

Willett, Peter. *The Classic Racehorse*. Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1981. PP. 272. Index, glossary, illustrations.

When all is said and done, the literature on “the sport of kings” isn’t really worthy of even a minor duchy. Oh, there are memoirs and anecdotal works in abundance, plus a giant corpus of often quite good journalism focused on the sport. That literature is important and useful in undergirding serious studies of

horseracing and the breeding industry which supports it, but there's the rub. What serious studies? Despite its obvious significance, horseracing has been arguably the object of very little scholarly analysis, less than any other major sport. A book such as Peter Willett's, then, is especially welcome and certainly belongs on the shelves of serious students of modern sport and those of good undergraduate libraries. It is without peer in its field, both in its conceptual approach and in the authority and insight of its author. Just as important, it manages to square the circle, for it can be read with interest and delight by casual students and dedicated railbirds as well as the scholar.

Willett's credentials are impeccable. He combines the background, training, and temperament of the scholar with almost forty years in the workaday world of thoroughbred racing. As a columnist for prominent English horseracing journals, author of several highly regarded books on equine topics, and independent bloodstock consultant, Willett commands a place of high honor within the industry and sport. Currently he is president of the influential Thoroughbred Breeders's Association of England.

His objective in *The Classic Racehorse* is straightforward: to trace the development of that most prestigious of modern racehorses, the classic runner. Willett defines this latter as "the horse of genuine excellence over middle distances (usually defined as 1½ miles) at three years of age." (p. 13). His search for the origins of this particular type of animal begins, naturally enough, in the England of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the cradle of the modern thoroughbred. Two survey chapters, resting presumably on conventional sources (the book has no notes and, sadder still, no basic bibliography), provide a backdrop for the central core of the work: sober, thorough analysis, country by country, of the evolution of the thoroughbred animal in all parts of the world where the originally English bloodstock has established important branches. There is no other single work in which the salient features of thoroughbred breeding and racing around the globe are so conveniently pulled together and analyzed with such skill. Individual chapters are devoted to the development of the breed in first England, then Ireland, North America, France, Italy and Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Eastern Europe and Japan, and, finally, South America and South Africa. It is a daunting tour de force, but Willett pulls it off with grace and always good judgment. In addition, he includes summary chapters on the origins and development of the national stud books and of the international pattern structure—the system of identifying and grading races according to their importance—relating them and their impact to the development of the breed.

The uniqueness of the work and its fundamental contribution to the literature rest in these extraordinarily informative country by country analyses. It is simply amazing how much Willett knows about the history of the breed, including the more obscure corners of the subject, such as the development of the thoroughbred in places so disparate as Russia, New Zealand, and Venezuela. (Again, it is a great pity that the author and editors of the book have chosen not to share with its readers the basic sources of Willett's information,

for few readers will know without the author's assistance where to go for further information on, say, the thoroughbred industry in Poland.) These chapters make *The Classic Racehorse* valuable enough as a basic reference work. But Willett does much more than just catalog information. With a deft touch he carefully interlaces breeding theory, national and individual idiosyncracies, and the vicissitudes of world history (e.g., the impact of World War II on the Hungarian thoroughbred industry) to explain the evolution of the classic racehorse. And despite the intricacies and detail into which he must now and again wade, he carries it all off with style, making quite palatable insights that might otherwise be lost in a welter of dry data.

On the debit side, the book could surely have benefitted from tighter editing and/or proofreading. For example, the centenary of the German Derby was not in 1869 (p. 163); there was no Tsar Nicholas 111 (p. 204); for "infer" (p. 237) read "imply"; and there are minor, but annoying repetitions in the book (compare pages 64 and 94). Such blemishes distract, but do not compromise the integrity of Willett's work. By any measure *The Classic Racehorse* is a valuable addition to the literature on thoroughbred racing and breeding and enriches our understanding of the subject.

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