

6-8-2012

Triple Crown

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Triple Crown" (2012). *On Sport and Society*. 17.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/17>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
June 7, 2012

I wrote this piece last night and intended to send it out today. Just a few hours ago the news came that I'll Have Another will not be running at Belmont tomorrow. It is a crushing blow to race fans and especially to those who have a stake in I'll Have Another. For those of us who have only an emotional stake in the horse and the race, and for those who were so looking forward to the possibility of a Triple Crown winner on Saturday the news comes as a great disappointment. I will watch the Belmont Stakes tomorrow because it is the Belmont and because there are several very good horses running. I will watch the race feeling a sense of loss in what might have been, but I will watch because it is a great sport featuring great athletes. For these reasons I am sending this essay to you despite today's developments. -R.C. 6/8/12

It has become one of the rarest of rarities in American sport. This Saturday for the twelfth time in the past thirty-four years a horse will come to the Belmont with an opportunity to become the twelfth horse in the history of the Triple Crown to achieve this elusive fete. The last time it was done was in 1978 by Affirmed.

The Belmont Stakes is the longest race of three Triple Crown events requiring a three year-old horse to run a mile-and-a-half and it is the third race run by the horse over a five week span. I'll Have Another will take on eleven challengers on Saturday to try to keep the streak of failures from reaching twelve. If you like numbers you must love all these twelve's on the board. I have no idea if they mean anything at all, but I am sure there are many bettors across the country trying to figure the meaning of twelve on Saturday.

Affirmed won the Belmont, and won the Triple Crown, by beating his rival Alydar in all three races in thrilling runs down the stretch. Steve Cauthen, "The Kid" at age eighteen rode Affirmed achieving fame almost as great as the horse. I'll Have Another is being ridden by Mario Gutierrez who is twenty-five, but like Cauthen was an unknown quantity coming into the Triple Crown season. "I'll Have Another" too had a rival, "Bodemeister," who will not be at Belmont, having gone through a grueling set of races this spring and not wanting to have another.

So there are similarities and parallels and recurring numbers to consider. Then there is the mile and a half distance that has been the undoing of many of the pretenders to the Triple Crown who could sprint but could not endure. Can they go this distance, is always the issue. Horses across the world often do go this distance, but in the United States the mile and a half is an anomaly. If you are under the age of forty you probably have not seen a horse successfully negotiate that distance at Belmont to take the Triple Crown.

As for myself, I remember only the last three Triple Crown winners: Affirmed in 1978, Seattle Slew in 1977, and Secretariat in 1973. Of the three, Seattle Slew's win was the least memorable for me. Although this was a great horse, I remember Seattle Slew more for the wins of his second year of racing when he defeated Affirmed in the Marlboro Cup, the first race matching Triple Crown winners.

As for Affirmed of course the memory is strong because of the thrilling finishes in all three races. The only minus was the fact that this was the third Triple Crown winner of the decade, and one expected there would be many more to come. Of course there have been none. Eleven have come to the Belmont and not one has closed the deal. So many looked like they would or could, but in the end disappointment was the winner.

The most memorable Triple Crown winner in my time watching horse racing was Secretariat. I have seen nothing like this horse since, nor indeed before. I can sit and watch video of Secretariat's three victories, breaking track records and dominating the field, and still wonder at this horse. I can remember distinctly when Secretariat won The Belmont by what seemed like a mile or more. I was standing in my living room in front of the television, screaming and yelling and laughing at the amazing race, the amazing horse, and the massive margin of victory. I was certain I would never see anything like this again, and I haven't.

Some people were miffed when Secretariat was named as one of ESPN's greatest athletes. My only question was why it was so far down the list. How could a horse be an athlete? If you watch those three races it is easy to see that Secretariat was an athlete, and if you let your imagination play it is even easier.

As to the eleven horses that had the opportunity to win the Triple Crown at Belmont since Affirmed, all these names remain familiar to me. Most recently Big Brown in 2008 seemed like a sure winner, only to pull up on the far turn and finish ninth. There were three others in the first decade of the 21st Century with Funny Cide and Smarty Jones perhaps the best remembered. There were three potentials in both the 90s and 80s; Silver Charm, Real Quiet, Sunday Silence, and Alysheba were all thought to be the one horse to turn the trick. And in 1979 it seemed almost a sure thing that Spectacular Bid would make it three Triple Crown winners in a row. These eight and three more, all came up short.

So on Saturday those who follow horse racing and those who are but casual fans of the game will be watching to see if the long drought will end. If in the end I'll Have Another will do what so many others could not do.

I know there are many out there who find horse racing a cruel and brutal sport that victimizes horses with the reckless use of drugs and too little care for the well being of the horses. I acknowledge that, and recognize the fact that the trainer of I'll Have Another is a less than admirable character in this regard. I also support all those efforts to reform the sport and protect the horses.

On Saturday I will concentrate on the horses and the jockeys and the fact that this could be another historic day of racing. I will watch the magnificence of these horses and cheer wildly if I'll Have Another is in the mix down the stretch. For me horse racing still has its redeeming qualities and lies within the framework of the essence of sport and is marked by a beauty of its own.

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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