Sport Of Kings – Horse Racing Essay, Research Paper

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The Sport of Kings

Horse Racing is a contest of speed between two or more horses, usually Thoroughbreds, which are driven or ridden over a special race course. It is technically termed flat racing. One of the oldest known sports, and still popular in most countries, horse racing is also one of the most highly organized and commercialized sports.

Flat races are contests of speed between two or more saddle horses, generally Thoroughbreds, ridden by jockeys on specially built tracks over distances from 440 yards to 2 miles. The sport is termed flat racing to differentiate it from the steeplechase, which involves jumping over obstacles. To equalize the competition between horses of a given class, each animal is assigned a weight handicap based on factors such as its age, sex, and past performances, and the jockey’s experience. Lead bars are carried in a holding pad under the saddle to make up the difference the assigned weight and jockey’s weight.

The origination of flat races can be traced back as early as 1140. The first line of a long line of kings named Henry tried to improve his Hobby horses by importing Arab stallions to give them more speed and stronger power. Throughout the Crusades, from 1096 to 1270, Turkish cavalry horses dominated the larger English warhorses, leading the Crusaders to buy, capture or steal their share of the stallions. After the War or the Roses, which decimated England’s horse population, King Henry aimed to rebuild his cavalry. Both the king and his son, Henry VIII, imported horses from Italy, Spain and North Africa, and maintained their own racing stable. Henry’s Hobbys, as they were called, raced against horses owned by other nobility, leading the word “hobby” to mean a “costly pastime indulged in by the idle rich.” It also lends credibility to horse racing being labeled as the Sport of Kings(DRF Staff).

Henry VIII focused on elevating the quality of his horses by breeding to quality bloodlines and this practice is employed to this day. “All modern Thoroughbreds have as common ancestors one or more of three stallions, the Byerly Turk, the Darley Arabian, and the Godolphin Barb, which were imported into Great Britain from the Middle East and North Africa between 1689 and 1724 (DRF Staff).” Mated with strong English mares, they produced offspring with both speed and endurance. Thoroughbreds that compete in organized flat racing are registered in the official national stud books of their country of birth. The British stud book was begun in 1791. Stud records in the United States date from 1873.

When horses that are intended for racing careers are two years old, they begin training that includes accepting the weight of the rider and their commands. Although most two-year-olds race, Thoroughbreds are usually in their prime between the ages of three and five, and horses up to ten have competed successfully. Some races are for horses of one sex only, but most races are open to entries of either sex. A female horse is known as a filly until its fifth birthday and as a mare thereafter. A castrated male horse of any age is called a gelding. An ungelded male horse is known as a colt until its fifth birthday, when it is thereafter referred to simply as a horse or a stallion, regardless of age.

Champion stallions are of great value to their owners, not only because of their race winnings but also because other horse owners and breeders pay substantial sums for the privilege of mating their own brood mares with these stallions. The expectation is that the offspring will become champions as well. The purchase price of a Thoroughbred suitable for racing or breeding purposes ranges from several thousand to more than a million dollars. The earning potential, however, for successful Thoroughbreds during and after their active racing careers is high. In 1996 Cigar broke the career earnings record of $6,679,242, set by Alysheba. Another leading money earner, John Henry, a gelding, raced through 1984 and retired at the age of nine with earnings of $6,597,947. One of the highest prices paid for a Thoroughbred was about $30 million for the European champion Storm Bird, purchased by a syndicate of American breeders in 1981. “New stallions for the year 2000 will include Kentucky Derby/Preakness winners Silver Charm and Charismatic top the cast of new stallions for 2000. However, it’s the grade I-winning Forestry who will have the highest-priced stud fee of $50,000” (Bloodhorse Interactive).

Unlike the courts or playing fields used in many other sports, racetracks are not uniform in construction and size. “Major tracks in the United States are ovals ranging from ? mile to 1 ? of a mile in circumference, composed of an outer loam or sand racing strip” (Track Facts). Most tracks also have parallel inner grass, or turf, courses. Tracks overseas are turf courses generally triangular in shape. Horses on U.S. and Canadian tracks always race in a counterclockwise direction; in the United Kingdom and elsewhere some races are counterclockwise, others are clockwise.

