

## Don't Blame Man O' War

One of the great urban legends of horse racing is that the meaning of the noun “upset” referring to “a game or contest in which the favorite is defeated”<sup>1</sup> stems from the defeat of Man O' War by the horse Upset in the Sanford Stakes of August 13, 1919 at Saratoga. This was Man O' War's only defeat in a career which saw him win 20 of 21 races.

Yet, there's absolutely nothing to this urban legend. Man O' War at the time of his defeat was a two year old who was 6 for 6 all at distances of six furlongs or less. He was considered a top horse<sup>2</sup> but not a legend. He went off in the Sanford at odds of 1-2<sup>3</sup> not 1-5.<sup>4</sup> There was a field of seven, and his main competitor Golden Broom went off at fairly short odds of 2-1. Upset was the third choice in the field at 7-1. All the remaining horses were 30 -1 or higher. At the time of the defeat, this was hardly a remarkable upset. Odds-on favorites regularly get beaten. Assuming that the bookmakers of 1919 were looking to achieve an effective 10% takeout, that would mean that the bookmakers believed that Man O' War had only a 60% likelihood of winning the Sanford. 7-1 horses often win. The 1919 Sanford was an upset but not a dictionary-altering event. You'd be better off calling upsets “Busters” after Buster Douglas' defeat of Mike Tyson in 1990 at much higher odds of 42-1.<sup>5</sup>

Even at the time of the race, it was recognized by sports writers that Man O' War's defeat was an upset. The New York World wrote, “One might make all sorts of puns about it being an upset, but Man o' War in the opinion of nine out of ten observers was far the better colt in the race. . . .”<sup>6</sup> The New York Sun also reported, “Upset's victory was a big upset to all racegoers, even his famous trainer, James Rowe.”<sup>7</sup> These articles clearly demonstrate that the noun upset – referring to the defeat of a favorite - was in regular usage at the time of Man O' War's defeat.

In fact, through a review of the New York Times, the usage of the term “upset” in conjunction with racing can be traced to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, it seemed to have been utilized in conjunction with a horse upsetting the calculations of bettors and followers of the sport. For example in its earliest 1865 Times usage, the

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<sup>1</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition., 2000 3<sup>rd</sup> definition

<sup>2</sup> The New York Times called him “great.” “Sanford Memorial Is Won By Upset,” New York Times, August 14, 1919 Pg. 17.

<sup>3</sup> This is based on bookmakers' odds as noted in the Times article referenced in note 2. There was no pari-mutuel betting in New York at the time.

<sup>4</sup> Man O' War went off at odds of 1 -5 or lower in his last ten starts. See Daily Racing Form, Champions, 2000 Pg. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Malamud, “Notes on a Scorecard,” Los Angeles Times, February 14, 1990 Part C, Pg. 3.

<sup>6</sup> August 14, 1919, p. 11, col. 1 See <http://listserv.linguistlist.org/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0211b&L=ads-1&D=1&P=10058>

<sup>7</sup> Id.

Times wrote, “The racing was of the highest order; the contests being close and exciting, and the judgment of the knowing ones *fairly upset by the unexpected results.*”<sup>8</sup> Similarly there was this from 1870: “It is quite possible that one of the despised outsiders, Sanford or Legatee of Flora McIvor may *upset the calculations of the knowing ones*, and triumph over the cracks.”<sup>9</sup> In 1872, the Times wrote, “The two races were a steeple-chase handicap of three miles, and the four-mile heats, which was won by King Henry, who sold in the field and thus *upset the calculations of the knowing ones.*”<sup>10</sup> In 1873, there was “Quita, whose name was left out of all the entries on the programme, *upset all calculations by winning the race.*”<sup>11</sup> 1874 saw, “The second affair a dash of a mile and an eighth for three year olds *upset the calculations* of the posted division.”<sup>12</sup> In 1875, the Times wrote “The second event was the four mile dash between Wild Idle and Rutherford, which resulted in a complete victory for the former and *upset the calculations of the wise-acres* who backed Rutherford.”<sup>13</sup>

By the 1880’s, the term upset came to be applied at all racetracks to refer to defeats of favored horses. These are just a few of the many examples of the word upset being used to mean the defeat of a heavy favorite before the 1919 Sanford:

#### Sheepshead Bay

“It was such an *upset* as Mr. Kahn, the owner of Saxony had not deemed possible.”<sup>14</sup>

“With a muddy track and foul weather probable for to-day, a lot of *upsets* may be looked for in the betting ring...”<sup>15</sup>

“A Bad *upset* for the Californians who made a Wager on Senator Hearst’s Gorgo”<sup>16</sup>  
“Gorgo was not the only favorite who was *upset* by the fortunes or misfortunes of racing.”<sup>17</sup>

#### Gravesend

“Bangor, the favorite in the second race, won and *upset* the good things.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Out-Door Sports,” New York Times, September 13, 1865 Pg. 5.

<sup>9</sup> “The Jerome Park Races Today –the Programme,” New York Times, June 15, 1870 Pg. 2.

<sup>10</sup> “The Turf, The Extra Racing Day at Long Branch,” New York Times, August 30, 1872 pg. 8. See also “The Turf, The Long Branch Races,” New York Times, August 3, 1872 Pg. 8 “The game little mare Butterfly upset the calculations of the knowing ones by winning ...”

<sup>11</sup> “The Turf, Fine Racing at Prospect Park Fair Grounds,” New York Times, September 14, 1873. Pg. 5.

<sup>12</sup> “The Turf, Third Day of the Saratoga Races,” New York Times, August 13, 1874 Pg. 5.

