



BY TOM ALLEN—THE WASHINGTON POST  
Burk's Charger was a promising racehorse with some behavior that was inexplicable; then trainer Jack Salter learned his horse was blind.

## Burk's Charger: Real Run in the Dark Horse

By Vinnie Perrone  
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**B**urk's Charger veered wildly in a race at Pimlico this month not because he was careless or clumsy or common. No, a veterinary specialist said, the horse smashed into the inside rail because he didn't know it was there.

Seth A. Koch was blunt with his diagnosis: Burk's Charger is blind, and has been for some time.

Burk's Charger became a winner in his fifth start, in February, and followed that with a first- and second-place finish. He was a 3-year-old on the rise, a black-maned bay with a strong closing kick, \$19,595 won and a lot of

promise. But the usually obedient brown gelding had acted wacky in two of his nine races, darting right at the start of one, left in the homestretch of another. The latter started a two-horse tumble that left jockey Al-len Stacy with a stiff neck and cracked ribs.

So Koch, a veterinary ophthalmologist, was summoned to trainer Jack Salter's Laurel Park stable Saturday to examine the eyes of Burk's Charger. Even before Koch unpacked his instruments and approached the patient, he saw trouble—ominous blue-gray pupils, permanently enlarged. Koch looked into them with a lighted scope and said later, "It blew my mind."

There was severe degeneration. See BURK'S CHARGER, D6, Col. 2

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HORSE RACING

# Burk's Charger's Blind Ambition Was to Race

BURK'S CHARGER, From D1

tion in the retina and optic nerves of both eyes. Burk's Charger's retinas were "burned out," Koch said, a condition no medicine or treatment can correct.

"I'm not going to say he has no vision whatsoever," Koch said. "But he certainly doesn't have usable vision. . . . You can safely say, from a functional standpoint, that he's blind."

The horse's handlers were aghast. Sure, the dilated pupils had been noticeable, even unsettling, but in four months at Laurel, Burk's Charger hadn't acted like a sightless horse. Not around the stable, anyway, or during workouts.

"He never runs into anything," said Sheila Kane, who became his groom last month. "He never hits his head."

In walks around the shedrow, the horse seemed to stop at all the appropriate places. "He knows where the windows are," said assistant trainer Michael "Tank" Beck. "He knows where the water bucket is."

Wouldn't a blind horse be skittish, excitable? "He's great to work around," Kane said. "I don't even tie him up to do his stall or brush him off or do his legs up or anything. He always knows where you're at around him."

"He doesn't even spook from the chickens that walk around. One was

sittin' on his hay rack yesterday. He was just eatin' away. The chicken was sittin' there lookin' at him."

For the past 25 years, Phil Judge has spent most mornings on horseback. He figures he's been on Burk's Charger 50 or 60 times, never with the feeling that the gelding was compromised in any way.

"He was all business," Judge said. "Always on the bit. Never ducked or dodged. It stopped me in my tracks when Sheila told me [of his condition]. I was ready for her to say there's nothin' wrong with him."

If trainer Salter, his assistants and private veterinarians had early misgivings about the horse's eyesight, they were soon repressed. In one of his wins, Burk's Charger stormed by Donald Barr's good 3-year-old, Flying Punch. Six weeks later Flying Punch won the Private Terms Stakes.

"Nobody roots harder for Donnie Barr than I do," Salter said. "But [Burk's Charger], blind, went by Flying Punch like he was tied to a tree."

That was at Laurel Park, where Burk's Charger lives. The horse apparently had so familiarized himself with Laurel's 1 1/4-mile dirt layout that he could get around it smoothly. Except for the time he made a right turn out of the gate in a race there and was disqualified for bothering other horses.

He had a listless race at Philadel-

phia Park early this month, then was nearly lethal at Pimlico April 15. Burk's Charger raced within a pack of horses early in the Pimlico stretch, bright sunshine in his face, when he bore left in full stride, ejected Stacy, and demolished the aluminum rail he hit chest first.

Assumptions that Burk's Charger had to have done himself harm were inaccurate. He walked the shedrow the next day and was so energetic three days later that Salter let him jog the track.

"I'm just thankful he didn't kill [Allen] Stacy or [Omar] Klinger or [Dylan] Armstrong or [Stewart] Elliott," Salter said, naming the jockeys who rode Burk's Charger.

"It's a miracle this horse didn't kill anyone," Koch said. "He had no more idea where he was than the man in the moon."

Koch questioned how such a horse could be permitted to race nine times in three states. But Pat Brackett, a state-designated veterinarian who works at Pimlico and Laurel, said it would be costly and impractical to check the eyes of every horse in every race.

Brackett said the tracks generally target "obvious" eye ailments in horses and deal with them accordingly. But rarely do racehorses have afflictions in both eyes, she said. "Horses don't have the greatest

eyesight anyway," Brackett said, "and they seem to get along fine."

Unwilling to put another jockey on Burk's Charger for fear of calamity, Salter had arranged last week to turn the horse over to a steeplechase trainer. Jim Salter, Burk's Charger's owner-breeder who's no relation to Jack, was willing to try the horse over hurdles, the assumption being that Burk's Charger wouldn't pose such a danger in less-confined races at slower speeds.

But Koch shone a light that changed everything. The steeplechase experiment ended before it began, for a horse can't jump what he can't see.

So Burk's Charger will leave Laurel soon to gambol across open pastures indefinitely, a life geared to grass, carrots and candy. In the coming days, he'll be sent to Art Willson's Point Lookout Farm in Brookville, Md., where Kane boards some show horses. She'll care for Burk's Charger, and ride him.

"He's survived through all this," Tank Beck said. "He deserves to live on the farm and live the easy life for a while. Plus Sheila, she loves him. She'll get on him, and he'll have fun, and he'll be happy. He took care of us; I guess it's time now we took care of him for a while."

Jack Salter, the horse's 61-year-old trainer, doesn't see so well himself at times. Diabetes hampers his

eyes and feet. He knows how odds are overcome.

For 41 years Salter has worked with horses and people and considered himself blessed. In the 1960s he had two dozen horses, "a barn full," at the Fair Grounds in New Orleans. Years later he had a stable at Charles Town, home of thoroughbred misfits, and now has three horses training at Laurel.

"I had a one-eyed horse before at Charles Town," Salter said. "At Charles Town you get everything."

But Burk's Charger was a new breed, a disadvantaged horse whose speed, spunk and wits fooled everyone.

"I knew I had a good horse," Salter said, "but I didn't realize how good he was" until Saturday.

Laurel Park isn't Salter's only stable. He's a Eucharistic minister who meets weekly with residents of a correctional facility. He volunteers at a food bank. He scuffs around the racetrack with a rolled newspaper shoved into each back pocket, an incurable optimist who can't help but marvel at God's sense of irony.

All it takes is one look at that patch of bare skin on the chest of the rail-wrecking Burk's Charger.

"It reminds me of the miracle every time," Salter said.

Which miracle that was, he didn't say.