A HORSE OF ANOTHER COLOR

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William Van Sant, a government clerk in Washington, D.C., won 50 thousand dollars in 1950 by using the word CAMELOPARD to identify an illustration of a giraffe in a contest puzzle. This unfamiliar word united perfectly with other object-names in a diagram that yielded a higher numerical total (based on letter-values) than it would have had he used GIRAFFE. His achievement demonstrated the importance of having a large collection of synonyms as an aid in contest puzzle-solving. Standard works like Crabbe’s or Fowler’s Synonyms proved to be sadly inadequate, and Laird’s Promptory or Allen’s Dictionary of Synonyms were little better in solving difficult puzzles. The ever-insatiable puzzle fanatics turned to existing crossword solvers which, they ruefully discovered, did not completely or correctly contain the numerous word substitutions.

It was not until 1955, when Marion Starr’s Synonyms based on Webster’s Second appeared, that a really useful book became available. However, this had one basic defect: it contained synonyms for only tangible (illustrable) nouns. This shortcoming was remedied in 1974 with the publication of Tom Pulliam’s and Clare Grundman’s incomparable The New York Times Crossword Puzzle Dictionary, which includes synonyms for words representing every part of speech. This work possesses other advantages: the words are arranged alphabetically by length (through eight letters), and by special and unusual definitions and associations, in an easy-to-find order. It has been my constant, dependable puzzle-solving companion in more ways than I can enumerate.

Over the years, synonym lists, either taken directly from works like the ones described above or compiled on one’s own, have proved particularly useful for solving contest puzzles based on rebuses. In a rebus, the solver is presented with several pictures which are connected by plus and minus signs; his task is to add and subtract letters in the words corresponding to the pictures, the final set of letters producing another word. (In many rebus contests the order of the unsubtracted letters must be preserved in the final word; in others, rearrangement is permitted.) The larger the word list the contestant can assemble, the better his chance of identifying the proper words to go with the pictures. In the simpler rebus puzzles, the number of letters in the answer is also given, in the form of a row of connected boxes called a word path.

In this article, I describe a puzzle contest in which, paradoxically, an entry of an enigmatic word was worth the full 600 points. This contest was sponsored by the New York Times on the first Sunday after Christmas each year. Contestants were given the first word in a word pair, and the task was to identify the word in the second position of the puzzle pair.

For example, in a five-letter entry, the first word was IDENTIFY and the second word was BOX. The puzzle then might appear as

IDENTIFY

Better than nothing, however, was the puzzle in the 1951 contest when the first word was THE, and the second word was HALL.

THE

In this article, I describe a puzzle contest in which, paradoxically,
an extensive word list was not necessary -- a trick played on the entrants by the puzzle editor. The rebus puzzle at the bottom of the page, the final one in a 72-day puzzle contest which ran in a newspaper about 1951, did not provide the solver with a word path. The average contestant correctly identified the first picture as that of a PLATYPUS, or DUCKBILL, or ORNITHORHYNCHUS, but had more trouble with the next two subtractive pictures (can you, the reader, correctly identify them?). The final picture, obviously a HORSE, sent these contestants on a mad scramble for synonyms, hoping that one or another might yield clues to the earlier pictures (even though few pairs of words can be subtracted from PLATYPUS or its synonyms).

Expert puzzle contestants, familiar with the contents of I See All, a five-volume work published in England some years earlier, quickly identified the second and third pictures as DILL and BUCK, revealing the underlying trick of the puzzle editor: DUCKBILL - DILL - BUCK = 0, leading to a final answer identical with the fourth picture! Experts, however, are suspicious; they are always looking for the hidden trick. (Their success at contests, in fact, is often dependent upon their ability to ferret out such tricks.) The apparent simplicity of the puzzle confused and worried them. So, they kept looking -- starting a synonym list for HORSE, or adding to one they already had, in the hope that they might find one with some letters that were more appropriate than the simple HORSE -- in short, a horse of another color. As the puzzle editor intended HORSE to be the solution, all this cerebration turned out to be in vain, and the three thousand people who sent in that solution were all judged winners (and eligible for the tie-breaker).

The synonym list that I compiled eventually contained more than 600 names. I pored over every dictionary I could find, culling those elusive equine synonyms from the Funk & Wagnalls Standard, the Merriam-Webster First, the Shorter Oxford (all four volumes), and more. I was compelled to discard several obsolete or archaic terms like hot, capo, hardy, rabil, etc., for I could not find these in the more acceptable popular authorities. Undoubtedly in all English-language dictionaries there are more than one thousand synonyms, including variants, for that helpful long-domesticated animal, the horse. Rather than stupefy readers with my full list, I present uncapitalized descriptors of horses and capitalized names of breeds for nearly all the letters of the alphabet.
Appaloosa
Barb
Clydesdale
Dartmoor Pony
English Trotting Horse
Falabella
Gelderland
Hackney
Icelandic Pony
Jutland Horse
Kentucky Saddle Horse
Lipizzan
Morgan
New Forest Pony
Orloff Trotter
Percheron
Quarter Horse
Rhenish
Shetland Pony
Thoroughbred
Ukrainian
Viatka Horse
Welsh Pony
Yorkshire Coach Horse
Zweibrucker

ambler
buckskin
colt
dam
equine
foal
gelding
hack
dare
jade
colker
loper
mount
nag
outsider
piebald
quad
roan
stallion
traveller
unicorn
vanner
workhorse
yearling
zain

Can any reader find a generic term for a horse beginning with I, or any term beginning with X? The best I could do for the latter was XANTHUS, the name of Apollo’s horse. Lest one suspect an error, I hasten to add that one of the definitions of UNICORN is "a team of three horses with one leading the other two" -- if you don’t like that, use UNGULATE, a general term embracing zebras, assus, rhinoceroses, swine, and other hoofed animals.

Finally, for your delectation here is a sampling of odd terms on my list, all taken from Webster’s Second:

fittie-lan
furr-ahin
rackabones
off-wheeler
jumart
hogget
quadrupedant
bidet
mud lark
pooka
daisy cutter

the near hinder horse in plowing (Scot.)
the right-hand hinder horse in plowing (Scot.)
a very lean horse
the off horse just before the front wheel
the fabled offspring of a bull and a mare or she-ass, or of a horse or ass and a cow
a yearling colt
a horse
a small horse, esp. for pack or courier service in the army
a race horse that runs well on a muddy track
a mischevious goblin appearing in the form of a horse
a horse that carries its feet low when trotting

My thanks to the editor and his daughter Susan for many improvements.