

The Kentucky Derby Museum, 704 Central Avenue, Louisville, KY 40201, (502) 637-7097.

The Kentucky Derby Museum located adjacent to Gate One at Churchill Downs in Louisville, follows the trend in modern museums by creating a pleasant atmosphere in which to tell its story. This is accomplished through colorful displays, strategic lighting, and a number of hands-on areas. The facility is two stories with a central "Great Hall," in the oval shape of a race track, encircling the mid-level balcony between the two floors. On the half-hour, a short presentation of colorful, multi-image, fast-moving slides merge with the sounds of the track, trainers, hawkers, fans, and horses. This presen-

tation takes the visitor through a Derby Day culminating with “the greatest two Minutes in Sports,” the Derby itself. This 360-degree presentation on the screen between floors and a replica of the Winners Circle at one end of the hall create a mood of excitement for touring the rest of the building.

The display areas surrounding the lower level move chronologically through eras beginning with the first Derby in 1875. The track was founded on land owned by the John Churchill family, and later a jockey club was formed to promote racing. The Derby’s beginning helped stabilize the track’s financial picture as did the creative thinking of founder M. Lewis Clark, particularly after betting was banned in Louisville. Clark studied the “Paris Mutual” wagering system (later known as Pari-Mutuel—a system whereby the pool of money wagered is distributed to the first three places and a percentage to the track for management) to put the enterprise on a sound financial basis.

Memorabilia as gear, silks, and saddles, are interspersed among plaques honoring horses, jockeys, and administrators (as the long-time track promoter Matt Winn) through years. Vignette or anecdotal pieces about each Derby are also included. Examples of these latter include the nineteenth-century bandit Frank James’ \$5,000 “out-of-pocket” bet on the winner Spokane in 1889; or the May 1945 race which was delayed until June 9 when the national ban on horse racing was lifted after V-E day.

A moderate-sized gallery area offers racing art displays. Other exhibitors cover the crafts and craftsmen of horseracing, including a section where noted ferrriers explain the nuances of horseshoeing. There are several areas with trophies and medals awarded at the Derby, Preakness, and other major stakes. One display on the second floor has nearly 200 of these objects. To this observer, the trophies have a great similarity and in their straightforward presentation is rather dull. Perhaps a racing enthusiast would have a greater interest here.

A special feature is a section for African-American contributions to the sport, in this case thoroughbred racing, and in particular the Kentucky Derby. Early trainers and jockeys learned their skills on plantations. It was not surprising that in post Civil War days these individuals and their offspring gravitated to racing, which offered one of the few financially rewarding areas open to African-Americans at the time. Many made names for themselves in the sport. Beginning with Oliver Lewis, aboard Aristides, 15 of the first 28 Derby winners were ridden by blacks, including Isaac Murphy, a three-time winner in the late nineteenth century. As racing became more lucrative and glamorous in the twentieth century, more whites became jockeys and pushed African-Americans out. African-American trainers and handlers, however, (such as Ed Brown with champion Baden-Baden in 1877) have been more pervasive throughout the years right to the present time. This display of African-American contributions to thoroughbred racing is a well-done aspect of the museum.

Examples of hands-on exhibits include the touch-screen theater where visitors can call up and view any of over 65 races, many from newsreels of the 1930s through the 1950s. Following this, the visitor can test his or her recall of Derby trivia. To educate and/or test your knowledge about what makes a good thoroughbred, one can make overlays by turning pages. Your choices are judged and your progress is explained as you work through the pages. The term horsepower is experienced with a bicycle allowing one to equate cycling power to horsepower standards.

Standing on jockey scales as well as sitting on a horse at the starting gate are additional visitor involvement displays. Through touch screens in the "Place Your Bets" exhibit, the visitor interacts in a sequential pattern with television faces to place bets at a track window. Since the racing industry has had difficulty attracting new interest over the last decade and attendance has suffered from off-track betting, this exhibit, while educational, could serve to stimulate new wagerers.

The advertised guided tour of Churchill Downs operates only during the summer and sporadically during the autumn. This is unfortunate because the tour would certainly enhance the museum experience at the Downs and add to a "feel" for its history. In addition, the museum facilities include a limited library, an extensive souvenir shop and a restaurant.

The Kentucky Derby Museum provides a pleasant experience and is designed for the majority, like this reviewer, who attend intrigued with the history and pageantry of the event, but with little knowledge of the horseracing industry itself. The museum at Churchill Downs succeeds on this count and can aid the sport historian in his or her general understanding of sport in the American culture.

University of Dayton

John R. Schlepfi