

A Day at the Races

Will going to the track become popular again? Big money is betting on it.

By Ray Kerrison

Given fine weather, more than 100,000 people will squeeze into Pimlico racetrack tomorrow for the 125th running of the Preakness Stakes, the so-called second jewel in thoroughbred racing's historic Triple Crown.

In six wild hours, they'll pump more than \$7 million through the betting machines, consume gallons of beer and tons of hotdogs and hoot and holler loud enough to be heard in the next county.

The Preakness is Baltimore's annual blowout, whose record crowd of 100,301 last year is recognized locally as the biggest sporting event ever held in Maryland.

But next week, when the track resumes its routine daily fare, Pimlico will look like a mausoleum. Fewer than 3,000 customers will be on the premises. Indeed, the daily crowds leading up to the Preakness have been so thin that the track has stopped releasing attendance figures.

Pimlico's dramatic crowd swings—jammed for the big event one day, all but empty the next—is the sad pattern prevailing at nearly all racetracks coast-to-coast. Two exceptions: Saratoga Springs in upstate New York and Del Mar beside the Pacific Ocean near San Diego. Both are summer vacation spas whose crowds have grown immensely in recent years.

Back in the salad days of 1970, Pimlico pulled in 12,000 customers a day. This year, it won't even break 7,000. New York, long considered the capital of the American turf, has suffered an even more drastic on-track collapse. Its utilitarian track, Aqueduct, drew more than 30,000 fans a day in 1970. Today, it barely breaks 5,000.

A Cigar and the Racing Form

Belmont Park, showcase for the legendary Belmont Stakes, the third jewel of the Triple Crown behind the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness, attracted an average of 27,500 racegoers in 1970. These days it hovers around 8,000.

I remember the days when I'd board the racetrack special subway train near Times Square on a Saturday afternoon for the express ride to Aqueduct. You'd have to fight your way in the car. The trains would be filled with horseplayers, clutching a Racing Form in one hand, a cigar and a pencil in the other. "Wadda yuh like in the feature, kid?" Yes, such crusty characters actually did exist, and not only in the pages of Damon Runyon or Ring Lardner.

At the Aqueduct station, these eager beavers would pile out the doors and sprint to the track gates to get their bets down on

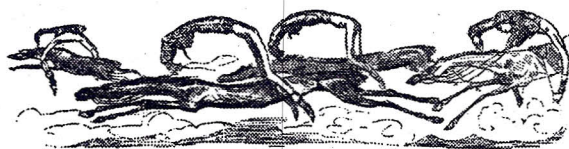
the daily double, a wager that tries to capture the winners of the first and second races.

All afternoon, old Aqueduct would roar and rumble under the pounding excitement of 45,000 delirious bettors rooting home their horse. The roar of the crowd was infectious. Win or lose, it was a helluva way to spend an afternoon. As John Nerud, a prominent breeder and owner, likes to say, "A bad day at the track is better than a good day anywhere else."

Now those days are gone, except for a few marquee races like the Kentucky Derby, The Preakness, the Belmont, the Breeders' Cup.

What happened? Racing is on the skids as a spectator sport primarily because it got left in the TV starting gate, then it was hit by mushrooming competition.

In the past 30 years, the fan base for football, basketball, baseball and hockey



has exploded through relentless television exposure. During the crucial years of TV turf-fighting, racing's executives wanted no part of it. "We're not going to give the product away for free," they wailed, then operating in the days when people still had to go to the track to place a bet.

The competition for the gambling dollar then hit racing from all sides—state lotteries, casinos and riverboats, bingo, sports betting. Suddenly, billions of dollars were being rerouted away from the tracks. Once the only legal gambling wheel, racing now had to compete in the open market place, no longer politically protected, and its guardians in those early days of competition had not the faintest idea how to do it.

They tried gimmicks, giveaways, concerts, free admission, free parking, free hotdogs, lucky-draw vacations. Nothing worked, and a kind of demoralization set in.

Some time ago, my wife and I took some Australian visitors to Aqueduct for the afternoon's sport. We booked into the restaurant overlooking the track. No tablecloths, casual service, little choice. As the host, I was embarrassed.

That's when I also discovered that there is nothing quite so discouraging as seeing two or three horses duel furiously down the stretch, enveloped in a silence so deep you could hear a leaf fall. It is a strange fate for a sport and milieu that has inspired so

much avid devotion, and American folklore, over the years.

So, is racing about to tap out? As it happens, no. The irony is that while there may be few warm bodies along the rail and in the clubhouse, the game is almost awash in betting dollars.

Wagering has risen astronomically in the age of casino-mania, computers, and rapid-fire telecommunication. Millions can now bet on horse races from their living rooms, just by picking up the phone. They don't need the hassle and expense of going to the track. They can even bet with offshore bookmakers in the Caribbean while watching the races, if they care to, on cable TV.

Track-Buying Binge

The new betting wave is in its infancy, but it has already pushed prize money up. The Breeders' Cup Classic goes for \$4 million. Races for maidens (horses that have never won a race) used to be worth \$8,000 and less. Today, they can exceed \$50,000.

This betting interest, some hope, will translate into spectator interest. Two turf conglomerates—Churchill Downs Inc. and another led by Austrian-Canadian entrepreneur Frank Stronach—have been on a track-buying binge, acquiring such household-name tracks as Santa Anita, Hollywood Park and Golden Gate Fields in California and Gulfstream Park and Calder in Florida and many lesser-known tracks as well.

"We hope to be the parimutuel company of the new millennium," says David Mitchell, Mr. Stronach's executive vice president. Thomas Meeker, president of Churchill Downs, says: "The racing industry has never looked more positive. Home betting is a huge stimulant. If you go international there's a \$100 billion wagering market out there in horse racing."

They have grandiose plans to turn their racetracks into entertainment centers and shopping plazas to help draw crowds. "We've got to make it fun," says Mr. Stronach. Lurking in the background is the prospect of not only expanding home betting but tapping the motherlode in installing slot machines and other casino revenue-raisers in the tracks.

Slot machines where once horse fanatics worried over track conditions? Well, why not, if they bring people to the track? Racing is no longer the only game in town, but for those who love its charming excitement, unpredictability and intellectual challenge, it still remains the best game in town. You can bet on it.

Mr. Kerrison is a turf columnist for the New York Post.