



# Best There Ever Was: Dan Patch and the Dawn of the American Century

*Sharon B. Smith*

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His winning percentage was well above Jordan's shooting average or Woods's domination of golf tournaments. And he sold products and drew spectators like no one had ever done. He was hands-down the most famous athlete in America's most popular spectator sport, and exactly one hundred years ago you would have been hard pressed to find anybody in the country who didn't know his name. He was Dan Patch, and he was a racehorse.

At the turn of the last century, harness racing drew larger crowds and offered bigger paychecks than any other sport. Its stars were household names, and Dan Patch was both the most celebrated and the richest. As successful as he was on the track, Dan Patch was also America's first "marketing machine": the horse who could sell cigars, washing machines, stoves, automobiles, and animal feed, just by the presence of his name and photograph. *The Best There Ever Was* examines the evolution of sports marketing through the lives of Dan Patch and the three men who owned him: an Indiana breeder, Dan Messner; M. E. Sturgis, who sold the horse for \$20,000 (a fortune in those days) and spent the rest of his life trying to buy him back; and Marion W. Savage of Minneapolis, whose entrepreneurial skills presaged today's sports marketing geniuses.

Any athlete who can draw a 90,000-person crowd, offer up world records, and then sell a coal stove with his name on it may well be the best by anybody's standards. A fun and fascinating read for sports lovers.

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