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The Breeders' Cup

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Breeders' Cup
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Since the first running of the Breeders' Cup in 1984, I have sat before my television each year and watched the greatest day of horse racing available in this country. I haven't seen all the Breeders' Cups, having been out of the country for a few of them, but have seen most of these great spectacles of racing.

This year, for the first time, Pat and I, made it to Breeders' Cup. I had been to Churchill Downs a few times previously, but never on a big race day. I had never been to a Triple Crown race and so this was a much-anticipated event.

As with most sporting events, being there is a totally different experience than watching it on television, although if you just want to see the races, television may be the best choice. The major difference in the experience, as it is with most sports, is that television cannot capture the speed and power of the race, nor the size and beauty of the horses.

Our seats were on the home stretch about halfway between the completion of the far turn and the quarter-pole. It turned out that these were great seats in at least one respect. It also turned out that they were the most expensive bleacher seats I have ever had anywhere. The bleachers were slightly elevated and afforded an excellent view of both the turf and dirt tracks. You couldn't see the finish line very well, but what you could see extremely well was the moment of acceleration for those horses that would contend down the stretch.

And what a sight and feeling it was! In many of the races the eventual winner hit the accelerator just as they were in front of us, and then boom, they were gone, bolting past the other horses as if they were standing still, opening the lead, and then holding that lead or pulling away to the finish. The thunder of the hooves expressing the power of the horses was a tactile experience that you could see, hear, and most impressively, feel. For a split second you stop breathing as this wonder unfolds in front of you with lightning-like speed. I have stood on the rail and been close to the action at many other horse races, but I had never experienced anything quite like this.

The paddock area is another place where television can take you, but where television cannot grasp the totality of the experience. You can stand very close to the walking area and see the horses arrive from the barn, some covered with a blanket, some not. They take two or three turns around the paddock, then are saddled, and finally follow the lead horse around the paddock and out to the track. What is most striking about the horses is their aesthetic qualities. The coloring, the sheen of the coat, the muscle structure, all bear witness to the quality of the horses gathered on Breeders' Cup day and produce a remarkable beauty. Some horses have a look of serenity and calm; others are a bit jittery, while others have an alertness that seems to indicate an awareness of the gravity of the occasion. Or perhaps it is the anticipation of the race, much like boxers in the last few minutes as they leave the locker room and make the long walk to the ring?

The other thing that television cannot give you is the totality of the scene. Horseracing crowds in general are an interesting slice of humanity. The track-rats, the dopesters, the shady, the wise guys, the fashion mavens, the ordinary, the eccentric, the extraordinary, are all on display on most days at the track. What the Breeders' Cup offers is an even wider range of humanity, in part a function of attendance figures, but more importantly, a function of money. The sport of kings is truly the sport of the super-rich.

With purses starting at one million dollars on the low end, the Breeders' Cup attracts the best horses and the richest owners on the planet, along with their fans and their entourages. The paddock not only displays the great horses, but you see before each race a gathering of the excessively rich. What is striking is the wealth that they put on display in that small piece of real estate. The clothing, the coiffure, and the jewelry all announce wealth, with a range from the impeccable to the gaudy, the tasteful to the tasteless, while the differences between the rich and the neo-rich stand out, with all of the excess approaching obscenity.

As for the crowd around the paddock and around the track, you see and hear most everything. At one point while standing in the crowd at the paddock, French was being spoken on one side of me, Arabic and Japanese on another, along with English in a range of accents: Irish, British, Indian, Middle Eastern, Japanese, and several American varieties from the South to the Northeast to the Midwest. Horses were discussed, betting decisions mulled, drunks peppered the air with shouts and laughter, and there was

much merriment and nonsense. Necks were craned to see particular horses, digital cameras and phone cameras were thrust into the air in search of a memento of the day.

And then there were the bettors. The high rollers and low rollers all standing in line clutching their programs, some flashing a fist-full of cash, some carrying loose-leaf folders to the window, still others making a last check of the Daily Racing Form or the local tip sheets.

Everyone, of course, has a system. Numbers, names, jockeys, colors, sometimes even the horses themselves are put into a myriad of complex formulas to arrive at the "sure thing." One person in a betting line in front of me prior to the first race placed bets on all ten races of the day simply in terms of number combinations, betting the same combination on each and every race. This led to complications as in some races the horses bearing those numbers had been scratched. What was clear was that everyone had a system, and everyone was sure they were picking the winners. Here, too, the banter, although somewhat muted as is fitting in this more solemn venue, was fascinating.

I should also report that I did pick three winners on the day, including "Invasor" in The Classic, while several others among my brilliant choices finished well up the track or not at all. And in one of those "bet the name" bets, "Arete" was running in one of the preliminary races on Friday. Of course I had to bet that name. I am not sure what it means, but "Arete" faded in the stretch.

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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