

Knowing When to Fold 'Em

Timing a retirement can be a difficult decision, especially when fans feel entitled to see you compete



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As promised, Ahmed Zayat, the owner of American Pharoah, provided an opportunity for horse racing fans to see his Triple Crown winner in action again. And, at first, Pharoah did not disappoint, winning the Haskell Invitational on August 2 in such comfortable fashion that jockey Victor Espinoza was able to pull him up at the end. Pharoah must not have watched film of Leon Lett

before the race, but, fortunately for Pharoah, there was no equine Don Beebe in the field to catch him before the line.

Zayat was consistent and seemingly very genuine in his desire to share his super horse with fans. Sports fans, of course, feel that we are entitled to no less. We hate it when athletes stop competing at their peak—think of Jim Brown, Sandy Koufax, Barry Sanders, Michael Jordan the first time around, Bjorn Borg and Bobby Jones. It's a feeling that was best summed up in the movie "Forrest Gump" when Forrest suddenly decides to stop running across the country, and one of his tagalongs asks, "What do we do now?"

It is perhaps easier to give fans what they want when the athlete is a horse and does not have the same degree of self-determination or expression (unless, of course, that horse, of course, is the famous Mr. Ed). But the factors that Zayat considered on behalf of American Pharoah are similar to what human athletes face when assessing whether to quit at their peak. Financial considerations may play a role, but the athletes mentioned above—as well as Pharoah—were financially secure. After all, humans have ample opportunities for income after their careers, and Pharoah's breeding rights have already been sold, with Zayat reserving the right to race him through the end of this year. That does, however, highlight a difference between human and equine athletes. Human athletes seem to be at their most desirable for breeding during their careers, while equine athletes wait until they are put out to stud. Perhaps horses have adopted Casey Stengel's famous maxim: "It's not the sex that wrecks these guys; it's the staying out all night looking for it."

One of the common traits of athletes who have retired on top is the feeling that there is nothing left to conquer, which may also be laced with a concern for tarnishing their legacies. The sight of Willie Mays, who in his prime ran with such beautiful abandon, playing on worn-down legs

in a New York Mets uniform is still troubling. But Mays loved playing baseball so much that he was probably being true to himself more than being driven by concerns about legacy, ego, cultural relevance or the opinions of fans. Joe Namath in a Rams jersey and Johnny Unitas in a Chargers jersey were even more troubling. There is something to be said for going out on top in terms of legacy preservation. In an incongruous moment recently, Michael Jordan, while testifying at a trial, had to put on reading glasses. "Don't look," he quipped from the witness stand. He doesn't want us to see him in reading glasses but he allowed us to see him in a Washington Wizards jersey?

In the case of American Pharoah, he still may have had something to conquer in his sport. Count Fleet never raced

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again after winning his Triple Crown in 1943, but the other 10 Triple Crown winners did—and none of them went undefeated after their Triple Crowns. We can now add Pharoah to that list as he showed the strains of a remarkable run and was edged out in the Travers Stakes on

August 29. Pharoah may have felt he had to continue to compete to pad his legacy, since he was the least-raced horse to win a Triple Crown. But, obviously, that chance to climb to the higher levels of racing history's pagoda came at the risk of finishing as other Triple Crown winners have.

Nevertheless, the sport of horse racing is better for Pharoah's victory lap, however long it lasts. We shall see if he competes in the Breeders' Cup. And perhaps the pivotal question for all top athletes—equine and human—should be: Is the sport itself better off for the athlete's continued involvement as opposed to the athletes or fans being better off? They may go hand in hand, but loyalty to fans (who can't get enough of you) may come at the expense of loyalty to the sport, which wants you to perfectly calibrate your departure from the winner's circle. Zayat and trainer Bob Baffert should not be second guessed, and in fact they might even do well as consultants for the denouement of human athletes. ■

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