

THE NEW YORKER'S Audax Minor: A LEGEND RECALLED

by Reg Lansberry

“Audax Minor” has become a little-recognized name. It should not be so.

George F.T. Ryall had an unparalleled 52-year run as the racing columnist for *The New Yorker* magazine, writing his column, “The Race Track,” from 1926 to 1978. Known to legions of devoted readers as “Audax Minor,” a nom de plume he adopted in homage to the British racing journalist Arthur Fitzhardinge Berkeley Portman, who signed his pieces “Audax,” Ryall was, and seems certain to remain, the magazine’s one and only turf writer.

Now that almost three decades have come and gone since Ryall’s byline and accompanying indelible observations informed, educated and delighted his many fans, and because the Racing Hall of Fame charter does not permit the induction of writers, it is perhaps to be expected that Ryall’s unique contribution to the history of the turf has been fading steadily from racing’s collective memory.

Without question, however, his *New Yorker* legacy must be that of a dedicated—if perhaps a touch eccentric—craftsman and stylist, a passionate follower of the sport whose affection for the Thoroughbred was second to none. At the conclusion of his *New Yorker* career, Ryall had written more than 2,200 columns—an average of more than 40 per year.

It is because Ryall’s body of work has been all but forgotten that, more than nine years ago, I began contacting racing’s spectrum of owners, trainers, jockeys, administrators, fellow writers and others to ascertain how many of them either knew or remembered George Ryall, or were perhaps even remotely familiar with his remarkable body of work. More than 300 inquiries elicited a wide range of responses. Some occurred via phone, others by letter. Responses throughout racing ranged

from “I never heard of him” to an engaging array of anecdotes about someone who all agreed was memorable in any number of ways.

Inquiries were also sent to present and former staff writers and editors at *The New Yorker*. Some of those contacted said they had never actually met Ryall. In the history of *The New Yorker*, this should not be considered unusual; the magazine has published many writers who never darkened its doors. Their submissions would be sent by mail, messenger or cable. Though he was not a recluse, a bona fide Ryall sighting at *The New Yorker* was exceedingly rare. Indeed, Ryall’s visits to the magazine over the years became full-fledged “events,” their rarity obvious only once he’d departed.

Among Ryall’s many readers, self-professed fans, colleagues and acquaintances who replied, the late peerless owner/breeder Paul Mellon said, “I remember his contributions to *The New Yorker* with pleasure,” while Ted Bassett, the now-retired chairman of the Keeneland Association, wrote that he “read him with great enthusiasm and delight. He had a unique insight as well as deep appreciation for racing.”

To Furman Bisher, whose coverage of the American sports landscape has spanned more than 50 years for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Ryall “always looked like a guy who’d been riding to the hunt and lost his mount. He dressed the part, tweedy [or woolen] hat, checkered shirt, and a big moustache. Everything about him said ‘horse,’ and I did read a good bit of his Audax Minor because I could get some Thoroughbred education from it.”

“I cherished George’s writing, which was precious in both senses of the term,” said the late Eclipse Award-winning writer Jack Mann, whose career covering racing included a stint with



Sports Illustrated. “But I knew him only in the ’60s as a tweedy, cheery little elf who dropped in at the New York press boxes occasionally and said clever things to Joe Nichols of the [*New York Times*] and others.”

Roger Angell, still very much on duty as an editor at *The New Yorker* after more than a half-century, wrote back immediately, stating he “was a great admirer of George Ryall’s writing and equine acumen, but I’m afraid I didn’t know him. He worked at home and was therefore something of a legend to the rest of the staff—a legend in a hound’s-tooth, checked tweed jacket.”

A WRITER’S PEDIGREE

Born in Toronto in 1887, Ryall, at age 13, was sent to England where he attended public school. It was at Haileybury that he met and cemented friendships with the poet Alfred Noyes and Maurice Hennessy. Besides his affiliation with a family cognac concern, the latter also owned horses. Thereupon the die was cast, as Ryall’s family owned horses in Ireland.

In 1907, Ryall began work as a general assignment reporter for London’s *Exchange-Telegraph*. After he (eventually) made the transition to reporting about racing, it led to filing race reports from England for the old *New York World*. Though Ryall decided in 1920 to return home to Canada, he never made it. The reason was the influential Herbert Bayard Swope, the *World’s* enterprising Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and editor-in-chief, who detoured Ryall to New York to become his stateside racing writer.

