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The Belmont Stakes

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Belmont Stakes
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A few decades ago when a powerful team played a very weak team in any sport and the result was lopsided there was a phrase to describe the event: "They beat the Little Sisters of the Poor." On Saturday the Little Sisters of the Poor got beat again but it was the powerful team, or in this case horse, that lost. "Smarty Jones" was supported by an entire nation, including the Philadelphia convent of The Little Sisters of the Poor where the sister of Smarty's jockey had parlayed the power of prayer and the two-dollar bets of the God Squad.

So once again there is no Triple Crown winner. After all the buildup and all the story lines we are left to wait one more year as 1978 gets further and further away. This has been an extraordinary week for horse racing and for the world of sport.

Ever since the impressive Preakness Victory all the experts have been lining up to crown Smarty Jones as horse of the century. There was some of this with Funny Cide, but nothing on the scale of the Smarty Army.

This bit of sports mania had everything. First, it had the recovering alcoholics. The owners of Smarty Jones, the Chapmans, have been on the wagon now for two decades. The jockey, Stewart Elliott, is another recovering alcoholic who is dealing well with his disease. In addition, Elliott had the resume of a mediocre jockey who for two decades has had the undistinguished career of a journeyman on the secondary tracks. It is here that the Seabiscuit parallel trumps the recovering alcoholic story.

Multiple media outlets interview Laura Hillenbrand, author of the bestselling book, *Seabiscuit*, to evoke the parallels. The marginal jockey with alcohol problems, the owners of similar profile, and the horse that looks like it doesn't quite belong in the same paddock as the big boys, all receive comment. This at a troubled time for America when national confidence has been shaken by events seemingly beyond the control of many Americans whose economic wellbeing has been diminished. It's not the Thirties, but still an entire nation seems captivated by the achievements of this amazing wonder horse.

Seattle Slew offers another set of comparisons. Undefeated in his first eight races, just like Slew, Smarty Jones seems he could be of the same stature. No other horse has won the first two legs of the Triple Crown as an undefeated three-year-old. Only Seattle Slew. Smarty Jones had already won millions in winnings and bonus monies and the stud fees has doubled and tripled over the past three weeks.

Then there is the Secretariat comparison. The big victory in the Preakness, by a wider margin than Secretariat, led some to predict a similar achievement in the Belmont. Ron Turcotte, Secretariat's jockey predicted a twenty-five length win for Smarty Jones in the Belmont. The old films of Secretariat smoking the field at Belmont are shown over and over again in anticipation of another wonder horse.

The betting odds are lopsided to the extreme. People are buying two-dollar tickets on Smarty Jones just to have a souvenir of the Triple-Crown winner. Special betting windows to handle only this sort of bet are set up at Belmont. One man buys nine thousand of these two-dollar tickets to give as gifts.

There is madness in the air all right. Philadelphia is behind their horse. There hasn't been a sports champion in Philadelphia since 1985 when Villanova won the NCAA basketball championship. The city is betting on the blue-collar horse from the blue-collar track to bring home the glory to the blue-collar city.

Including the first in 1919 there have been eleven horses that have won the Triple Crown, but none since Affirmed in 1978. Certainly Smarty Jones would be number twelve.

Then there is the trainer, John Servis. Looking as young as Seattle Slew's trainer when that great horse scored the Triple, John Servis quickly developed a media persona to fit greatness. Servis is the family man who loves his wife and kids, who is modest and self-effacing, who is just happy to be here. Servis has stayed in Philadelphia because he does not want to move his family at this time. When the time is right it will be a family decision to move, not his alone.

Has anything been missed here? All these images and more have been regurgitated over and over again for three weeks. It was so much fun having a Triple Crown winner again.

And then came the race! Reality trumps Myth. My first misgivings came when Stewart Elliot was interviewed an hour or so before

the race and seemed to be having trouble swallowing. I haven't seen a pre-event interview like this since John Tudor was interviewed prior to being smoked by the Kansas City Royals in Game Seven of the 1985 World Series.

When the race started it all looked to be going as planned. Smarty Jones took the lead but the pace was slow, although the third quarter of a mile was not. Coming into the far turn Purge was finished. Coming around and out of the turn Rock Hard Ten and Eddington were cooked. Smarty was pulling away or so it seemed. Then coming hard on the outside was Birdstone. He got near but Smarty initially met the challenge. Then in the final lengths, swoosh, Birdstone flashed by Smarty Jones and a nation deflated.

One more Triple Crown winner failed to go through the formality of coming into being. I groaned and turn away to have dinner before the hockey game got underway. In Calgary the Lightning would disappoint another nation on this amazing Saturday in sport.

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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