

Off to the Races

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

Before basketball, before football and even before baseball, horseracing was our national sport, the source of legends, stories and folk songs, and it all started right here in Virginia. Early colonists were competitive in spirit and most owned saddle horses. Whenever they gathered for whatever reason (except on Sunday) there inevitably was drinking, gambling and horseracing. Before about 1660, impromptu races were conducted on makeshift tracks on court days and social occasions. Someone would brag on his horse and there was always a challenger to take him on in a match race. A track would hurriedly be marked off consisting of two parallel paths of about a quarter mile in length cleared through the woods or along the lanes that served as roads. The finish line was two upright stakes where judges stood to determine the winner. This “quarter race” was a unique form, unlike the distance races of several miles common in Europe, and this new sport quickly spread from Virginia to the other colonies.

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Gradually horses were selected and bred for quickness, small size and muscular hind quarters well suited to short bursts of speed. Some historians believe that Indian ponies, descendants of Spanish Andalusians, were brought into Virginia from the Southwest as early as 1651. This early breeding and selection along with the later infusion of Arabian bloodlines eventually resulted in the “Quarter Horse” as a recognized breed.

During the second half of the 17th Century, dedicated racetracks were laid out and maintained on worn-out tobacco lands scattered around the Colony. In Middlesex, the most prominent course was established around 1660 on the lands of Randolph Segar in the upper end of the County near Jamaica. By 1700, it was referred to as the “Publick Race Ground, commonly called Seagers.” It is inferred from many court records referencing race judges that these tracks were still straight quarter-mile courses. On circular or oval tracks, starters and judges were often the same people.

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With the establishment of permanent tracks, racing became a scheduled event usually conducted on Saturdays. Consequently, subscription races, often with a field of several horses, replaced match races. In subscription racing, owners pay a fee to enter their horses and race for a purse with a cut going to the track. The real betting was still between owners and among spectators. Horses, fortunes and even land changed hands with a handshake.

British-style distance or “flat races” of four miles or more did not become popular in Virginia until the mid 1700s when thoroughbreds and other horses of Arabian breeding were imported from England. Thoroughbreds were tall and wiry but well muscled. They were bred for stamina and endurance, as well as speed, and were thus well suited to “follow the hounds” or carry riders on long journeys. Virginia planters were closely tied to developments in Europe and strove to emulate English aristocracy. They were well content to be British subjects until treated like a red-headed stepchild following the French and Indian War.

Distance racing during the 18th Century took two distinct forms. Point-to-point or cross-country races led to the steeplechase and hurdle races of today. Flat racing, conducted on circular or oval tracks of approximately one mile in length, led to the dash race of one mile, the most common form today; the long race of up to four miles; and heat races of (usually) three four-mile heats. The heat race was grueling, designed to test the stamina and endurance of both horse and rider. Heat races were won by the best two out of three heats and often decided after two heats. If a horse was “distanced” or led by more than one-eighth of a mile in any heat, ~~his~~ race was over.

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Harness racing started in America and also became popular during the 18th Century. Trotters and pacers pulled a light two-wheeled cart and were not allowed to break into a gallop. ~~Initially there was no specific breed, but to qualify for registry horses had to complete a mile within “standard time” and became known as “Standardbreds”.~~

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Thoroughbreds were established as a breed when Lord Godolphin inadvertently bred English mares to an unruly and despised Arabian stallion in the 1730’s. Soon the Godolphin line dominated racing in Great Britain. In 1752 an 11 year old Godolphin gelding was shipped to Ireland to teach Sir Ralph Gore a lesson in humility. Sir Ralph had acquired large tracts of Irish land as a result of the Cromwellian invasion, and the established Irish aristocracy was anxious to give the usurper his “comeuppance”. This striking old horse was a bay with large white patches, a color pattern known as “skewbald”, and the horse was thus named Skewball. ~~[Piebald coloration is white on black]~~ Skewball easily beat Sir Ralph’s bay mare to the delight of just about everyone except Sir Ralph, who had wagered a good chunk of his fortune.

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The race was retold far and wide in broadsides and ballads, which spread to America and got all jumbled up with our own folklore. Stewball then became part of our own folk music heritage culminating with Peter, Paul and Mary’s version: “Oh Stewball was a racehorse, and I wish he was mine. He never drank water, he always drank wine ...” and “..came a-prancing and a-dancing, my noble Stewball!”

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The first Arabian brought into the Colonies was imported by Samuel Gist of Hanover County in 1732 followed by importations by the Tayloes of Mount Airy in Richmond County, the Byrds of Westover on the James River, the Wormeleys of Rosegill, and other notable gentry scattered around the colony. By the time of the Revolution, distance racing had supplanted quarter racing in most of Virginia (quarter racing survived South of the James in “the Old Race Horse Region” for another 100 years).

