

The North-South Races: “All the Ambitions of the Sections”

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In 1820 northern turf enthusiasts bemoaned the languishing state of thoroughbred horse racing. Where were the excitement and the prestige which had thrilled their colonial predecessors? Yet, with the great stallion Eclipse in the New York stables of Charles Van Ranst and a new, fast track opening on Long Island in 1821, the northern turfmen were about to have all their fears squelched and their desires for increased competition met. Within two years, William R. Johnson, Virginia's "Napoleon of the Turf," issued a challenge to the Van Ranst-J. C. Stevens syndicate: the latter's Eclipse against the best southern horse in four-mile heats for \$20,000 aside.

Thus commenced a series of nearly fifty races between northern and southern horsemen through 1850. Contested primarily on the Union Course on Long Island (the major course in the north to which southerners came), these races symbolized the hopes and fears of antebellum gentlemen, their optimistic beliefs in perfectibility and scientific achievement, their ambivalence toward democracy, and perhaps most importantly, their national aspirations which eventually succumbed to sectional pride. In these races, including two, three, and four-mile sweepstakes, jockey club purses, and match races, the southern turfmen held a slight edge in victories. None of the contests created nearly the excitement and sectional interest as did five major four-mile matches, all but one of which offered \$20,000 to the winner.

Contemporaries considered the Eclipse (N) and Henry (S) match in 1823 as the model for all future north-south contests, in part because most of the later stock followed their bloodlines and, further, because theirs was the record time to beat. Consequent matches between Flirtilla (S) and Ariel (N), Bascombe (S) and Post Boy (N), and Fashion (N) and Boston (S) gained increasingly greater numbers of spectators, amounts of side bets, and faster times, as well as more publicity in newspapers which sought to mitigate sectional controversies by praising both winners and losers. Throughout the 1830's and 1840's the two most prominent managers, the agrarian Johnson for the south and the businessman Stevens for the north, scoured their respective areas to uncover the fastest horses, until the 1845 match between Peytona (S) and Fashion (N) marked the end of the most spectacular races.

Until the Bascombe-Post Boy match in 1836, thoroughbred racing with a sectional character steadily increased in vitality and honor and warmth among contestants. After that match, however, races at the Union Course declined in frequency, and promoters and owners demonstrated less concern for sharing the benefits of their breeding secrets. Northerners began to pine for horses they had shipped to the south and to Canada, while southerners became more defensive about their losses. Both groups bore the burdens of frequent financial depressions and became less cavalier and more acquisitive. Even southwest sectional races detracted from the north-south races, as both the New York and Virginia stables declined in stock, and political antipathy interfered with the once friendly attitudes between northerners and southerners. Where once the great north-south competition had served to improve sectional relationships and to offer a sense of national purpose in the breeding and racing of horses, by the late 1840's this competition fell victim to sectional jealousy and popular interest in other sports, among other factors.