

6-5-2015

Triple Crown

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Triple Crown" (2015). *On Sport and Society*. 18.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/18>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
JUNE 5, 2015

It was a just a year ago that I wrote about the last attempt at a Triple Crown. This year we are at that point again where a race of approximately two minutes and twenty seconds will either end a remarkable era of Triple Crown futility or extend it for yet another year. And so with a few changes of the cast I submit again these observations on this marvelous weekend in horse racing history.

By late Saturday Sportsworld will know if there is a Triple Crown winner for the first time in thirty-seven years. The last winner was Affirmed in 1978. No one could have guessed that it would be this long before another horse would accomplish this feat again. After all Affirmed was the third horse of the 1970s to win the Triple Crown. Seattle Slew won the Crown in 1977 and the great Secretariat did it in 1973.

Since then thirteen horses have won the first two races only to fail in the Belmont. The third race has been the charm, but only for the challengers. The most recent came a year ago when California Chrome failed to pass the test of the Belmont course.

There are many reasons for this long drought. Three races run over five weeks is a test that few horses can pass. In racing today two year olds generally run no more than once a month. In addition the mile and one-half distance at the Belmont is more than any of three year olds has ever run, or for that matter will ever run again. The combination of these factors has proven too much to overcome. However, it would seem that American Pharoah has the qualities that will allow him to break the long streak of futility. Then again it was believed that several of the previous thirteen horses who faltered at the Belmont possessed these qualities.

Many sports fans and those outside the sporting world believe that horse racing is a form of animal cruelty rather than sport. This is not a view that I share. I am totally enthralled by horse racing and I can barely wait for Saturday. I will be watching with undivided attention from the paddock scenes to the winner's circle and everything between. I watch a lot of horse racing on television and not for the betting, which I do only at the

lowest levels when I am at a track. I watch for the beauty of the horses, the competitiveness of the races, and the excitement generated by the event.

A horse moving with speed and power across dirt, grass, or artificial surface is a marvelous sight. These are great athletes with a highly developed racing sense and competitive mentality. To see a horse in mid-flight as they lose contact with the racing surface and move forward is an awesome thing.

I never quite realized nor fully appreciated this aspect of horse racing until a few years ago when I was at the Breeder's Cup at Churchill Downs. Sitting, in fact usually standing, at the head of the stretch I witnessed up close the power of the horses as never before. Coming out of the turn the acceleration is comparable to something you would witness at a drag race or a rocket launch.

All of this is impressive but it is only part of the beauty of racing. The other part is found in the horse. The size, muscle structure, coloring, and grooming of the coat is a portrait of athletic beauty. Going to the paddock area and seeing the horses up close and in preparation for the race is another essential element to a full appreciation of the sport. One is struck again by the power, but also the grace of great athletes heading into action.

I understand fully those who object to horse racing, but I do not share the views of those who see the ugliness within the sport more than its beauty. I know that horse racing is badly regulated and governed, and that drug abuse practiced on horses is much too common. I know that this has been going on for some considerable time and that it needs to be not only acknowledged but acted upon. The horse racing community must break up their league of denial.

There are signs that reform may be coming, but it is not coming nearly fast enough. Perhaps the most immediate need is a set of national standards on the treatment of horses and use of drugs within racing. If the industry cannot do it, then federal legislation and regulation is a must.

There must be a sense of urgency in these matters. If there is not, who wins the next Triple Crown and when, will be a moot point.

I remember the three Triple Crowns of the 70s. Seattle Slew was a powerful horse and the only Triple Crown winner to complete the sweep having never lost a race. Affirmed won the Triple Crown the following year in 1978 by beating his rival Alydar in all three races in thrilling runs down the stretch. Steve Cauthen, "The Kid" at age eighteen rode Affirmed and achieved a level of fame almost as great as the horse.

The first Triple Crown winner of the 70s, and first since Citation in 1948, was the most remarkable horse I have ever seen. Secretariat in 1973 overwhelmed all comers and in the final leg at Belmont produced the greatest horse race I had ever seen. Secretariat ran away from the field winning by thirty-one lengths in a record time for the mile-and-a-half. In fact all three wins were achieved in record time.

Horse racing fans and workers at all levels remember this race and how they could not believe what they were watching. Some thought that Secretariat was running too fast and would collapse before the finish line. Jack Nicklaus was quoted as saying he stood alone in front of his television cheering Secretariat on, and had tears coming down his cheeks as the great horse crossed the finish line. I remember standing in my living room yelling and cheering as if I was at Belmont and thinking, "this really cannot be happening." But it was, and it did.

I have watched that race over and over again in the last three decades, and I am still in awe and still feel the excitement generated that day.

So come Saturday with all that I know about the corruption of horse racing, with my knowledge of all that needs to be done to clean up horse racing, I will be in front of my television hoping to see what I have not seen and what racing fans have not seen in thirty-six years. For a little over two minutes I will be at the track at Belmont waiting for American Pharoah to cross the finish line and complete the Triple Crown.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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