With the Roaring ’20s in full swing, a new weekly humor magazine appeared on the scene in New York City on February 21, 1925. Under the guidance of founding editor Harold Wallace Ross, who put up 50 percent of the initial investment capital (and decades later would be described as an “editorial genius”), *The New Yorker* set sail in search of its “voice” plus subscribers and advertisers. Supplying the other 50 percent stake was Raoul Fleischmann, the magazine’s founding publisher, whose family had become exceptionally prosperous in the yeast business. Ross and Fleischmann’s introduction to each other occurred across a poker table in a private upstairs room at the Colony, a speakeasy turned restaurant on East 63rd Street in New York, at a meeting of the Thanatopsis Marching and Inside Straight Club. Fleischmann was an avid race track habitue.

Although it is not known precisely who made the overture to Ryall to become the magazine’s turf writer, he began to cover racing for *The New Yorker* less than a year and a half after the magazine’s launching. Because he was still employed by the *World*, Ryall decided to adopt a pen name for his magazine pieces. The first “Audax Minor” tagline (located at the end of his columns) appeared in the issue of July 10, 1926. The department title was “Paddock And Post.” Underneath was the column’s title, “Aqueduct to Empire City—Random Notes.”

Ryall began what surely no one could have predicted would be an unbroken 52-year relationship with *The New Yorker* by writing:

We will hear “The Wearing of the Green,” the tune the band always sounds off when James Butler wins a race at his own track, many times between now and the close of

the Empire City meeting. The Honorable George, my outside man, spent a number of mornings last week sitting behind a can of green paint in the cupola of the grandstand with a watch in each hand, and he tells me that the horses that carry the “cherry and white” are rarin’ to go. Glowing will be the stable’s hopes for the East View Stakes, and far from a forlorn one, too. The well-named son of Vulcain and Spark showed form early in the spring, but a kick while at the post at Jamaica sent him into retirement.

The following month, in the issue of August 28, 1926, the column heading was changed to “The Ponies.” The following spring, in the issue of May 7, 1927, “The Race Track” finally appeared and would be linked forever after to Audax Minor.

From the outset, Ryall’s output was as prolific as the breadth of his curiosity and the depth of his all-consuming interest in the turf. It showed in the quality of his reporting. And quality, first-rate reporting mattered to Ross more than anything. Ross’s fascination for detail was embodied in his oft-expressed cry, “Facts, give me the facts.”

In addition to his race reports, Ryall tackled a multitude of turf-related subjects. To cite a few examples: The innovative (1929) Australian starting barrier; the new Australian totalizator (parimutuel) machine (1932); “stoopers” and “ground squirrels” who search the race track environs for mistakenly discarded winning tickets (1943); pre-race testing of horses (1946); the installation of a “shoe board” at Aqueduct to note changes of equipment, and New York’s implementation of a new concept, the consolation daily double (both in 1951); and the training and care of Russian race horses (1958).

It was Ryall’s ability to write about any subject, whether equine or human (no matter how arcane or trivial), in an engaging way, that gained him a widespread and dedicated readership. Ryall was also relentless about reporting weekly attendance and handle figures. Two of his favorite race tracks, among many around the world, were the new Belmont Park (especially its paddock and walking ring) and Saratoga.

A short and wiry man with a moustache, Ryall was described this way by colleague Brendan Gill in his 1975 memoir *Here at The New Yorker*: “. . .with fine brown hair, sharp eyes, and a droll way of speaking; tips on horses emerge sideways and downward out of a corner of his puckered mouth, as if that were the very fashion in which he had received the tips from the horses themselves, warily circling the paddock and sizing up their adversaries. Many people are eager to read Ryall’s column who have never been to a race track in their lives; to them, his world is a romantic fiction, and they are grateful when they learn that, with his green tweeds, his binoculars swung smartly athwart his chest, and his jaunty stride, Ryall resembles a character out of some sunny Edwardian novel. Bertie Wooster might well have stumbled against him in the press of the crowd on a corking afternoon at Goodwood. Bertie would have burst out, ‘Sorry, old chap!’ and Ryall would have told him what he thought of him, in a courteous, sidelong snarl.”

A recurring observation about Ryall from people who knew him was that he did not engage in idle conversation, preferring to get right to the point by asking direct questions. “George could be a crusty, obstreperous guy. He’d come down

to Pimlico around Preakness time,” said Chick Lang, whose administrative career at Pimlico Race Course from 1960 to 1987 included duties as general manager. “He’d kind of squint and stare at you if you walked up to ask a question. I don’t know if he was a [Damon] Runyonesque character, but someone might think of him that way.”