Some tracks are famous as the sites of specific races. Especially well known are the three classic races for three-year-olds in the United States, known as the Triple Crown: the Kentucky Derby, held at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky; the Preakness Stakes, at Pimlico, near Baltimore, Maryland; and the Belmont Stakes, at Belmont Park in Elmont, New York, near New York City. Only 11 horses have been Triple Crown winners, capturing all three races in a single year: “Sir Barton (1919), Gallant Fox (1930), Omaha (1935), War Admiral (1937), Whirlaway (1941), Count Fleet (1943), Assault (1946), Citation (1948), Secretariat (1973), Seattle Slew (1971), and Affirmed (1978)” (Churchill Downs).

Most Thoroughbred races in the United States are held at distances ranging from six furlongs to two miles. A furlong is one eighth of a mile. Races are classified as stakes, handicap, allowance, or claiming events. To equalize competition, two-year-old horses race only against each other, not against older horses. Many races are restricted to only three year olds such as the Triple Crown. Another race restriction that is commonplace is races only for female horses. There are essentially five different types of races that prove the class of a horse.

Stakes races usually involve horses of the same age and sex, all of which are initially assigned the same weight. Certain deductions may be made later. An example, three-year-olds are often allowed to carry less weight than older horses. Stakes races derive there name from the stake, or entry fee, owners must pay (Turfway). These fees, to which the track adds a purse, or contribution, establish the total amount from which prize money is paid to the first, second, third and fourth place finishers. Within the stakes race category there are are four sub-catagories they include: track based stake, grade three, grade two, and grade one. Grade one stakes races consist of the upper echelon horses and top purses.

Handicap races are events in which horses are assigned specific weights based upon their race records. The horse considered superior is assigned the highest weight, with the less recognized horses receiving proportionately lighter handicaps. Lead bars would be placed in the holding pad under the saddle to weigh down the favored horse. Weight differences of fifteen to twenty pounds are commonplace in these events.

Entries in allowance races are judged on their past performances. The track official known as the racing secretary takes into the account the number of races won and money earned. Allowance races typically have horses of about the same ability matched against one another. Another similar type of race is the maiden special weights. Horses that have never won a race are classified as maidens. These races consist of five to twelve non-winners bunched together to decide a first time winner.

Claiming races are an opportunity to sell or purchase a horse. The selling price of the entered horses is stipulated before the race, granting a buyer the opportunity to make a claim for that amount. The buyer takes possession of the horse at the completion of the race, regardless of its performance. If two or more interested parties claim the same horse at the same price, lots are drawn to determine the winning offer. Knowledgeable owners and trainers may use claiming races to obtain at bargain prices horses whose former owners underestimated the potential of their animals. The 1999 Kentucky Derby winner Charismatic prior to winning the Derby was entered in a $30,000 claiming race (CD Online). Anyone could have claimed Charismatic and unknowingly purchased a future Derby winner.

With several different catagories and class of races, tracks incorporate the types and offer nine or ten races per day. Most tracks operate in the afternoon. Several consecutive days or weeks of racing at a track is called a meet.

Horse races follow a strictly organized procedure. Horses are saddled and jockeys mount in the paddock area in full view of the spectators. Often escorted by outriders and riders on lead ponies, the horses are lead onto the track. This journey to the gate is called the post parade. The horses are then positioned in individual stalls within the starting gate, located at the starting line. When the field is evenly aligned, the started presses a button to open the stall gates.

Strategy is an important part of racing, particularly in contests of a mile or longer. Those horses that possess “early speed” are sent to the lead as soon as the race begins. While jockeys on “come from behind” horses gallop more slowly at first to save energy for a stronger effort in the stretch. Whether the “speed” horses will maintain their early lead or yield to the fast-closing competitors depends on the horses’ quality and condition. Other variables known as “racing luck” are factors such as whether the jockeys make the right moves at the right time.

