

# Hopkinsville Athenaeum Society: Longshot in the Dark

By Chris Jung

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If it wasn't for a chance partnership on a Pembroke Road farm, a \$21,000 transaction in New York, a jockey on the mend looking to revitalize his career, or a freak monsoon at Kentucky's most historic venue, I wouldn't be uttering these words tonight.

And even more significantly, Hopkinsville certainly wouldn't have a four-legged athlete on its mythical Mount Rushmore of local sports figures.

Mr. President, Mr. Vice President and fellow presenter, Mr. Secretary, and fellow Athenaeum Society members, this is the story of Flying Ebony — Christian County's black colt that could. A thoroughbred that still stands as the only Hoptown-foaled horse in our town's history to win the coveted Kentucky Derby crown.

Before we get to the protagonist of this tale, I'd be remiss if I didn't provide some context and credibility when it comes to a topic of this magnitude.

Looking back, I'm not sure there has ever been a place as special and significant to me as Churchill Downs Racetrack, particularly during the first weekend in May. The twin spires that loom large over the Louisville city scape mean something different to anyone who has basked in their radiant shadow, present company definitely included.

Unfortunately, I've always hovered just over the weight limit required to mount a horse at the track. A boy can dream. Other than that, however, I've had the privilege to witness all facets of the famed dirt oval, including the prestigious Kentucky Derby, from just about every vantage point imaginable.

To be honest, it's almost overwhelming to reminisce.

For me, Churchill Downs is a Friday off from elementary school and a red wagon pulled through the general admission tunnel with your sisters and friends, carrying a day's worth of family fun into the infield to enjoy the Kentucky Oaks.

Churchill Downs is your Dad receiving the track's exclusive cigar rights, and helping him sell House of Blue Smoke stogies in the Jockey Club and on Millionaire's Row, ultimately pocketing \$500 in tips just to help tobacco stick rookies cut and light their first Cohibas and Dominicans.

Churchill Downs is being one of 20 people in the country chosen for the venue's collegiate journalism seminar and getting to chase a real story on the backside, then having your work critiqued by the likes of Pat Forde and Billy Reed.

Churchill Downs is a place that takes a chance on a recent college graduate and brings him back home by offering a job. It's also the backdrop for a movie-like meet-cute where you tell a random girl she looks "angelic" on Derby Day 2009 as she walks through the Gate 1 lobby, and then convincing that same girl to marry you two years after.

Churchill Downs is tears rolling down your Mom's face while she gracefully belts the words to "My Old Kentucky Home" for the last time, as the Derby 2010 horses emerge from the paddock. Then, it's tears rolling down your own face five years later, as a 3-year-old filly with the same name as your mother — Lovely Maria — wins the garland of lilies on Oaks Day.

Between bachelor parties and wedding rehearsal dinners, and a litany of other events and experiences at Churchill Downs, sometimes it feels like a second home.

When my wife and I moved to Hopkinsville in August 2014, I wasn't sure if this history-rich western Kentucky town had taken to the traditions of the Greatest Two Minutes in Sports. Upon discovering, however, that it was the birthplace of Flying Ebony — one of just 147 previous Derby winners — I knew I had landed in the right place.

Back in 1919, I imagine that's similar to how Lucian Moseley was feeling after a three-day train ride to the Big Apple and eventually selling off his first-ever yearling during an annual Saratoga horse auction.

Moseley quickly learned in the late 1910s that a fast-rising interest in thoroughbred racing, and the subsequent cost of promising young horses, could lead to big-time opportunities. And it most certainly did. That's why he decided to go all in and purchase Riverview Dairy Farm — located near what is now Skyline Drive, in the area of the old Kentucky New Era building and Hillcrest Church on Pembroke Road — in 1921.

Shortly after, Moseley forged his relationship with decorated horseman and breeder John P. Madden of Lexington, and truly set history on track for greatness. Madden consigned one of his mares, Princess Mary, at Riverview Farm. Princess Mary had already been bred with another horse named The Finn, who was on loan from a farm in Lexington. This significant *encounter* took place at John White's Herbert Stud Farm on Bradshaw Road and eventually produced a little black colt named Flying Ebony.

A dark bay or brown horse, Flying Ebony was a handsome, short-coupled animal with a good shoulder and short cannons, but rather rough-looking ankles. He had a peppery disposition but an affectionate relationship with his closest caretakers.

In July 1923, Moseley once again make the trek to New York and the aforementioned Saratoga Sales. It was his fourth consecutive trip. A number of Christian County horse farmers would also send their yearlings to the north, hoping to cash in. Because of the long distance and extreme weight loss experienced by the thoroughbreds during the railcar ride, the western Kentucky contingent would always have to leave a month early.

Once the dust finally settled at the yearly yearling sales, New York carpet man and millionaire Gifford Cochran paid \$21,000 for Moseley's hopeful colt, which made Flying Ebony the highest priced yearling of that particular auction.