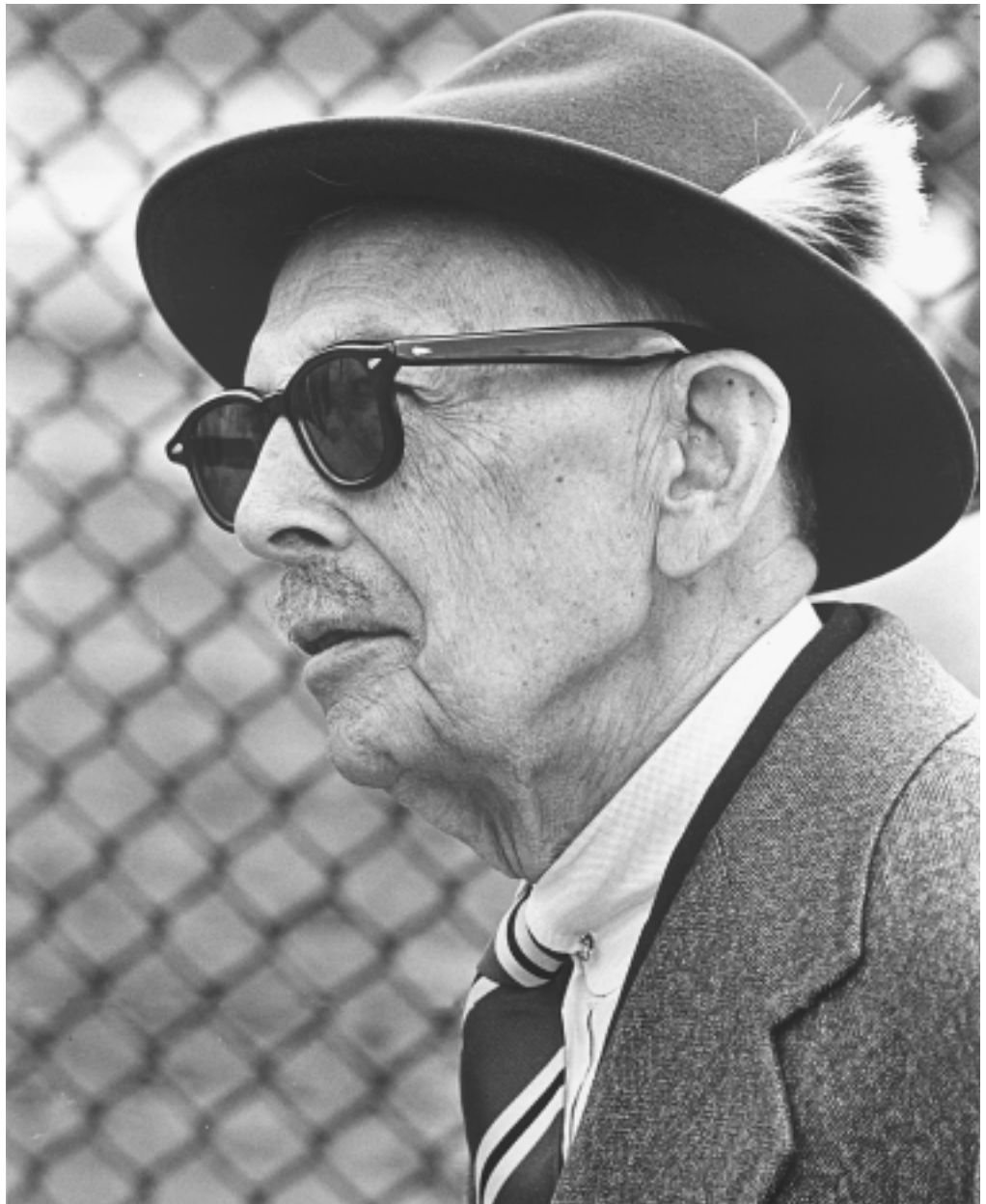
The late Heywood Hale Broun, a journalist, sometime actor and racing raconteur, worked for the New York evening newspaper *PM* [where Ryall was racing editor during the 1940s and 1950s]. He knew Ryall during those long ago days and remembered that he could seem irascible to someone who didn’t know him. “But that was just a defense mechanism,” Broun noted. “He was really very kindhearted and sweet.”