Races are examined by the track stewards and recorded on videotape. In addition, photoelectric timers measure the leading horse’s time at specific places around the track and at the finish line. The record for the fastest mile is 1 minute 32 1/5 seconds, in 1968 by the American horse Dr. Fager (Guinness).

Setting a track record not only takes a fit horse but also a knowledgeable jockey and trainer. Most jockeys first learn to handle horses as exercise riders, riding in morning workouts. Jockeys are usually about 5 feet tall and weigh about 100 pounds. They begin their jockey careers as apprentices, receiving weight allowances until they have won a stipulated number of races. Jockeys wear distinctive colored and patterned shirts and caps, called silks, they identify their horse’s owner, like a coat of arms. Every owner registers his silks with the Jockey Club. Even though Thoroughbred race riders are small, they have the strength and courage necessary to guide a horse thundering down the track at top speed. Leading jockeys have quick reflexes, a finely-developed sense of timing, and above all mastery of racing strategy and experience “a cool hand with a hot horse”(Bailey).

The technique of riding Thoroughbreds has evolved over the years. Jockeys sat upright until the end of the last century, when Tod Sloan developed the exaggerated forward seat position. Placing the rider’s weight over the horse’s center of gravity greatly reduces wind resistance, and more important, keeps a rider in greater balance with a horse at high speeds (Denman, 55). To insure that the horse will carry the precise assigned white, jockeys and their equipment weigh out before and weigh in after a race. Maintaining a proper weight is an important factor in a jockey’s life. Few weigh more than 105 pounds and those who have difficulty with excess poundage must diet constantly..

Jockeys use specialized racing gear. Underneath the racing silks, many jockeys wear a protective chest protector to protect from injury in case of a mishap. The racing saddle they use is very lightweight weighing less than four pounds. The carry a whip to urge the horse along. Goggles protect against mud and dirt. Several jockeys have started to wear nasal strips to ensure proper breathing throughout the race. Jockeys also receive last minute instructions from the trainer. Trainers deliberate with jockeys before a race to give instructions and plan a strategy. Is the horse a front-runner or a does it like to come from behind” Does it “bear in” or “drift out” from the rail? Another important question, would be which are the speed horses? After the race and weigh in is completed the jockeys run off to shower in the jocks room. They switch silks and repeat the process on another entry. They may ride for a particular owner or accept whatever mounts trainers offer. Jockeys are paid a fee for each horse they ride as well as a percentage of the purses their mounts win.

Racing is a very carefully supervised sport. The managing body of British racing is the Jockey Club of Great Britain. The Jockey Club through its office in Lexington, Kentucky, handles the registration of all North American Thoroughbreds. The Thoroughbred Racing Associations and the Racing Commissioners International are important racing bodies. In addition to Jockey Club registration procedures, racetrack officials identify each horse before every race and conduct tests to detect the presence of medication or drugs that might affect the race’s outcome. Videotape records of the race’s progress, while a high-speed camera at the finish line determines close outcomes. Stewards representing the Jockey Club and the state racing commissions can disqualify horses and penalize jockeys for such infractions as interference and dangerous riding.

Horse racing is the second most widely attended U.S. spectator sport, after baseball. “In 1997, 56,194,565 people attended 8,004 days of racing, wagering $9.14 billion” (YouBet.com). Betting is an important element in the popularity of horse racing. At different times “four main types of betting have been popular: simple betting between individuals; sweepstakes betting, in which large entry fees are pooled and awarded to the winners; bookmaking, in which speculators offer odds against each horse and accept bets against their predictions; and pari-mutual betting, which is the most widespread system used at the major American tracks” (Betmaker.com). The designation pari-mutuel is a French phrase translated as “betting among ourselves.” Under the pari-mutual system, which was developed in France during the 1860s, the betting odds on a given horse are derived from a comparison between the total amount wagered on the horse and the total wagered on all the horses in the race. The odds are automatically computed by a device called a totalizator, which posts them on a lighted tote board clearly visible to spectators (Betmaker.com). Odds are recomputed at approximately one-minute intervals until post time, when all bets must be placed and the pari-mutuel machines are locked. Winning tickets are cashed after the race’s results have been declared official, by which time computers have determined the payoffs. Pari-mutuel bettors can wager that a horse will win (finish first), place (finish first or second), or show (finish first, second, or third). In the event that two or more horses are entered by the same owner or trainer, they are coupled in the wagering as an entry. In this situation a bet on one of these horses is a bet on all of them.

