in Kentucky.

Dawson said, "His name was Frank Thomas, and I don't know who gave him the name 'Walk-Trot,' which is what you'd call a three-gaited horse. But he made history. It was on TV and everything."

The horse was Stonewall's Parfait, winner of the World's Championship Horse Show at the Kentucky State Fair in Louisville in 1965.

Dawson said that racial prejudice was a fact of life for most of his career.

"You would do the work, get the horse going gaited, then the white man would show it and you never got credit for it," he said. "When a horse would win, they'd give out ribbons and always have a write up in national magazines, but the names of black trainers were never mentioned."

He said the owners at Emerald Farm "were good people. They cared about me and Walter. But when I came to Countryside, I got credit for everything I did."

Asked how he feels now to be recognized for career achievement, he said, "I feel good about it. I don't want to make anybody mad, because training horses has been good to me. And everybody's got a chance now. Things have changed, because black trainers showed what we could do."

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