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Isaac Murphy: A 19th Century African-American Jockey

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The name Isaac Murphy is not exactly a household word in American Sport, and I suspect even among those who follow horse racing the name is not likely to evoke recognition. But on this day before the Kentucky Derby it might be worth recalling the career of Isaac Murphy.

I was reminded of him last Sunday while watching one of those TV shows on which sportswriters sit around and kibitz about the week in sport. The subject of the Kentucky Derby came up, and an African-American sportswriter asked rhetorically why there were no black jockeys. I was surprised at the comment, and wondered if the writer knew the answer to his own question. If he knows his African-American Sport History he could answer the question, and he would know the name Isaac Murphy as well.

He would know, because Isaac Murphy was one of the greatest jockeys in America in the late 19th century, and one of the greatest jockeys in the History of the Kentucky Derby. He was one of many African-Americans who participated in the Sport of Kings, as African-Americans played a major role in horseracing in the United States until early in the Twentieth Century.

This is one of those stories in the History of Sport that perfectly parallels developments in the History of the United States.

Born Isaac Burns in 1861 in Kentucky, Isaac Murphy took on the name of his grandfather, Green Murphy, shortly after he began working as a jockey. Because Isaac was small of stature he was apprenticed as a jockey in 1873, and he rode his first mount competitively in 1875, the same year he rode his first Kentucky Derby.

Within five years Isaac Murphy was at the top of his profession, and he dominated the sport through the decade of the Eighties. He rode every great horse in America, won every major race except the Futurity, and was the first jockey to win three Kentucky Derbies. He won the famous Latonia Derby five times, and qualified for the winner's circle at the American Derby four times. Most remarkable of all he had a career winning record of forty-four percent, riding winners in 628 of his 1,412 races.

During his best years in the decade of the Eighties Murphy was earning between \$15,000 and \$20,000 a year, while the other top

jockeys were making about \$5,000. With his wealth Murphy invested in real estate in Lexington and Chicago, and had his own stable of horses. He was considered a gentleman, and was highly regarded in racing circles not only for his talent, but for his impeccable honesty in a profession that was notorious as a haunt of gamblers and fixers.

After 1890 Isaac Murphy's career took a dramatic turn downwards, and by 1893 he was out of racing. Two factors seemed to play a role. Murphy suffered from bad health resulting from the rigors of maintaining his weight, and there were rumors of drinking problems, which he denied.

Although these factors may have played some part, what was happening to Isaac Murphy was part of a larger pattern of change, not just in racing or sport, but in American society generally. By the 1890's white Americans were turning increasingly to segregation, while driving African-Americans out of many lucrative occupations.

The Nineties was a decade of intense racial hostility by whites toward blacks, a development that came out of the economic problems and the politics of the period. The turmoil of Southern politics led to a rapid growth of segregation, and race hatred.

From the beginning of organized horse racing in the South, the slave population dominated the position of jockey. The horse was considered much more important than the jockey, who was simply chosen from stable attendants, trainers, and exercise boys. Jockeys were seldom even mentioned when discussing racing. The dominance of this aspect of racing that had begun in the slave quarters, carried over in freedom through the end of the 19th century. At the first Kentucky Derby in 1875 fourteen of the fifteen jockeys were African-Americans, including the winner, Oliver Lewis. African-American jockeys won 13 of the first 27 Kentucky Derbies.

But as the *nouveau riche* entered racing in the '80s and '90s they began to closely examine all aspects of the sport, and become concerned about the jockey. Also money paid to jockeys was increasing, and whites were correspondingly attracted to this occupation. This movement of whites into the field, combined with the growing appeal of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, led to the removal of the African-American from his position in racing.

By the mid-'90s Boards of Control were being created to regulate the sport, and Jockey Clubs were formed to control the riders. The result was the licensing of jockeys and the denial of licenses to African-Americans. The last African-American rode in the Kentucky Derby in 1911.

Isaac Murphy did not live to see this, as he died in 1896. In recent years a monument has been placed at Churchill Downs to commemorate his achievements. During the post-parade tomorrow think of Isaac Murphy. He too once loved his old Kentucky home.

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