Broun then spun a tale about the 1936 Kentucky Derby involving Ryall, whom he termed “a great chalk player that disliked betting on anything that was not short odds.” As Broun told it, (Mrs.) Jacqueline Ryall asked her husband to bet \$2 for her on a 20-1 chance: Bold Venture. The son of *St. Germans promptly shocked everyone in attendance by racing to victory and giving legendary trainer Max Hirsch his first of three Derby triumphs.

“Well, when the horse won, I asked George if he made the \$2 bet,” Broun said, laughing. “Certainly not!” Ryall replied. Unable to get near the \$2 windows, according to Broun, Ryall placed the wager at a \$20 window. “Did you give her [Jacqueline] all the money?” Broun asked. “No! I just gave her the winnings from her \$2 bet,” Ryall said.

The late Kent Hollingsworth, editor of *The Blood-Horse* from 1963 to 1986, succeeded Joe Estes in those duties. One of the writers he inherited from Estes was Ryall, who had picked up the torch from Joe Palmer (upon the latter’s death) as the magazine’s New York correspondent beginning with the issue of February 28, 1953. Eventually, Ryall would submit one or two articles per year as a special correspondent.

Hollingsworth dismissed the Broun story out of hand, stating, “Oh, no, he’s [Broun] kidding you. That’s not the George I knew at all.” Never particularly interested one way or another in being present at Churchill Downs every year for the Derby, Ryall



WALTER M. BALL

disliked the raucous crush of humanity at the Louisville oval. The first Derby that Ryall attended was in 1922 when Morvich became the first California-bred to win the Run for the Roses.

“George would come and sit in my office [in Lexington] during Derby Week and shoot the breeze. Then we would go to lunch,” Hollingsworth said. “Although I knew him only in his later years, he was very kindly to me.”

Ryall was a longtime member of the National Turf Writers Association (NTWA), one of the oldest sportswriting organizations in the U.S. He joined when he was turf writer for the *World*. Ryall’s influence with the NTWA proved important to the late Whitney Tower, who would one day become its president (and eventually chairman of the Racing Hall of Fame from 1989 to 1999). It was in the early 1950s that Tower helped start a new magazine: *Sports Illustrated*.

“George suggested that they [turf writers] change the bylaws to allow magazine writers such as me to join,” Tower said.

“When I was elected, I was told that it was thanks to George who got the rule changed.”

“I enjoyed talking with George in the Belmont Park paddock on frequent occasions,” said renowned artist Richard Stone Reeves, who died in 2005. “He would say to me, ‘From an artist’s point of view, what do you think of the conformation of that horse?’ We would discuss the good points and the weak points of the horses, and a favorite of both of ours was Buckpasser, who had near-perfect conformation.”

To the uninitiated, Ryall’s “style” would doubtless seem boring today. That’s because Ryall almost never quoted anyone—owners, trainers, jockeys. It was not a journalistic standard during those years.

A New York contemporary of Ryall’s was Allison Danzig, who covered tennis for the *New York Times* from 1923 to 1968. The first writer to be inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, R.I., Danzig was known for the laborious care, literate style and cogent analysis of his pieces, which earned him the sobriquet “last man in the press box.” More than two decades ago, Danzig explained to me his approach to reporting tennis matches (especially on deadline) during the majority of his career. Danzig, too, did not gather quotes. “It was up to me to report and write about what I saw,” Danzig said. “If you knew your subject—in my case, tennis—and understood what had happened during a match, then all you had to do was interpret it and write about it.”

Because for many years *The New Yorker* went to press on Monday at 2 p.m., that meant certain last-minute pieces and the sports departments (including “The Race Track”) had to be turned in on Sunday night. For many years, the late Gardner Botsford—nicknamed “Lord Bud” by Ryall—was the magazine’s Sunday night editor.

Botsford was a *New Yorker* staff editor for more than 40 years until his retirement on June 1, 1982. In his memoir, *A Life of Privilege, Mostly*, Botsford wrote that 20 years after Ryall began writing for the magazine, “his columns had not changed a particle in style, tone, content, or coverage. The only thing that distinguished one column from another was the names of the horses; you could edit him in your sleep.” In a telephone conversation, Botsford said, “George was absolutely perfect at what he knew and what he was doing. He had a devoted following.”