Exotic wagering involves more than one horse. Such combinations include the daily double, in which the bettor must predict the winners of two consecutive races, usually the first two and last two races of the day. An extreme variation of the daily double is the pick 3 or pick 6. In which bettors must select the winners of 3 or 6 consecutive races. In cases that no one selected all 6 winners a consolation pay out for five winners is distributed and a carryover is left for the next day of racing. To win a quinella or exacta box, the bettor must predict the first two finishers in a single race without regard to the order in which they finish. To win an exacta, the bettor must specify the exact order in which the first two horses in a race will finish. Such involved wagering almost always yields higher payoffs than typical win-place-show wagers.

Off-track betting (OTB) is growing in popularity throughout the United States. OTB facilities offer an alternative to wagering at racetracks. Bettors can place wagers and watch the races via satellite broadcast. The OTB facilities are primarily placed in areas where race tracks are few and far between.

Simulcasting, in which live races are televised at various racetracks around the country via satellite, is becoming very important in U.S. racing. It allows bettors to wager on stakes-quality horses, since simulcasts generally are reserved for the best races available. An example, bettors can wager on the Kentucky Derby around the world through simulcasting, not just at Churchill Downs. At many U.S. racetracks, whole cards of races from other locations are simulcast, both when the racetrack is also running live racing and when there is no live racing scheduled. Some tracks simulcast the races from up to eight different racetracks at the same time. “Beginning in the 1970s, off track betting and simulcasting became increasingly prevalent in the United States. By 1993 wagering via simulcasting accounted for more than 40 percent of all wagering conducted at racetracks in the United States” (Betmaker.com). The Kentucky Derby and the Breeders’ Cup are the two most popular races and are offered through simulcasting.

The Kentucky Derby stands as the oldest, consecutively held Thoroughbred race in America. The first Kentucky Derby was held May 17, 1875, as a crowd estimated at 10,000 from around the city, state and surrounding areas converged on the Jockey Club grounds. A field of 15 three-year-olds went postward for the 1 1/2 mile contest which was won by H.P. McGrath’s Aristides, trained by Ansel Williamson and ridden by the popular African-American rider, Oliver Lewis (Martin,124) Of that day’s 15 jockeys, 14 were African-American. Although the first Derby was held at 1 1/2 miles, the distance was changed to the current 1 1/4 miles in 1896. “In 1945, a wartime ban on racing threatened to cancel the Derby. Following VE day, a government announcement on May 8 lifted the ban and the 71st Derby was held June 9 that year” (Martin, 126).

The Breeders’ Cup started in 1984. It incorporates seven championship races in one action packed day. It is known through the racing community as Thoroughbred racing’s “Super Bowl.” It is held at varioius racetracks around the country each fall, the Breeders’ Cup brings together racings finest horses to compete for more than 10 million dollars in purses. The Breeders’ Cup is often the determining factor in divisional championships and the Horse of the Year. The Breeders’ Cup consists of eight races based on various distance, sex and age restrictions. The two million dollar Breeders’ Cup Distaff is race for three year olds and up, fillies and mares, racing a mile and an eighth. There are two juvenile races one for fillies and for colts or geldings. The distance for both races is one mile and a sixteenth. The purses on the Juvenile races are one million dollars each. The Mile is for all horses three years old and up, racing one mile on the turf for one million dollars. The Sprint is six furlongs for all horses three year olds and up for one million dollars. The Turf is the longest of the races and is open for all three year olds and up. It is a mile and one half on the turf for two million dollars. The biggest purse belongs to the most prestigious race of the Breeders’ Cup, the Classic. Three year olds and up run one mile and a quarter for four million dollars.

