

Historica Canada Education Portal

Northern Dancer

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Northern Dancer biography from [The Canadians](#) series. In 1964, Northern Dancer was the first Canadian horse to win the Kentucky Derby. This famous Canadian racehorse also became the first non-human to be inducted into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame.

Aims

In a variety of writing, role-playing and creative activities, students will explore the importance of Northern Dancer's accomplishments to Canadian history and identity.

Background

E.P. Taylor couldn't sell Northern Dancer as a yearling for \$25,000, but years later Winfield's Farm rejected an offer of \$40 million dollars for the horse. How did this underestimated thoroughbred become a priceless treasure?

Northern Dancer was born in 1961 and passed over at Taylor's yearling

sale because he was considered too small to be an effective racehorse. Mr. Taylor, however, liked Dancer's pedigree so he was sent for training with the great horseman Horatio Luro. Dancer was soon running and winning numerous races. In fact, he won seven out of his first nine races. But it was in 1964 that Northern Dancer had his most impressive year as he won two of the three races for the Triple Crown. Not only was he the first Canadian bred horse to win the Kentucky Derby, but he also set a new record by finishing the race in two minutes flat. A couple of weeks later, he won the Preakness. There were great hopes that he would also win the Belmont Stakes, but he narrowly missed this victory.

Perhaps more amazing than his victories at racing is his legacy as a sire. It is estimated that there are more than 125 stallions with Northern Dancer's bloodline and that anywhere from 50-70% of thoroughbred horses can be traced back to him. He sired many champions such as Nijinsky who won the Triple Crown for England. He could garner stud fees up to as high as a million dollars.

In 1990 Northern Dancer died, but his legacy lives on. He is the first non-human to be inducted into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame - a well-deserved honour for the little horse with a lot of spirit.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

Writing

1. Have students write obituaries for Northern Dancer. (For examples of

obituaries, refer to your local newspaper or go to [The Globe and Mail](#).)

2. Have students pretend they are E.P. Taylor and have them keep a diary of the important events of Dancer's career. You may choose to set a limit of length and number of entries.

3. Lou Cauz of the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame said of Northern Dancer's win at the Kentucky Derby that, "It was a huge boost to our pride much like in 1972 when Canada defeated Russia for the World Cup of Hockey." Have students research the 1972 Canada/Russia hockey game. Then write an *eyewitness account* of what happened during the game. They should state the significance of this game to Canadians. Ask the students to compare the two events and the impact of each on Canadians.

Drama/Music

4. Place students into groups. They should prepare a newscast, which reveals different perspectives at the Kentucky Derby. Have one person pretend he/she is a journalist interviewing the following people before and/or after the Kentucky Derby:

- E.P. Taylor
- Billy Hartack
- Bill Shoemaker
- A Kentucky lady
- A Canadian spectator

As a preparatory activity you may want students to complete a diary entry that details what they, in their role, have witnessed and felt that day. The journalist should work on creating a set of questions that will elicit

thoughtful and interesting answers from the interviewees. You may want to do a mini-lesson on asking questions which do not elicit yes/no answers. As a variation and to explore the nature of "framing" in media, it might be interesting to have both a Canadian and an American journalist in the role play. In this case, the introduction, conclusion, and choice of questions would have a different nationalist slant.

5. Place students into groups. Have them compose a rap that details the main elements of Northern Dancer's life and accomplishments. Students should perform the rap for the class, with any sound effects they deem necessary.

Visuals/Research

7. Have students draw an editorial cartoon that celebrates Canadian pride about Dancer's victory at the Kentucky Derby. You should have students analyze cartooning techniques by bringing in a few examples from your local or one of the national papers. Then have them apply the same techniques to their own project.

8. Place students into groups of 4. Have them research four other Canadian sports heroes from 4 different sporting activities. Using the information they have found, have students create a "jeopardy" game board. Their fifth category should be on Northern Dancer. Then have students play the games. You should approve all categories to eliminate overlap.

9. Place students into pairs. Have them research the life and accomplishments of an athlete they feel has been a source of Canadian pride. Have them create a poster from the research and present their findings. They should justify their choice during the presentation.

Worksheet: [Northern Dancer](#)

Resources

[Northern Dancer Worksheet](#)

[Northern Dance - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Edward Plunkett Taylor - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Frayne, Trent. *Northern Dancer and Friends*. Don Mills: Longmans, 1969.

Lennox, Muriel. *E.P. Taylor: A Horseman and His Horses*. Toronto: Burns and MacEachern, 1976.

Lennox, Muriel. *Northern Dancer: The Legend and His Legacy*. Toronto: Beach House, 1995.

Mappin, John, ed. *Tribute to a Thoroughbred: Letters to Northern Dancer*. Montreal: Porcupine's Quill, 1992.