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

As one might expect, Ryall’s comprehensive turf coverage contained many “likes” and “dislikes.” A notable feature of his *New Yorker* columns was a fondness for horses who became particular favorites, or “pets” as he called them. Just a few of Ryall’s all-time favorites on the male side of the ledger were Exterminator (“in my not at all humble opinion, the finest horse I ever saw”), Whisk Broom II (“the handsomest Thoroughbred I ever saw”), Equipoise, Citation, Native Dancer, Tom Fool, Kelso, Buckpasser and Secretariat.

But if anything, Ryall, who saw Regret (who in 1915 made history by becoming the first filly to win the Kentucky Derby), was even more besotted by top-notch fillies. Among his favor-

ites were Top Flight, First Flight, Canadiana (who won the 1953 Queen’s Plate, defeating colts), Dark Mirage and Ruffian.

Daily Racing Form columnist Joe Hirsch, who covered racing for a half-century himself before retiring in 2003, recalled Ryall’s fondness for the Queen’s Plate in his native Canada. Prior to Queen Elizabeth II’s elevation to the throne in 1952 upon the death of her father, King George VI, it was contested as the King’s Plate, of course. Beginning with the 1952 renewal, it thenceforth became the Queen’s Plate, which it remained to the end of Ryall’s career. Ryall’s (clearly excited) coverage of the race’s centenary in 1959 began this way:

I won’t swear that the hundredth running of the Queen’s Plate at the New Woodbine, in Toronto, last week was a sight no one who saw it can ever forget, but, looking back at it through a cloud of pleasant recollections, that’s the way it seems. There was dignity and glamour and something very Empire about the arrival at the racecourse of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II of England and Prince Philip the Duke of Edinburgh, who rode down the stretch in the same elegant landau that the Queen’s father and mother rode in at the Old Woodbine twenty years ago. The silver helmets of the Governor General’s Horse Guards were shining, their scarlet plumes were waving, and their lance pennants caught the sun as the royal standard was broken out on the flagpole in front of the grandstand and the salute was sounded by seven silver trumpets of the band. There were no drum majorettes.

Twenty Canadian-foaled three-year-olds went to the post for the Plate, which is the oldest horse race to have been run off regularly in North America, and they put on as thrilling a contest as you’d see in a month of Sundays. . .

Longtime devotees of “The Race Track” were always aware that, while Ryall took the sport of Thoroughbred racing and the attendant welfare of the horse and desire to improve the breed seriously, he could have fun in his columns. Ryall incorporated a whole slew of fictitious characters into his pieces. They imparted a sense of fun while also conveying information. It began with Ryall’s very first column on July 10, 1926, when he alluded to “The Honorable George, my outside man.” Some of the others, all of whom became fixtures and familiar presences, included: Col. Tantivy Martingale, Diogenes Checkpoints (“my private statistician, reports . . .”), Owl Eyes (“my favorite clocker”), Red Board Joe (“who picks winners after the finish”), Fetlock Deep (“my expert on track conditions”), Shiny Sleeves Sam (“always the hunch player”), Wrong Horse Harry, Moxie the Dice Cheater, Short Price, Col. Bogey and Show Parlay (“the department’s roving outside man”).

GOLDEN YEARS

In hindsight, the decade of the 1970s is considered to be the last golden era in Thoroughbred racing. During a six-year span, Secretariat (1973), Seattle Slew (1977) and Affirmed (1978) became the ninth, 10th and 11th horses, respectively, to capture the Triple Crown. In his 80s when the decade began, Ryall had by then understandably slowed down. From time to

time, his column would mention that he'd "popped a splint" or "aggravated an old stifle injury." Nevertheless, Ryall was as overjoyed as anyone to begin his column in the June 16, 1973, issue about the Belmont Stakes as follows:

Predictably, and magnificently, the Meadow Stable's Secretariat galloped away with the Belmont Stakes by thirty-one lengths at Belmont Park last Saturday afternoon. Nothing I've ever seen in this race, which is called the Test of the Champion (and, if you must know, I go back to Man o' War), was more comprehensive, and no triumph more thorough. In addition to his amazing margin of victory (Man o' War's was twenty), he not only smashed the track mark of 2:26 3/5 for the mile and a half to smithereens but his time—2:24—set a new American record for a dirt course. And I'd never heard such cheering, even for Kelso, as greeted Secretariat as he came down the stretch. There seemed a note of relief in it as well as pleasure that he was winning the Triple Crown, which no horse had done since Citation, twenty-five years ago. It was indeed the performance of a champion, winning proudly, almost contemptuously—scorning to play it safe, quickly taking the lead for the twelve furlongs, and daring anyone to go with him. Only one—Sham—tried, and Secretariat disposed of him in a little less than a couple of furlongs. It's only fair to say that Sham gamely kept up a hopeless chase as long as he could. On the turn for home, with about three furlongs to go, Twice a Prince, the colt who got his legs tangled in the starting gate before the Kentucky Derby, passed Sham and held second place to the end, saving it by half a length from My Gallant. Pvt. Smiles was down the course, and so was Sham, who stopped badly in the last furlong. I'm sure that many in the crowd of 69,138 who saw Secretariat will not be easily convinced that there ever was a better three-year-old. In my opinion, he's the best since Citation.

