

Bluegrass Kings

Athenaeum Society
May 5, 2011

H. Kendrick Dougherty, MD

Paper preparation for the open meeting of the Athenaeum society is somewhat intimidating. When one learns that you are one of the two unlucky, I mean fortunate, members to have the honor, the wheels start turning. Some of us take it more seriously than others. Representative John Tilley, for example, when he learned that he was the chosen one, decided to have a child and described the joy of gestation and birth to the group. Now that's commitment. I mentioned this to Karen, but she pointed out, in no uncertain terms, that Abraham and Sara were not.

I seriously considered picking up where William Turner left off last year, I think it was 1914, and read the Kentucky New Era to you for a few years, but I didn't want to wade into my old history teacher's territory or his future papers.

One of the greatest fears that one has is to prepare a paper and then have one of your fellow members present the same topic at a prior meeting. This, in fact, happened to me. I had prepared, what I thought was an outstanding paper on the Bavarian Opera, only to have Rob Harper give a lengthy dissertation on the subject three months ago. I didn't think I could improve upon his work, despite his repeated mispronunciation of Wagner as "Vogner."

Ultimately, however, one must decide and it became obvious to me that I should speak on a subject that I have a keen interest and is at the very least, timely. In a couple of days, an event dear to all Kentuckians will transpire just 180 miles or so up the road. Tonight, I hope to enlighten you a bit about the "Sport of Kings" so that you can be an informed participant at your Derby party this weekend. I may even tell you who will win and how to bet on it, or at least my opinion on the subject which, in all honesty, is worth very little.

My parents were married some 60 years ago. Dad had to borrow his father-in-law's car in order to go on a honeymoon. They went to Florida and one day opted to go to a greyhound track and see the dog races. A two dollar wager on the daily double returned some \$400, a significant sum for the day. I'm pretty positive that wager was the first and last wager that Dad ever collected on, but it is from that gene pool that I sprang.

We often would make weekend trips to Ellis Park in Henderson, a tradition which I continued with my own boys and I became quite enamored with horse racing. An undergraduate degree at the University of Kentucky in Lexington only served to further enhance my love for the sport in the beautiful confines of Keeneland racetrack, often not only at the expense of a few dollars, but also a missed class or two.

Horse racing is an ancient sport. Its origins date back to about 4500 BC among the nomadic tribes of Central Asia, who first domesticated the horse. Since the beginning of recorded history, horseracing was an organized sport for all major civilizations around the globe. The ancient Greek Olympics had events for both chariot and mounted horseracing.

Today, horseracing is one of the most widely attended spectator sports in America. It is inextricably associated with gambling. In 1989, over 50 million people attended 8000 days of racing, wagering over \$9 billion. Today, with the advent of simulcast racing, that figure is well over \$100 billion.

The origins of modern racing line in the 12th century. During the Crusades, the Turkish cavalry horses ran circles around the big English warhorses. Crusaders bought or captured Turkish horses to bring home. English racing horses were originally fast, pony-sized horses called "Hobbys." Much-married Henry VIII imported horses from Italy, Spain, and North Africa. He kept a racing stable, under the direction of a nobleman called the "Master of the

Horse." Henry's "Hobbys," as well as his imported Arab stallions raced against horses owned by the nobility in matches arranged for the entertainment of the court. This led eventually to the word hobby to mean a costly pastime indulged in by the rich.

Henry's Master of the Horse was not a professional horseman, and consequently, by the time Henry died, his horses had become so indiscriminately crossbred that the royal stable was a jumbled lot of animals with very muddled genes. These horses were dubbed "cocktails," from which we get our word for a mixed drink.

During the reign of Queen Anne (1702 -- 1714), horse racing began to become a professional sport. Match racing evolved into multi-horse races on which spectators wagered. Racecourses emerged all over England, offering increasingly larger purses to attract the best horses. The rapid expansion of the sport created the need for a central governing authority. In 1750, racing's elite met at Newmarket to form the Jockey Club.

