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A vintage Derby Day column from 2001

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
A vintage Derby Day column from 2001
MAY 5, 2005

This column was originally published in 2001.

A friend who is Louisville born and bred and has lived in Florida for nearly 30 years, about as long as I have, sent me this e-mail less than an hour before this year's Kentucky Derby.

"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. Fortunately, this phenomenon lasts about as long as the race. But it is an intense high."

It's not just Kentucky natives who have made a ritual out of watching -- and relating to -- the Derby. Millions of Americans gather around their television each year in early May to bear witness to what has become known as the greatest two minutes in sport. As far as spectator sports go, it offers an adrenaline rush equivalent to a 30-story-high roller coaster ride.

But what is the emotional draw for those of us born in Minnesota, Ohio or Maine? Why do we attach symbolic meaning 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. The Derby marks the beginning of the annual watch period to see if this could be the year that produces a Triple Crown winner -- a magical feat that has been accomplished only 11 times, the last in 1978.

But it is also the spectacle: the display of wealth, the unpretentious parade of money and style, and the pretentious display of the same. The Derby is redolent of tradition and grandeur. It is one of those signature American events that offers a snapshot of sports culture while simultaneously reflecting the many divisions of American society.

For me, this day, time and place encapsulates elements of class and race that are steeped in historic significance. Just looking at the beautiful and moneyed people who hold the stage at Churchill Downs, it is clear that "class" is still the "unmentionable cousin in the American attic." Consider the special seating in millionaires' row, the clear separation of the masses in the infield, and the unspoken resentment that old Kentucky wealth has toward interlopers (like high profile trainers D. Wayne Lukas and Bob Baffert) who come out of the lower orders to bask in the spotlight, and even take it, from the old money.

The fact that so much was made during all the post-race commentary about this year's winner, "Monarchos," being the only horse handled by a Kentucky-born trainer, is indicative of the attitude toward new money and foreigners. Much of the native Kentucky racing establishment resent the perceived dilution of racing's aristocracy. Indeed, outsiders have never been welcome, despite all that talk about Southern hospitality.

Gender rituals are also anachronistic. At Churchill Downs on Derby Day, women are still expected to perform a traditional, decorative role -- what was once called the furniture function of women. When interviewed on television they feign any real knowledge of the sport of kings, claiming to pick the "winners" by the appeal of the names or colors of the silks.

Then there are the women's hats. From the slightly gaudy to the stylishly elegant, they are almost always oversized, demanding to be noticed. You just don't see these hats most days, and it seems they are everywhere on Derby day. Emblematic of elegance and class, they are testimony to the fact that in some places, especially the wealthier corners of the South, gender relations have not changed. One should not be fooled by the occasional presence of a woman jockey or trainer; since Diane Crump rode Fathom in 1970, there have been only three additional women jockeys. The more things change the more they stay the same.

Most striking, however, is the whiteness of it all. Owners, riders, trainers, fans, television commentators, touts, horse and riding experts -- and not a black face among them. The Derby has, literally, been whitewashed.

In the first Kentucky Derby, in 1875, 13 of the 15 riders were African American. And in the first 27 years of the Derby, 13 of the winning jockeys were African American, including the first three-time winner, Isaac Murphy. But there wasn't another

African-American jockey at the Derby until last year, when Marlon St. Julien rode Curule to a seventh-place finish. Murphy was elected to the Jockey Hall of Fame in 1955, but for decades his name was seldom mentioned at the most hallowed horse racing arena. Finally, in the 1980s, a sculpture of Murphy was dedicated at Churchill Downs.

Racing's relationship with African Americans continues to reflect the racial divide prevalent in some corners of society. In 1999, 91 percent of those in attendance were white and only 7 percent were black. The city of Louisville, by comparison, is approximately 17 percent black.

Race, class, gender, sport, tradition. For a spectacle that is only 120 seconds in length (not counting the social galas and several days of pre- and post-race analysis), the Derby manages -- quite successfully -- to capture the best and the worst of our social reality. Perhaps that is why we are drawn to watch.

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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