After the Revolution, Thoroughbred racing moved west to Tennessee and Kentucky. Churchill Downs, home of the Kentucky Derby, was built on the lands of John and Henry Churchill, direct descendants of the Churchills of Wilton in Middlesex County, by their nephew, Col. Meriwether Lewis Clark Jr., grandson of the explorer and also (obviously) of Virginia descent. The last and greatest distance race at Churchill Downs was run in 1876 between Mollie McCarty of California and Ten Broeck of Kentucky. Mollie, a four-year-old mare, was undefeated in 13 starts and ran out of challengers on the West Coast. Ten Broeck was an established legend in the Eastern states and nearing the end of his racing career. He ran in the very first Kentucky Derby but was beaten by a horse that he had beaten in his first race the year before. He went on to establish six records for distances of from one to four miles. During his last two racing seasons, he tallied 16 wins and two seconds in 18 starts. Ten Broeck was considered by commentators of the time to be the “yardstick of class, whether in dash races or heats ...”. So great was his fame that Congress adjourned early to watch him run in Maryland.

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The race was to be three four-mile heats. The track was muddy, conditions Mollie was unaccustomed to. She led for three of the first four miles then faded and was “distanced” by Ten Broeck at the end of the first (and last) heat. One historian observed: “had Mollie been able merely to save her distance, she ultimately must have won because Ten Broeck would not have been able to go around again.” Apparently under the influence of an opiate, “he did not perspire, his pupils were contracted, his muscular strength and activity were reduced, and he was languorous and drowsy. To keep him awake, it was necessary to fan, whip and keep him moving...”

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News of Ten Broeck’s victory and Mollie’s defeat quickly spread across the country and into folklore and legend. *Run Molly Run* became a popular folksong. The race was immortalized and bluegrass established as a genre when the Stanley Brothers released their version of *Molly and Tenbrook* in 1948. Actually, it was a Bill Monroe song. Bill even recorded it first but the Stanley Brothers released their recording first and it became an instant classic.

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MOLLY AND TENBROOK as sung by the Stanley Brothers (refrains omitted):

*Oh run ol' Molly run, Run ol' Molly run.
Tenbrook's gonna to beat you, to the bright and shinin' sun.*

*Tenbrook was a big bay horse, wool down shaggy mane.
He run all around Memphis and beat the Memphis train.*

*See that train a-comin', comin' round the curve.
See Molly runnin', strainin' every nerve.*

Oh Kyper, oh Kyper, somethin' ain't right.

Molly's beatin' Tenbrook, clear out of sight.

Tenbrook said to Molly, "What makes your hair so red?"
"From runnin' in the hot sun, and fever in my head".

Tenbrook in the stable, Molly in the stall.
Tenbrook kicked the plank off, kicked Molly through the wall.

Women all were laughin', children all a-cryin',
Men all hollered, ol' Tenbrook was flyin'.

Oh, get ol' Tenbrook, hitch him in the shade,
We're goin' to bury little Molly, her coffin's ready made.

[Note: Bill Monroe's version contains several additional verses including:

*Kyper, Kyper you're not a-ridin' right,
Molly's beatin' old Tenbrooks clear out sight.*

*Kyper, Kyper, Kyper my son
Give old Tenbrooks the bridle, let old Tenbrooks run.*

Ten Broeck's jockey was William "Uncle Billy" Walker. Born into slavery, Walker was considered one of the best jockeys in American history. "Kyper" must be a corruption of Walker or simply fiction.]

The Kingston Trio then mommicked up the title and the story with their *Run Molly, Run*, in which Molly beats a horse named Long John. In 1973 Bluegrass was changed forever when the Grateful Dead took a fanciful whack at the story and put a *Blue Mule* in the race. Written by Peter Rowan and played by *Old And In The Way* with Jerry Garcia, the Blue Mule's "Mother was that blue ox, babe, She was born in the eye of a hurricane...". During the race "Against Molly and the Tenbrooks ... My blue mule started flying ... She won that race in Outer Space, not on solid ground ..."

As in colonial times, horse races and foxhunts are social events and usually involve drinking and feasting and drinking. On court days in the 17th Century, local tavern keepers set up stalls to sell their "cyder", beer, port and ardent spirits. Food was probably a secondary necessity and likely was whatever victuals were on hand that would travel well, such as a slice or two of good country ham on buttered biscuits left over from breakfast. The Mint Julep, now identified with the Kentucky Derby, evolved in Virginia in an attempt to make the harsh rums of the time somewhat drinkable. Traditionally, Juleps are served in silver cups and held only by the top and bottom rim with the thumb and forefinger so as not to melt the frost. Now-a-days, picnics, tailgate parties and "fair food" from race track vendors fortify race-goers.

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