

MAGNIFICENT KINCSEM – SHE HAD NO EQUAL



Backstage of Racing by Bert Lillye (1970s)

The world has known many great racehorses, but none quite like Kincsem. (*the name in Hungarian means "my treasure"*) Her performance never has been approached, let alone equalled.

Read of her exploits, then try to imagine what the media and promoters of racing would make of a present day Kincsem.

She won all of her 54 starts, raced against the best horses in five countries mainly in classic races.

Kincsem (born 1874) lived for exactly 13 years and at stud she produced five foals. (*of the 54 she had 6 "walkovers" i.e. no shows but she did achieve 48 actual career wins which is remarkable*) Three were fillies whose progeny won 41 classic races in five countries – Austria, Hungary, Italy, France and Germany.

If you were entranced by the drama and excitement that Bernborough conjured in his 15 successive wins, then speculate on the magic that would have been Kincsem's in today's era of instant communication.

The story of Kincsem has been told many times since the mare died on March 17, 1887, when struck down by colic, but it was the variations in the telling which intrigued me when I read yet another account this week.

It was compiled by Michal Horacek and I respect its authenticity because much of the data was provided, by Dr Edvin Hesp, the great grandson of English-born Robert Hesp who trained Kincsem. The wonder mare was sired by English-bred Cambuscan, who was imported to Hungary two years before his son, Camballo, won the Newmarket 2000 Guineas in 1875. Ernst Blaskovich, one of Hungary's most renowned breeders and equestrians, bred Kincsem when he put his mare Watermymph, then 13, to the year younger Cambuscan.

Michal Horacek makes no mention of it, but some accounts of Kincsem have it that she was one of several yearlings rejected by Baron Orczy when he bought seven of Blaskovich's draft for £700. Yet another says that the Baron, whose wife wrote that famous novel, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, actually, bought Kincsem in a batch of seven fillies for £1,500, but rejected her on inspection because she looked "common".

There is another colorful variation which relates that Kincsem, before she raced, was stolen by gypsies. When the filly was recovered, one of the gypsies predicted: That little filly, as ugly as she is, will win every race in which she starts."

Kincsem had her first race start on June 21, 1876, at Berlin, winning by four lengths. She then scored at her next three appearances against moderate opposition.

Unbeaten

Her first big test came in the Louisa Rennen Stakes at Frankfurt where she ran as second favorite to Regimenstochter, a filly who was fresh from victories in England. Kincsem slaughtered the favorite to the tune of 10 lengths, then proceeded to win another five races in her first season.

Nevertheless, it was the colt Tallos, a winner in England, who started favorite ahead of Kincsem when they dashed in the Austrian Derby in Vienna.

Kincsem won the Austrian Derby with ridiculous ease. She cruised to the lead 1000m from the finish and was hard held at the winning post where she held a two-length advantage over Tallos with her jockey looking over his shoulder. Blaskovich and trainer Hesp decided it was time for Kincsem to take on the cream of Europe's racehorses.

They travelled Kincsem by train from country to country, beginning in Hungary and Germany where she beat the best those countries could offer and the rest of the world wondered.

What sort of filly was it who beat the cream of Germany's horses by six lengths in Hanover, then donkey-licked the German Derby winner Pirat in Hamburg?

While speculation was raging, Kincsem went to Baden-Baden where she outclassed the, French horse Mambrin in the Grosser Preis, the richest continental race.

Hesp did not spare Kincsem she ran often. He gave the filly, eight more races that season and after her first two seasons she was unbeaten in 27 races!

(Emperor Franz Josef of Austria, a partisan of steeplechasing, became a tremendous fan, never missing an opportunity to see Kincsem perform. And after each victory, the Emperor would send for Kincsem's owner to personally congratulate him.)

An offer to match the Epsom Oaks winner Placida, with Kincsem did not materialize, but it gave Ernst Blaskovich the notion to prove his Filly's freakish ability to the doubting English.