The Jockey Club wrote complete rules of racing and set standards defining the quality of horseracing. It also took steps to regulate breeding. James Weatherby, whose family served as accountants to the members of the Jockey Club, was assigned the task of tracing the pedigrees of every horse racing in England. In 1791, the results of this research were published as the Introduction to the General Stud Book. From 1793 to the present, members of the Weatherby family have meticulously recorded the pedigree of every foal born to those racehorses in subsequent volumes of the General Stud Book. By the early 1800s, the only horses that could be called "thoroughbreds" and allowed to race were those descended from horses listed in the General Stud Book. Thoroughbreds are so in-bred that the pedigree of every single animal can be traced back to one of three stallions, the "foundation sires:" the Byerly Turk foaled around 1679, the Darley Arabian foaled around 1700, and the Godolphin Arabian, foaled around 1724.

The British settlers brought horses and horse racing with them to the New World. The first racetrack in America was laid out on Long Island as early as 1665. Although the sport became a popular local pastime, the development of organized racing did not arrive until after the Civil War. The American Stud Book was begun in 1868. Gambling on racehorses and therefore horseracing itself grew explosively and by 1890, 314 tracks were spread across the country.

Its rapid growth, without any central governing authority, led to the domination of many tracks by criminal elements. In 1894, the nation's most prominent track and stable owners met in New York to form the American Jockey Club, modeled on the English, which soon ruled racing with an iron hand and eliminated much of the corruption.

In the early 1900s, racing in the United States was almost wiped out by anti-gambling sentiment that led almost all states to ban bookmaking. By 1908, the number of tracks plummeted to 25. That same year, however, the introduction of pari-mutuel betting for the Kentucky Derby signals a turnaround for the sport.

All betting at American tracks today is done under the pari-mutuel wagering system. This system was developed by a Frenchman named Pierre Oller in Paris (thus the "pari" in pari-mutuel) in the late 19th century. Under this system, a fixed percentage (14 to 25%) of the total amount wagered is taken out for track and operating expenses, racing purses, and state and local taxes. The remaining sum is divided by the number of individual wagers to determine the payoff, or the return on each bet. The projected payoff, or "odds," are continually calculated by the track's computers and posted during the betting period before each race.

How did our Commonwealth become synonymous with the industry? After the Revolutionary War, more and more immigrants poured into Kentucky and horse racing became

more of a Kentucky institution. At the 1775 Transylvania convention, Daniel Boone introduced the first bill to "improve the breed of horses in the Kentucky territory." Many Kentucky settlements, with the notable exception of Louisville, which already had a race track, featured a Race Street: a straight street just off the main thoroughfare and named after what went on there. In 1797, the first Jockey Club was founded, later recognized as the Lexington Jockey Club. Henry Clay was a founding member.

The War of 1812 took a heavy toll on horses. Afterwards, racing was slow to recover in the South and reformers shut it down entirely in the North and the East. Lexington, however, always had a track where owners competed their best homebreds. Horsemen quickly realized there was no equal to the bluegrass when it came to nurturing pedigreed stock. Bluegrass, for those who wondered, is a deep-rooting perennial native to the Black Sea area. Some credit Quaker leader William Penn with its importation, but the seed probably came to America in the pockets of Mennonites ousted from Russia, for whom Pennsylvania was a safe haven on their way west.

Meriweather Lewis Clark, Jr. was the grandson of former Missouri governor and Lewis and Clark expedition co-leader, Gen. William Clark. His father married Abigail Prather Churchill which linked him to one of Kentucky's first families. The Churchills had moved to Louisville in 1785 and purchased 300 acres of land, part of which today includes Churchill Downs. When his mother died, Lutie, as Clark, Jr was nicknamed, was sent to live with his aunt and her sons, John and Henry Churchill, who would later inherit the property.