It was also while Cochran was there that he bought six other yearlings for \$140,000. Among the six was a colt that he would name Coventry. Future Hall of Fame trainer William Duke had just returned from a successful stint as a trainer in France to train for Cochran. Of the yearlings that Cochran had purchased, Coventry and Flying Ebony showed the most promise.

As a 2-year-old, Flying Ebony would win four of his eight starts. He won a race on the 1924 Derby undercard, part of his four-race win streak. At three, Flying Ebony started in and won his only prep race prior to the Kentucky Derby, a seven-furlong sprint that he took by a nose. None of his wins were stakes races, though, which prevented much fanfare within the industry.

Flying Ebony's stablemate, Coventry, under jockey Clarence Kummer, would gain fame for the stable as he won the Preakness at its new distance, a mile and three-sixteenths, a week before the 1925 Kentucky Derby.

Unfortunately, Coventry came out of the race sore and unable to make it to Churchill Downs to run in the world's biggest horse race. Cochran, thinking that Kummer would travel to Louisville to ride Flying Ebony in the Derby, suddenly found himself without a jockey when Kummer chose to stay in New York to ride elsewhere.

Enter Earl Sande, the well-known rider of 1923 Kentucky Derby winner, Zev. Finding himself on the comeback trail after a broken leg and other injuries, Sande was having a hard time getting mounts. Even though he was recovered, Sande had trouble finding trainers willing to let him ride again. Doctors had said his career was over and no one wanted to take a chance on the popular jockey.

With his Derby hopeful withdrawn, Sande began the search for a new one. In the days before the race, he reportedly went from barn to barn on the backside at Churchill begging for a ride. Without having any luck, Sande even offered the trainer of the favorite, Quatrain, \$2,000 to let him ride, but he was once again turned down.

Hearing that Flying Ebony was riderless, Sande turned to Cochran and Duke, who both felt the horse had an outside chance, and persuaded the pair to let him ride in the 1925 Derby. The experienced trainer Duke, who was nearing the end of his career, knew Sande was likely the sprinter's best chance to make the distance, so he gave him a shot on the biggest stage of them all.

On May 16, 1925, the morning of the great race dawned bright until around 8:00am, when a few sprinkles quickly passed through. Duke, having trained overseas, immediately had the farrier put mud calks on his horse. He would be the only horse to run the race with grips, the others venturing to post in flat plates, as there seemed to be

no other threat of rain. The Churchill track in 1925 was also a much deeper track, so there would not be any issues with running with mud calks. At that time, horseshoes were steel plates, not the light-weight aluminum plates that horses run in today. Eventually, the rain cleared out, bringing a record crowd flocking to the Churchill oval.

And oh, what a site it was.

The Thoroughbred Record reported that eight miles of Pullman cars and special trains brought out-of-towners to the Derby, and that nearly 100 airplanes entered into the sport on a large scale for the first time, bringing passengers to Louisville, all venturing to see the blue-ribbon event.

Motion picture cameras were stationed all around the track, ready to film the great race. WHAS and a Chicago station were both on hand to provide the first local and national radio broadcasts of the Kentucky Derby. Approximately six million people tuned in to hear the race announcement, as Credo Harris started with, "We are radio casting to you, for the first time in history, the running of a Kentucky Derby..."

This was also the first time the Derby was referred to as the "Run for the Roses," a nickname coined by New York sportswriter and one-time Churchill Downs president Bill Corum. The stage was truly set for the most *epic* Kentucky Derby to be run since the race's inception in 1875.

Those that tuned in to listen, however, were soon able to hear an abrupt, hellacious, five-minute storm that tore through the track, as the Derby horses were getting ready to go to post. Listeners could hear the thunder, as well as the hailstones, as they pounded off the broadcast cupola. Trees were uprooted around town, a man was struck by lightning, and the gathering hail looked as if a snowstorm had passed through.

While the 20 Derby horses walked onto the track for the post parade, a downpour of rain fell suddenly and soaked the track. The rain stopped for a moment and then started again as the horses were being lined up at the gate, leading to a four-minute weather delay. Finally, the rain subsided, and the 51st Kentucky Derby got underway.

As soon as the barrier rose, Sande sent Flying Ebony to the front, where he stayed as they passed the stands the first time. Flying Ebony broke well from the sixth-post position and was running in fourth place early in the race. He was leading at the quarter-mile post, then pulled back while Sande kept the leader, Captain Hal, well in his sights.

As they rounded the turn into the stretch, Captain Hal's jockey started yelling at Sande, telling him that he had no chance. Sande knew better as he still had Flying Ebony under a hold. Dramatically, he decided to loosen the reins, allowing the black colt to fly to the front, charge ahead muckily on the sloppy track, and pass under the wire an easy winner by one-and-a-half lengths, in a time of just over 2 minutes and 7 seconds.

Quatrain, whose trainer turned down jockey Sande, finished 12th.