Of the seven Breeders’ Cup races, the one most eagerly watched with an eye towards the future is the Juvenile (G1). Amazingly enough, however, the results of the Juvenile are as good an indicator of who not to bet in the next year’s classics rather than who to bet. In an era where having the Kentucky Derby favorite is a certain way not to win the Run for the Roses, the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile has become infamous for the failure of its winners to go on to greater things at three. Ironically, the first running of the Juvenile in 1984 was as good a form guide as any race for the `85 classics. While winner Chief’s Crown failed as the favorite in all three Triple Crown races (second in the Preakness Stakes [G1], third in the Kentucky Derby [G1] and Belmont Stakes [G1]), runner-up Tank’s Prospect won the Preakness and third-place finisher Spend a Buck went on to win the Kentucky Derby and Horse of the Year honors in 1985. The first Juvenile, the first race run in Breeders’ Cup history, seemed to establish the race as a precursor for classic success the following year.

However after the successful first year the Juvenile winners had a tough time in the Triple Crown Classic races. The 1985 winner, Tasso, did not compete in the Triple Crown the next year, nor did any of the other entries that year have a significant impact on the classics. The 1986 Juvenile proved to be the most star-studded of Breeders’ Cup history, with Kentucky Derby and Preakness winner Alysheba finishing third, Belmont winner Bet Twice fourth, and major stakes winners Gulch, Demons Begone and Polish Navy filling the spots immediately behind that duo. In a premonition sign for Juvenile winners, however, 1986 winner Capote failed to train on and was 0-for-6 as a three-year-old.

A pattern had been set in the Juvenile, as one winner after another failed to make an impression on the classics the next year. Success Express, like Capote trained by D. Wayne Lukas, won the `87 Juvenile. And, like Capote, he never won another race, going 0-for-9 at three.

D. Wayne Lukas was back again in 1988, playing the spoiler’s role this time as Is It True upset 3-to-10 favorite Easy Goer over a muddy track at Churchill Downs. Easy Goer would show his distaste for the Churchill mud the next year in losing the Kentucky Derby to Sunday Silence, while Is It True would miss the classics in `89.

Rhythm continued the pattern in 1989, winning the Juvenile, then skipping the `90 classics, though he did win the Travers Stakes (G1) later that year. Fly So Free, the `90 winner, was still around for the Derby the next year, but finished off-the-board.

In 1991, Arazi put on one of the most dazzling shows in Breeders’ Cup history, flying in from France with a lofty reputation and living up to it, romping home a five-length winner over Bertrando. Seven months later, however, Arazi would finish eighth as the odds-on choice in the Derby as the Juvenile curse struck down another Juvenile-winning champion.

Consistency has been the hallmark of the Juvenile curse, as Gilded Time (1992) missed the Triple Crown with injury and Brocco (`93) won just once more after the Juvenile. The Juvenile finally produced a winner capable of classic success in 1994, when Timber Country took the Juvenile, then went on to win the Preakness. But as an ugly reminder of how potent the curse is, illness and injury struck down the son of Woodman, who never ran again after the Preakness.

Unbridled’s Song appeared a superhorse in the making when he won the 1995 renewal. But a broken bone ruined his Kentucky Derby chances and he finished fifth. The curse appeared stronger than ever following the 1996 running. Boston Harbor led all the way to win that year’s Juvenile, but only raced once more as a fracture in his leg ended his career. The 1997 renewal featured Horse of the Year-to be Favorite Trick, who capped an 8-for-8 two-year-old season with a 5 1/2-length triumph over Dawson’s Legacy. The 1999 race was won by Anees a colt by Unbridled. Anees is the second foal by Unbridled to win the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile (Breeders Cup Limited Online). Can Anees go on to win the Kentucky Derby next May? Only time will tell.

The excitement from watching a horse in the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile advance forward towards the Kentucky Derby and Triple Crown may entice fans to follow the sport. Winning on a two dollar win wager may excite fans and encourage more outings to the local racetrack. Fans may be interested in watching jockeys time and manipulate the horses to time their charge for the finish line. With so many variables the precise reason for the success of horse racing is hard to determine. Fans have supported the sport for centuries and all signs point to a bright future into the new millenium.

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