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## The Kentucky Derby

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It is called the greatest two minutes in sport; the run for the roses; and the first leg of the Triple Crown. It is The Kentucky Derby.

The first Saturday in May is special for fans of horse racing, for Kentuckians, and for anyone interested in the great sport spectacles of the United States. It is the beginning of two to five weeks of suspense to see if this will be the year that will produce a Triple Crown Winner. It has tradition, style, and ritual. It is one of those events in American Sport that offers a snap shot of a segment of American life in all its beauty and with all its warts.

Yesterday was the 127<sup>th</sup> running of the Kentucky Derby making it one of the oldest continuous events in American sport. This year as in so many years in the last two decades the favorite did not win. No horse had ever won from the 17<sup>th</sup> poll position and didn't again. This of course is part of the charm of horse racing, or for that matter, sport in general. Favorites don't always win, the experts are often wrong, and sometimes the sentimental choices come through.

"Monarchos" was the only Kentucky bred horse in the field and was largely an overlooked choice by both bettors and experts. So what happens? "Monarchos" wins, and does so in the second fastest time in the history of the event, only two-fifths of a second off "Secretariat's" track record. Will "Monarchos" win the Triple Crown? Will "Monarchos" find a niche in history near that of "Secretariat?" We will know in either two or five week's time.

A friend who is Louisville born and bred and has been a Floridian about as long as I have, sent me this note less than an hour before the race. It captures the lure of Derby Day:

"This is the one day (the two minutes?) when, each year, a tidal wave of emotions sweeps me back to my place of birth. I can't explain it. I sip a mint julep. And when the U of L band plays 'My Old Kentucky Home,' I shed a tear. Ignoring all the social-cultural baggage that goes with this race, I somehow get in touch with childhood, parents, friends long forgotten (old girlfriends?) and all manner of vague emotional images that I never experience at any other time. . . Fortunately, this phenomenon lasts about as

long as the race. But it is an intense high."

But what is the draw for those of us born in Minnesota, Ohio or Maine? Why should we care? Why do we attach any emotion to the playing of "My Old Kentucky Home?"

In part it is the love of horse racing. These beautiful, unpredictable, and powerful animals carry themselves with a certain dignity and grace, while at the same time displaying a tremendous competitive spirit coming down the stretch.

In part it is the spectacle: The display of wealth, the unpretentious parade of money and style, and the pretentious display of same. Then there are the hats, women's hats. From the slightly gaudy to the elegant and stylish, usually large, and demanding to be notice. You just don't see these hats most days, and you always see them on this day. They are emblematic of elegance and class.

For me however there is another dimension to it all. Somehow this day, time, and place encapsulates elements of class and race steeped in historic significance. Just looking at the beautiful and moneyed people who hold the stage at Churchill Downs, one is reminded of just how much "class" is the "unmentionable cousin in the American attic." The special seating in millionaires row, the clear separation of the masses in the infield, and the unspoken resentment that the best people have toward the interlopers like D. Wayne Lukas and Bob Baffert who come out the lower orders to bask in the spotlight, and even take it, from the old money.

The fact that so much was made in all the post-race comments about a Kentucky-bred horse winning this year's race was not just something that people said. It carried an added emotional dimension for those who resent the diluting of racing's aristocracy by the new money and the foreigners. Outsiders have never been welcome despite all that talk about Southern hospitality.

Then of course there is the whiteness of it all. Owners, riders, trainers, fans, television commentators, touts, and all manner of experts, and not a black face among them. Were it not for history this might not be so significant. In the first Kentucky Derby fourteen of the fifteen riders were African-American, and in the first 27 years of the Derby, thirteen of the winning jockeys were African-American. One of the great jockeys in the history of the Derby, the first three time winner, was Isaac

Murphy an African-American. Until the 1980s Murphy was seldom mention at Churchill Downs. Nearly all the trainers were African-American. After 1911 no African-American rode in the Kentucky Derby and the trainers turned white as segregation put its chokehold on America.

I mention this not to condemn anyone, but only to point out that specific decisions were made at a particular point in American time to exclude people from a sector of American life. And it was so far back in the American past that we neither think about it nor even notice it. Nor is class much noticed or mentioned. Still it too constitutes a significant part of the American social reality.

Every now and then it is good to remember that things are not the way they are because they have always been that way, or because that is simply the way they are. Things are the way they are because certain decisions were made for specific reasons that set things the way they now are. These are not eternal fixtures and all are subject to change. They were set by humans and can be altered by humans.

For all these reasons I love the first Saturday in May.

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