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The Kentucky Derby: A Historical Look At Horse Racing's Finest

By Rita R. Powers

The Kentucky Derby, the premier horse race of all horse races, has a checkered history that spans 130 years. At first, it struggled to survive, owing its success to the men and women who created and sustained it.

The dream started with a young man, Col. M. Lewis Clark, grandson of Gen. William Clark, the explorer. He visited England and France in 1872 and decided that he would start a racetrack in Kentucky to revive the state's horse breeding industry. Development began soon after the trip on 80 acres he obtained from his two uncles, John and Henry Churchill. Funding was through membership subscriptions that sold at \$100 a piece. The track was officially opened on May 17, 1875. Four races were held that day and the winner of the featured race, the Kentucky Derby, was a horse named Aristides. Two African Americans, Oliver Lewis and Ansel Williamson, trained and jockeyed Aristides. Throughout the years, the Kentucky Derby became the focal event for Churchill Downs.

Eventually, the Kentucky State Fair held activities at Churchill Downs, but the main attraction was then and still is today betting on that special horse to win. In 1875, the prize for winning was \$2,850. The purse jumped to \$5,460 in 1890 with Riley leading the pack as the thoroughbreds crossed the finish line. The winner of the Kentucky Derby in 1896 was Ben Brush with the first-place prize money totaling \$4,850. The winner's purse would remain at that figure for the next 17 years.

In 1913 there was a slight increase in prize money, but the following year the winner's proceeds skyrocketed to \$9,125. That same year Old Rosebud won by a hefty 8 lengths, setting a track record of 2:03 for the 2/5-mile oval. By 1915, the Derby had developed a reputation as a premier sporting event due to a 3-year publicity push. The Golden Jubilee Derby in 1924 featured a purse of \$52,775. Through the years, the prize money continued to grow. In 1970, Secretariat became the first Triple Crown winner in 25 years, with a Derby win timed at 1 minute, 59 seconds. The net for Secretariat's owners was a whopping \$127,800. In May of 2004 the winner of the Derby took home a record \$5,854,800.

While Churchill Downs was the hub of betting, racing, and other activities, it went through leadership changes quite frequently. Col. M. Lewis Clark and his Louisville Jockey Club started the annual show

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in 1875. Although the first Kentucky Derby had been a success, there were financial problems. In an attempt to provide a more secure financial situation, the race was incorporated under the New Louisville Jockey Club on November 24, 1894. William F. Schulte became president and Col. M. Lewis Clark was appointed the presiding judge.

Tragedy struck with the suicide of Clark in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 22, 1899. Financial problems plagued the track again and former mayor, Charles Grainger, Charlie Price, and Matt J. Winn took over on October 1, 1902. The first sign of profitability was in 1903. The Kentucky Jockey Club took over all 4 racetracks in Kentucky in 1918–1919. Churchill Downs–Latona became the legal name of the track in 1937 after the sale of several of the other racetracks. October 6, 1949, marked the death of Col. Matt J. Winn, the man credited with making the Kentucky Derby the most prestigious race in the world. Bill Corum took over the helm and modernized the track.

The Kentucky Derby was televised for the first time on May 3, 1952. In December of 1958, Bill Corum

died and was replaced by Wathen Knebelkamp. Under new direction, Churchill Downs underwent more renovation. Also, the City of Louisville tried to purchase the racetrack, but the aldermen had the final word and wouldn't allow it. Around 1968 there was another battle for ownership of Churchill Downs and this time the Derby Protection Group became the highest bidder.

Lynn Stone was named the new president in 1970. He was successful in fending off 2 more attempts to take over the racetrack. But when financial problems arose, Stone resigned in August 1984, to be replaced by Thomas Meeker. Through the good leadership of Meeker, Chairman Warner Jones, and the current Chairman William Farish, Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Derby have flourished.

Besides the controversy related to takeovers and changes in leadership, there were legal issues as well. In 1908, betting began to be a problem to the point that the Louisville city administration was cracking down on bookmakers. A loophole made it possible to continue the parimutuel betting that Col. Clark had imported in 1875 from France. Problems arose again and there was a government ban on horseracing in 1945, but VE Day changed everything and the Derby continued on June 9th of that year.

As was noted earlier, African Americans have played a key role since the first race and have made major contributions throughout the derby's history. Alonzo Lonnie Clayton was an early jockey who, at in 1892 the age of 15, rode Azra, making him the youngest jockey to achieve victory. Erskin Henderson was the 6th African American to win the Kentucky Derby, riding Joe Cotton in 1885. Babe Hurd rode Appollo in 1882 and won. George Garrett Lewis, another African American, jockeyed Fonso in the 1880 Derby. These are 4 of 15 African Americans who won the Kentucky Derby and have their names enshrined in the Kentucky Derby Museum.

In addition, women jockeys have been active in the Derby; the five who have run for the roses are Patti Cooksey, Diane Crump, Julie Krone, Andrea Seefeldt, and Rosemary Homeister. Also, It has been fairly common throughout the years that women have been owners.

The Kentucky Derby and Churchill Downs have become the hallmark of first–class horseracing by

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dealing with adversity and making adjustments. The Derby is a horserace unlike any other in terms of prestige, excitement, and quality competitors. Those who have played an important role in making the Derby a yearly tradition include the jockeys, trainers, breeders, administrators, owners, and those magnificent creatures, the horses that have run for the roses for 130 years. The brainchild of Col. M. Lewis Clark is much more than a horserace. It is an American institution.

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Churchill Downs: A Legacy

By Sebastien Veilleux

Any horse racing lover worth his or her weight knows about Churchill Downs. This legendary track is rich with memorable horse racing moments. The track was and is home to top horses from all over the country—even the world. To say that the horse racing action at Churchill Downs is loved by all would be a grave understatement. In the world of horse racing, Churchill Downs is a masterpiece.

Churchill Downs has a slow beginning. The famed Kentucky Jockey Club was formed in 1809. However, some 70 years would pass before the first glorious race at Churchill Downs would actually take place. Even the most casual of horse racing fans are familiar with the Triple Crown. One of the Triple Crown races, the Kentucky Derby, is held each year at Churchill Downs. At a time when race relations in the USA were not the best, it was a bit ironic that jockey Oliver Lewis who was an African American won the very first Kentucky Derby.

Back in 1883, the name "Churchill Downs" first appeared in a newspaper article. However, it would take until 1937 for the track to officially incorporate the soon to be legendary name. To raise fund for the track, Clark—who decided on the final spot for the track—sold 320 memberships to Churchill Downs. These memberships were sold at the whopping cost of \$100 each. At the time, \$100 was a good deal of money.

Today, the Churchill Downs is owned and operated by Churchill Downs Incorporated (CDI). They run many horse racing tracks around the country, including: Churchill Downs, Arlington Park, Calder Race Course, Ellis Park, Fair Grounds Race Course and Hoosier Park. All of these tracks have one thing in common—they are great horse racing tracks.

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Did you know that the Kentucky Derby was first televised in 1952? That's when the famous race really got a boost. It was the 77th running of the Kentucky Derby. The Kentucky Derby has always been a solid race, and today it's one of the biggest. Each year the purse is normally \$1,000,000 to \$2,000,000. Popular and legendary horse, Smarty Jones, won the Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs back in 2004. It was special in that the purse, some \$6,000,000, was double the amount in 2005. It just shows you what an exciting horse can do for the sport.

The Churchill Downs is rich in history. If you have never visiting Churchill Downs, try and make it some day. Betting on the races at Churchill Downs are exciting whether you are there in person or not.

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