At 60-1 odds, a winning Flying Ebony betting slip paid \$8.30 to win, \$3.80 to place and \$2.80 to show on a \$2 bet. Today, that winning ticket would have paid out \$122.42. The winning purse for the 51st Running of the Kentucky Derby was just over \$52,000.

Flying Ebony was given his roses as he posed for the many flashing cameras. The presenters were ready to give Cochran, the owner, his gold trophy; however, they were unable to find him. At the last second, Cochran appeared through the crowd. Unbelievably, he had missed the race due to a mishap with the police.

While heading to the track, Cochran had his driver speed so that they could arrive on time, but they were pulled over. An argument with the police led authorities to take Cochran for a "talk with the sergeant." Cochran finally arrived at the track, just as the Derby was starting. He was unable to view it as he got to his spot just as the race was over, not even knowing who had won. Upon finding out, the unhappiness of his police run-in melted away, replaced with the joy of just having won the garland of roses.

Lucian Moseley was at Churchill Downs for his former horse's victory. When Flying Ebony crossed the finish line first, Moseley threw his straw hat into the air. According to a post-race write-up in the Kentucky New Era, the people in the crowd that day say they heard Moseley shout, "How 'bout that for a little country boy from Christian County!"

Flying Ebony was the last Derby winner whose color was officially registered as black, which is very rare today under Jockey Club classifications, with most such horses now categorized as "dark bay/brown." Black Gold won the Derby in 1924, a year before.

The 1925 Kentucky Derby was Flying Ebony's final win. He raced three more times before being retired, finishing with total earnings of over \$62,000 in 13 starts.

Eventually sold into stud in 1926, Flying Ebony would stand at Ashland Stud for five years, siring several stakes winners, among them the notable Dark Secret. When Cochran died, his horses were dispersed, resulting in Leslie Kieffer of Maryland's Inverness Stud Farm purchasing the black stallion Flying Ebony for \$2,500.

In 1934, Charles Perkins, who had seen Flying Ebony win the Kentucky Derby, purchased the horse at the Saratoga Sales, moving him to his Santa Ynez Valley California farm, where the famous Hoptown horse remained until he died on Sept. 22, 1943, at the age of 21. He's credited with breeding 174 winning racehorses. Flying Ebony's Kentucky Derby trophy remains among the permanent exhibits at the Kentucky Derby Museum in Louisville.

Flying Ebony ended up being Duke's only Derby starter and the last of five Derby winners for Cochran. Their partnership ended up being short-lived after Duke died the following year after a bout with pneumonia.

Sande went on to win the last of his three Derby mounts in 1930, aboard Gallant Fox, who became just the second horse to ever win horse racing's Triple Crown — a successful victory in the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont races.

Ebony Knight, a California-bred son of Flying Ebony, became a top show horse in Western stock horse classes before his death in a 1949 barn fire. Both Lexington, Kentucky, and Havre de Grace, Maryland, have roads named after Flying Ebony.

Back in Hopkinsville, Moseley eventually retired from the horse business and sold off a parcel of Riverview Farm to WFIW Radio. The rest of the property was eventually purchased by James Haddock. Before he died in 1968, Moseley moved to a house at 122 Latham Avenue in Hopkinsville. That residence, owned today by Boyd and Patsy Clark, has a "1925: Flying Ebony" placard that still hangs on the outside of the home.

About a month into my research, my heart dropped when I learned that an Athenaeum paper had already been written on Flying Ebony. Dr. Tom Riley, who everyone here likely remembers, delivered "Flying Ebony: A Sprig of the Old Pennyrile" on November 7, 1974. After some reflection, I found it humbling to travel down some of the same paths as Dr. Riley and decided to write something that could serve — hopefully — as a suitable complement to a fallen member's literary work.

At the end of Dr. Riley's paper in the mid-70s, he ended with a verse written by John White — friend of Lucian Moseley — in the Kentucky New Era the Monday after Flying Ebony won the Derby and put Hopkinsville on the horse racing map.

Speaking of Flying Ebony, it read, "He was bred in Old Kentucky, where the bluegrass doesn't grow, but the scent of the Pennyroyal in all the breezes blow. He was raised on the sprouts of sassafras, this offspring of The Finn's; and the people at the Derby yelled, 'Ye Gods! Old Pennyrile wins'."

I don't think anyone could say it much better than that.

In the end, Churchill Downs is watching your friends evolve from mud-sliders in the infield to suited-gliders in the grandstand. It's ticket cashing, program slapping, Julep sipping, cigar lighting, exacta boxing, hat wearing, memory making on the first Saturday in May in Louisville, Kentucky.

It's the Greatest Two Minutes in Sports. It's history. It's mystique. It's tradition. It's everything. A lot of money will be spent at the track during the 148th Running of the Kentucky Derby this May; but, for me, I will never be able to pay enough back for the wonderful memories and life-altering moments and experiences I've had there.

As for Flying Ebony and Hopkinsville as a breeding ground for future champions? It may be a longshot in the dark, but I'll always bet on you to win.