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Isaac Murphy: A Great Jockey and a Victim of Segregation in Horse Racing

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE

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Isaac Murphy is not a name commonly known in American Sport, and even among those who follow horse-racing it is not likely to evoke wide recognition. But on this day before the Kentucky Derby it might be worth recalling the career of Isaac Murphy because he was one of the greatest jockeys in the history of the event and one of the greatest jockeys in racing history. Murphy was one of many African-Americans who played a major role in horse-racing in the United States until early in the Twentieth Century when African-Americans were systematically removed from the sport.

This is one of those stories in the History of Sport that perfectly parallels developments in the History of the United States, and it is a story worth recalling as the debate over affirmative action is again intensifying.

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 Murphy 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 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 developed 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 altogether. 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, systematically driving African-Americans out of many lucrative occupations.

The Nineties was a decade of intense racial hostility and violence 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 racial segregation and economic warfare.

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 that had begun in the slave quarters, carried over into 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 became concerned about the jockey. Also money paid to jockeys was increasing, and whites were correspondingly attracted to this occupation. The movement of whites into the field, combined with the growing appeal of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, led to the systematic removal of African-Americans from their dominant 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 licences 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, but this has not changed the numbers of African-Americans working as jockeys. As the debate over affirmative action continues it should be remembered that

African-Americans were systematically excluded from many occupations and professions by those who coveted their jobs and grasped power. Not because they lacked talent.

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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