

Big Brown and the troubled state of racing

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Big Brown and the troubled state of racing
MAY 18, 2008

Big Brown's victory at The Preakness yesterday has set the stage for a possible Triple Crown winner. At Belmont Park on June 7, and in the three weeks leading up to it, there will be much excitement and speculation in anticipation of Big Brown's big race. Ten horses have made it to this stage over the past three decades only to fall short at the Belmont Stakes. Nearly all of these ten, and now Big Brown, were felt to have an excellent chance to join the elite group of Triple Crown winners.

Big Brown soundly bested two different fields of challengers in the first two legs of the Triple Crown. Now a half-brother to the previous two Belmont winners awaits Big Brown in New York. Casino Drive was flown in from Japan to run in the Peter Pan Stakes at Belmont on May 10. With Kent Desormeaux riding, Casino Drive dominated. On June 7, of course, Desormeaux will be on board Big Brown.

As someone who enjoys horse racing I will be watching, but with some mixed feelings. Watching these beautiful animals roar around a track is one of the wonders of the world of sport. The grace, beauty and power of the horses, combined with the skills and courage of the jockeys, produce high quality physical and aesthetic appeal. However, the collapse of Eight Belles at the Kentucky Derby has raised serious questions about horseracing. These are not new questions and issues, but they are serious, and now more than ever need to be addressed.

Much has been written over the last two weeks about the problems of breeding for speed and the economic imperatives that shorten the careers of thoroughbred horses leading them to stud as soon as the profit margins dictate. Big Brown will run but six races in his racing life before leaving the racing scene. One result of horses being bred for speed and then not raced enough to build durability is an increased chance of a breakdown.

Part of what is driving all this is the invisible hand of Adam Smith. The profit motive, the hope to strike it rich, the increased speculation by racing syndicates, all have increased the drive for speed over durability. Mike Iavarone and International Equine Acquisitions Holdings, Inc. (IEAH), which owns Big Brown, have brought this new form of horse ownership into focus. Some have called IEAH the hedge fund of horseracing.

The search for quick financial return has led, it is said, to a number of practices of questionable character in the horse business. Among these are tendencies to over race a horse at the lower levels of the sport, and the use of surgery to mask defects in young horses to prepare them for auction. These undetected defects can then be bred into a horse line and then lead to more breakdowns in these horses that are not as sound as they seem.

Even more serious is the overuse of medication on the horses. Lasix is perhaps the most used; it controls bleeding, and it is banned in some states. The use of steroids is increasing by leaps and bounds in racing. Again, many feel this is due to the heavy infusion of investment speculators in racing.

I am sure I have no solution for these problems. I would not even suggest I have the expertise to comment intelligently on them. I do think, however, that the discussion needs to continue towards reform.

I listened to an interview between Bob Costas and Big Brown's trainer Rick Dutrow yesterday before the running of the Preakness. In the course of the interview Costas asked Big Brown's trainer what he thought about the use of Winstrol on horses. This is an anabolic steroid that is banned in ten states, but not any of the Triple Crown states. There are groups working to have it banned from racing entirely.

In an off-handed and casual manner Dutrow said he administers Winstrol to all of his horses routinely on the fifteenth of every month. Why? Because as Dutrow said, several years previously a trainer had talked him into it: not because he believed in it necessarily, not because the horses needed it for any medical reason, not because it seemed to make any difference in the performance of the horses. I was stunned by the ignorance or callousness of the answer and amazed that Costas did not follow up with another question or questions about Dutrow's line of reasoning.

Much has been made about Rick Dutrow's personal problems with gambling and drugs. He himself says that he is most comfortable training horses and being around horses. For a man who proclaims his love for horses and his dedication to horses, it seems remarkable that Dutrow could be so casual about routinely and regularly doping the horses in his charge without having any substantive reason for doing so.

As I thought about this interview and Dutrow's notion of proper horse training, coupled with his obvious love of the adulation that is now coming his way as a trainer, I thought back to Secretariat, the horse that for me and many others defines the beauty of horseracing.

I thought, as well, of the owner, Penny Chenery, and her well-documented dedication to both the horse and the traditions of racing. I was reminded of the trainer, Lucien Lauren, and his dedication to the horses and their well being. Chenery's grace and charm are difficult to find around Big Brown's connections.

Clearly Chenery came from a different horse culture than Mike Iavarone, who is described on the IEAH web site as a "high-profile investment banker on Wall Street" who brings "his passion for the action packed environment of Wall Street to the similarly exciting world of Thoroughbred racing." Nor is Rick Dutrow and his notions of a casual drug enhanced training regimen within the same tradition as Lucien Lauren.

The emergence of IEAH and Big Brown seems to be a measure of the transformation in the horse racing culture. It may also be a reflection on the culture of sport in America and of American culture generally.

The primacy of the quick score, the big bucks, and a disregard for standards and tradition are plaguing horseracing and many other sports. And this may be a comment on a disconnected drift that seems to be at the center of contemporary American culture.

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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