Lutie was a high roller, developing tastes for custom-made suits, good food, champagne, and horseracing. Through two trips to Europe and through convenient marriages and deaths, he

gained a sophisticated appreciation for horse racing and strong connections to several Southern racetracks.

In 1873, he returned from abroad with ideas about how to build a racetrack and to eliminate bookmaking by using the new French wagering system. The Churchill family backed his racetrack venture and a new track was built on Churchill land. The Churchill brothers founded the new Louisville Jockey Club and Driving Park Association while Lutie acted as President and on-site manager. By selling 320 shares of stock at \$100 a share, they came up with \$32,000 to build a racetrack. In the spring and fall, the facility would be dedicated to horseracing. At other times, people were free to use the grounds for carriage driving (hence the Driving Park Association as part of the Jockey Club's name.)

The track opened amid great hoopla on May 17, 1875. Believe it, or not, the Kentucky Derby was not the main attraction. Two other races that ran that day: the Louisville Cup, which was discontinued after 1887 and the Gentleman's Cup race, in which a member of the Jockey Club rode his own horse were the featured races. But when Aristides set a new world record for the mile and a half distance, the crowd went wild. After only one year, the track was considered a success.

It is of interest to note that by mutual agreement, the Louisville Jockey Club land became the property of John Churchill. John was 71 years old and a widower for 30 years with no children. In November of 1890, John remarried a 36-year-old woman named Tina Nicholas, who was from a Kentucky family just as distinguished as the Churchills. Their son was born 10 months later and wills were changed. Had John not remarried, Lutie Clark might have inherited the land the track was on, but the birth of a healthy Churchill heir changed that.

Lutie Clark was quite a figure -- literally and figuratively. He weighed more than 300 pounds. At one point, he could barely climb the stairs up the grandstands to monitor the races he made possible. He was often seen as bullish, arrogant, and quick to judgment. A couple of examples:

In 1879, he refused breeder TG Moore permission to race claiming his entry fees were past due. Moore took the announcement as a personal insult and demanded an apology. Clark refused and ordered him out of his Galt House office. Moore told Clark he would bear the consequences should he not apologize and Clark knocked him to the ground, held a gun on him and ordered him off the premises. Moore left, got his own gun and shot Clark through the door, the bullet lodging under his right arm. No charges were ever brought.

Several years later, Clark was working as a steward at a Chicago track when a bartender at Clark's hotel took offense at Clark calling all Chicagoans "thieves and liars." I'm really not being political here as that would be prohibited. This really happened. Anyway, Clark left, returned with a pistol and forced the bartender to apologize for being offended.

Lutie's attitude, personality, disregard of track and city expenses and other unappealing personality traits placed him in ill repute with most everyone, including his family. But his contributions to the track and the Derby cannot be overlooked. Without him, there would be no Kentucky Derby, and Churchill Downs would have never gotten off the ground. He brought the first pari-mutuel machines into Kentucky: he presided over the American Turf Congress and wrote racing rules that are still in force today. He pioneered the stakes system, creating the Great American Stallion Stakes, on which the present Breeders' Cup is modeled.

Yet, during the 1880s, his reputation as an arrogant, quick-tempered man grew and he was not well liked by locals, who took to calling the Jockey Club track "Churchill's Downs," a

reference to English racing that poked fun at Lutie as well as reminding him who really controlled the Louisville Jockey Club purse strings. The local press picked up on the nickname, which has since become the track's incorporated, trademarked name.

If you are a thoroughbred owner, a breeder, a trainer, a jockey, a groom, a racing enthusiast, or a horse, there is one race that you strive to be a part of. "The Run for the Roses," "The Fastest Two Minutes in Sports," "The Most Exciting Two Minutes in Sports" are all synonymous with the first leg of the Triple Crown: the Kentucky Derby.