That autumn, in the company of Pierre Bellocq (Peb, the longtime cartoonist who is still going strong at *Daily Racing Form*), Ryall made his final visit to Paris for the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe at Longchamp, where he witnessed Rheingold's triumph over the talented filly Allez France, the race favorite. The trip was cited in Ryall's obituaries in *The New Yorker* and *New York Times* in 1979.

Visiting the stables at Maisons-Laffitte, Ryall hurt his leg badly when he slipped on a marble stairway. Tended to immediately by the Sisters of Charity, who ran l'Hopital des Jockeys there, as Bellocq recalled nearly three decades later: "George was not happy; he wanted to go to the U.S. hospital in Neuilly. I went home [that evening] but when I came back he was smiling; he had a tray with food and a bottle of French wine. I arranged for an ambulance to take George to Longchamp to see the race, but he would go only on one condition: 'That I can take the nuns with me.' The nuns wanted to bet on Allez France."

Ryall took the Mother Superior and several of the nuns with him to see the race, which they viewed from the rear door of the ambulance. "The Mother Superior thought it was wicked but she managed to get a bet down," Ryall was quoted as saying.

In his book *About Town—The New Yorker and the World It Made*, author Ben Yagoda writes about William Shawn, who became the second editor in the magazine's history, succeeding Harold Ross: "Unlike Ross, Shawn would never think of effecting editorial changes through the reassigning or, much less, dismissing of contributors. A *New Yorker* column, therefore, was the equivalent of a tenured position in the academic world. . . . As skillful and discerning as these critics were, the reference points for all of them were an earlier time, and all to some degree gave the magazine a faintly antique air. Yet Shawn's assumption was that they would occupy their posts until retirement or death."

That same view was expressed years ago to current *Daily Racing Form* publisher Steven Crist, a self-described "great fan" of Ryall's work. "I would have loved to inherit his job," Crist wrote in a letter, "but the late Brendan Gill [a *New Yorker* staff writer for over a half-century] once told me, 'our coverage of racing will die when George dies.'"

It was in the issue of December 18, 1978, that Audax Minor appeared for the final time "under colors" (a favorite phrase of his). Fittingly, his last column was titled "Going Out on Top."

At his death on October 8, 1979, in Columbia, Md., Ryall had the distinction of being the writer of longest record in the magazine's history. Honored by his racing peers in 1972 with the Walter Haight Award, Ryall also wrote for *PM*, *The Blood-Horse*, *Town & Country*, *The Sportsman*, *Polo* and *Country Life*.

In the issue of October 22, 1979, *The New Yorker* continued a tradition of memorializing, in its inimitable style, the members of its "family" with an obituary tribute. Staff editor Robert MacMillan crafted a two-column obituary saluting "G.F.T. Ryall" that concluded: "Ryall saw every race that Man o' War ran, and recorded the progress of all the great champions since then: Citation, Hill Prince, the long-tailed Whirlaway, Native Dancer, Secretariat—all of them. He had a special fondness for fillies; he was inconsolable when one of his particular favorites, Dark Mirage, broke down, and he would talk to no one for several days after Ruffian's fatal injury. Ryall's knowledge of racing was almost incredible. He could recall every step of a race forty years ago and be borne out by the charts in the *Racing Manual*. Once in a while, our Checking Department, trying to verify some remote detail he had mentioned, would be told by outside sources that the only man alive who could answer that question was George Ryall, of *The New Yorker*. . ." ❀

Audax Minor had an equine namesake who made his career at Mid-Atlantic tracks in the early 1990s. "He was small and feisty," said breeder Mary Voss, of her choice of names for the Maryland-bred son of Alydeed out of multiple Grade 1 winner John's Call's full sister Call to Arms (by Lord At War-Arg).

Ryall's New Yorker columns may be viewed, in their full context, on CD-ROMs made available by the magazine. For more information visit www.newyorker.com.