So after nine incredibly easy wins as a four-year-old, Kincsem was shipped to England to run in the 1878 Goodwood Cup.

There were only four starters and Kincsem was the outsider!

The English, who pride themselves on being the world's best breeders of the thoroughbred were not prepared to accept the Hungarian upstart.

They ended up eating humble goulash. Kincsem won by two lengths; then it was off to France to contest the Grand Prix de Deauville. *(Back across the English Channel at Deauville, France, a minor catastrophe occurred after the filly was unloaded from her ship. Kincsem had developed an intense fondness for a particular cat, which, along with a young lad named Frankie, travelled everywhere with her. On this particular occasion, the cat was unable to be located. The distraught filly refused to budge, calling incessantly for her cat. This went on for two hours. Finally, the truant feline heard her friend's neigh and came running. The cat jumped on Kincsem's back, and once reunited, horse and cat were loaded aboard the waiting train to take Kincsem to the racecourse.)*

But not before stories spread about the wonder filly fretting for her pet cat; or that she refused to drink the English water. *(Despite her gruelling schedule, Ernest Blaskovich and Hesp took every care with their prize mare. Her grain and hay came from her owner's stud, and enough was always*

brought with her to last the duration of a particular trip. Anything different, and she refused to eat. Water from de Blaskovich's stud was brought with her, as well. On one occasion, when her usual water ran out, Kincsem refused to drink any water for three days. A frantic search for water that she would drink ensued. Only after some water was brought from an old local well, which obviously had a similar taste to the water she was accustomed to, would she drink. This well became known as "Kincsem's well," and for many years a plaque on the well let visitors know the part it played in Kincsem's remarkable career.)

Consider the headlines those incidents would make today for a champion heading for her 38th successive win.

Some of the historians have also recorded that Kincsem was partial to daisies which she was tempted to crop, even though her rider was attempting to bring her into line for the start.

Tantrum

And there is an account of Ernst Blaskovich's ritual of always presenting Kincsem with a bunch of roses in the winner's stall, where he fastened one of the blooms to her bridle.

This story has it that Ernst was late in arriving with the roses one day, so Kincsem put on a tantrum and refused to be unsaddled.

What a play that would be for today's TV camera men!

Kincsem won the Grand Prix at Deauville without raising a sweat; then she was off to Baden-Baden for her second bid on the Grosser Preis, the richest race in Europe.

The train was delayed and she arrived at the course only minutes before the start, being saddled in the carriage. She went straight from the train to the starting point.

The trauma had its effect. Kincsem appeared to have the rich race in her keeping, when "Prince Giles The First" came with a late challenge to dead-heat.

Count Henckel, the owner of Prince Giles, insisted on a runoff so the two horses went at it again an hour later.

This time it was no contest. Kincsem winning by six lengths.

She won the Grosser Preis for the third time the following year and retirement came eventually after 54 straight wins Kincsem, not unnaturally, became a legend in her own lifetime.

And no wonder, it became fashionable for baby girls to be christened Kincsem. and 100 and one products bore the name of the champion filly.

The story is told, and not by Michal Horacek, that Kincsem formed a great affection for her stable attendant who was known to all as Franz. No one ever heard his second name. The lad travelled and slept with Kincsem on her many train journeys and it was said that the filly often pulled off her rig to cover the sleeping youth. There is a story, too, that when Kincsem died, Franz enlisted in the army as Franz Kincsem. the name that appeared above his grave. (she ended her glorious career in the Hungarian Autumn Oaks, winning this event for the third straight time while carrying 28 pounds more than the rest of the field.)

The Central Racecourse in Budapest was renamed Kincsem Park in 1974 on the centenary of her birth, when the occasion was marked by the unveiling of a magnificent statue to perpetuate Kincsem's memory.

The anecdote that I like the best about this wonder mare concerns, her first foal. The day the filly was born Ernst Blaskovich backed the foal to win the German Derby. Three years later Kincsem's daughter Budagyongy did just that.