<sup>13</sup> The Turf, The Saratoga Meeting Closed,” New York Times, August 22, 1875 Pg. 12.

<sup>14</sup> “Saxony Meeting Defeat,” New York Times, June 24, 1887 Pg. 2. In the same article, it was additionally noted, “The Rapid Stakes proved to be the second upset for Saxony this year, and a bad one it was for the betting men who had plunged on him.”

<sup>15</sup> “Hard to Pick Winners,” New York Times, September 29, 1887 Pg. 8.

<sup>16</sup> “A Bad Day for Favorites,” New York Times, September 15, 1888 Pg. 2

<sup>17</sup> Id.

<sup>18</sup> “The Races at Gravesend,” New York Times, September 27, 1899 Pg. 8.

“In the selling mile and a furlong, for which only three horses ran, a tremendous *upset* was produced...”<sup>19</sup>

### Morris Park

There were according to the sub-headline “*Upsets* at Morris Park”<sup>20</sup>

### Jerome Park

“The third race brought a great big *upset* for another pronounced favorite, Lelex.”<sup>21</sup>

“These races brought victories for the favorites in all save the last two races, the steeplechase bringing the big *upset* of the day, as the race had been fixed for Sam Emery to win.”<sup>22</sup>

Sam Emery apparently “completely *upset* the plans of the schemers by tumbling at the last hurdle.”<sup>23</sup>

### Saratoga

“The first *upset* came with the first race.”<sup>24</sup>

“It was in this race that backers of favorites got their first of a series of *upsets*.”<sup>25</sup>

“Two favorites were badly *upset*, Gambler in the first race not being even placed.”<sup>26</sup>

“As popular an *upset* as racing has ever produced was the result of the Huron Handicap to-day...”<sup>27</sup>

“The victory of Trojan in the Futurity with its value of \$15,640 to the winner was not the only startling *upset* of the day.”<sup>28</sup>

### Empire City

“Golden Shore *upsets* a good thing in Rockstone for a selling price at the Empire City track.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “Two-Year-Olds in Close Contests,” New York Times, September 24, 1909 Pg. 8.

<sup>20</sup> “Upsets at Morris Park,” New York Times, October 10, 1890 Pg. 3.

<sup>21</sup> “Five Short Horse Win,” New York Times, October 13, 1887 Pg. 2.

<sup>22</sup> “Sam Emery’s Woeful Fall,” New York Times, October 16, 1887 Pg.2.

<sup>23</sup> Id.

<sup>24</sup> “A Surprise at Saratoga,” New York Times, August 24, 1897 Pg. 3.

<sup>25</sup> “A Bad Day for Favorites,” New York Times, August 6, 1884 Pg. 3.

<sup>26</sup> “Governor Foraker Wins a Race,” New York Times, August 2, 1892 Pg. 3.

<sup>27</sup> “Huron Handicap Won by Outsider,” New York Times, August 19, 1909 Pg. 12.

<sup>28</sup> “Trojan, Long Shot, Wins the Futurity,” New York Times, August 29, 1914 Pg. S3.

## Monmouth Park

“There were a fine lot of sure things *upset* in the first race.”<sup>30</sup>

“The result was a big *upset* to the betting men who had plunged heavily on Estrella as a particularly good thing in such company.”<sup>31</sup>

## Other Tracks

Clifton – “Futurity and Richelieu *upset* the talent.”<sup>32</sup>

Benning – “A big *upset* occurred in the second race when Bettie Landon, at 100 to 1, gave the odds-on favorite, Al Powell and Bathmaria a sound beating...”<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, the term “upset,” before the Time of Man O’ War, was also used to mean defeats of the favorite in sports other than horse racing. Here are a few examples:

Ice Hockey “The result was a decided surprise to the adherents of the local team, as well as an *upset* of form.”<sup>34</sup>

Billiards “Gardner and Conklin May Cause *Upsets* in Contests at Liederkrantz Club this week.”<sup>35</sup>

Baseball “How Braves *Upset* Baseball ‘Dope,’”<sup>36</sup>

Football “Middle Western Teams *Upset* Outstanding Elevens in Two Decisive Battles,”<sup>37</sup>

Tennis “In the latter event an *upset* occurred as Raymond D. Little and Albert C. Bostwick were defeated in three sets...”<sup>38</sup>

Any notion that the defeat of Man O’ War in the 1919 Sanford inaugurated the start of the use of the term “upset” in sporting events is upsetting not to all calculations but to reality. There were upsets at racetracks long before Upset.

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<sup>29</sup> “Melisande Wins in a Record Race,” New York Times, August 18, 1908 Pg. 8.

<sup>30</sup> “Miss Ford Meets Defeat,” New York Times, July 22, 1887 Pg. 3.

<sup>31</sup> “Lucky Baldwin Unlucky,” New York Times, August 24, 1887 Pg. 3.

<sup>32</sup> “Surprises at Clifton,” New York Times, November 22, 1888 Pg. 2.

<sup>33</sup> “Bettie Landon, 100 To 1, Won,” New York Times, April 6, 1906 Pg. 12.

<sup>34</sup> “Yale Won Hockey Match,” New York Times, February 9, 1902 Pg. 16.

<sup>35</sup> “Western Player Is the Favorite,” New York Times, March 11, 1907 Pg. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Billy Evans, “How Braves Upset Baseball ‘Dope,’” New York Times, November 15, 1914 Pg. S4.

<sup>37</sup> “Leading Football Teams of East Outranked by Elevens of Middle West,” New York Times, November 18, 1918 Pg. 16.

<sup>38</sup> “Upsets in Tennis,” New York Times, June 20, 1907 Pg. 8