The Kentucky Derby is a grade 1 stakes race for three-year-old thoroughbred horses held annually on the first Saturday in May in Louisville, Kentucky at Churchill Downs. The race is a mile and a quarter in length on a dirt track. Colts and geldings carry 126 pounds (the combined weight of the jockey and saddle) and fillies 121 pounds. The attendance of the Kentucky Derby ranks first in North America and usually surpasses the attendance of all other stakes races, including the Preakness Stakes, the Belmont Stakes, and the Breeders' Cup. It is the first leg of the Triple Crown, followed by the Preakness and the Belmont Stakes.

Thoroughbred owners began sending their successful Derby horses to compete in the Preakness and Belmont Stakes because these races offered the highest purses. In 1919, Sir Barton became the first horse to win all three races, but it was not until 1930 when Gallant Fox became the second horse to do so that the media brought the term Triple Crown into play. Since 1931, the order of the races has been consistent, the Derby first, followed by the Preakness in two weeks, and then the Belmont two weeks later. There have been eleven Triple Crown winners, the so-called "superhorses", the last being Affirmed 33 years ago.

In addition to the race itself, a number of traditions play a large role in the Derby atmosphere. A tear usually comes to my eye when I hear Stephen Foster's "My Old Kentucky Home" as the horses trot onto the track -- a tradition since 1921.

Care for a cocktail? Try a mint julep, the traditional Derby iced drink consisting of bourbon, mint, and a sugar syrup. The "cordial julep" was mentioned as far back as 1634. The first known mention in print of the mint julep was in 1803. Ironically, the Kentucky Derby is one place that the average patron does not get a "real" mint julep. The offered julep of the Derby is made with Early Times, which is a Kentucky whiskey, not a bourbon. Nonetheless, they are quite popular -- over 120,000 will be served. For the deep-pocketed purists, you can purchase a special \$1000 mint julep served in a gold julep cup with a silver straw and made with Woodford Reserve Bourbon, mint from Ireland, organic sugar from Australia, and ice from the Bavarian Alps.

If you can't get a ticket, don't worry. Join the 80,000 revelers in the infield with a general admission ticket and party to your hearts content. If you are well-connected, join your friends on "Millionaires Row," the expensive boxes where the rich and famous gather.

What does the winner get? Besides the prestige of being one of 137 Derby winners? Exactly what are they running very fast for? Well, one thing they are running for is the Roses. Since 1934, the winner is draped with a garland of roses, 90 inches long, 14 inches wide and weighing about 35 pounds. 564 hand-selected prime red roses are on a garland of green satin. The center of the garland is made up of a "crown" of roses which features the same number of roses as horses competing in the Derby. A single rose in the center is raised above the rest and symbolizes the heart displayed by the winner. Big Brown, who won Derby 134, was the only

horse not draped with the rose garland as he was reported to not like flowers and his owners did not want to upset him after his Derby win.

Naturally, if you win, you would expect a trophy. Since 1924, the winning Derby horse is presented a gold trophy. In 1999, Churchill Downs acceded to racing lore and changed the direction of the decorative horseshoe on the 14-karat-gold trophy. The horseshoe had pointed downward on each trophy since 1924, but was turned 180° so that it pointed up. Racing superstition decrees that if a horseshoe is turned down, all the luck will run out. The trophy is hand-crafted, topped by an 18 karat-gold horse and rider and includes horseshoe-shaped handles. It stands 22 inches tall and weighs 3 1/2 pounds, including its jade base.

When Aristides won the first Kentucky Derby in 1875, his owners received a remarkable \$2850 as the winner's share. The purse for the 137th Kentucky Derby is about \$2 million, with \$1,425,000 going to the winner. Not bad for two minutes work.

The Kentucky Wildcats, and Lord knows I'm an avid fan, have often been dubbed the "Kings of the Bluegrass." I think the real Bluegrass Kings have four legs, not two.

I wish I had the time to talk about breeding, training, individual races and horses, jockeys and one of my favorite pastimes, handicapping, but time prohibits.

The most exciting two minutes in sports is just two days away. Sit back, Have a cocktail, and enjoy with me one of my favorite hobbies.