

Horse Racing Before Race Tracks: An Encounter with Early Kentucky Folksport

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Kentucky has long been associated with horses, horse racing. Churchill Downs and The Kentucky Derby. Horse racing in the state brings to mind the glamorous track, herds of excited spectators, betting and mint juleps. In the Bluegrass state, horse racing has not been just the “sport of kings.” it has been the “sport of the people.”

This sport of the people, however, has not always been surrounded by sophistication, wealth and organized gambling. In the 1790’s and early 1800’s Kentucky horse racing was a folk sport, that was an integral part of rural life. No popular gathering in Kentucky in the 18th and 19th centuries was complete without a horse race of some kind. As a folk sport, racing was loosely structured, records were not kept and conditions of the races were quite variable.

The intent of this paper is to examine horse racing as an early Kentucky folksport, taking into consideration (1) racing sites, (2) types of races, and (3) participants in these bucolic events. It will further examine the demise of rural horse sport and its association with folklife and rural customs.

Even though the first public race course in Kentucky was laid out in Lexington as early as 1789, horse racing was enjoyed in less formal environments in rural Kentucky throughout the 19th century. Agricultural fairs and court days, farms, main street and a river bottom were all suitable sites for a race. Early Kentuckians enjoyed their own version of racing wherever they happened to be. The state is replete with traditional points or sites where races of early colonists took place.

The horse that raced in these rural settings did not have to be a thoroughbred, a prized jumper or an expensive import. It could have been a plow horse, a pony or a mule. By 1800 all Kentucky settlements knew what it was to have quarter racing at regular intervals. (These original races were approximately a quarter of a mile long; hence the name quarter racing.)

Even though these early rural races usually involved only two horses, the races were seldom without spectators. The spectators may have been the fair goers, or neighbors or townfolk. But everyone wanted to watch a horse race no matter how impromptu. And everyone usually has some little bet on the side as to the outcome.

A treatise on horse racing as a Kentucky folksport would not be complete without an observation of horse racing’s adjunct, fox hunting. Early Kentuckians eschewed the English pageantry of the hunt and developed their own versions of the sport. “Hill Topping” “One Callus Fox Hunters.” and “listen to that hound” were expressions that grew out of the way the Kentuckian chose to go about the sport.

Twentieth century technology and the growth of towns and cities have diminished the impact of 19th century rural horse racing. What started as a folk sport eventually became a highly organized, tightly controlled, multi-million dollar business. too rich for the provincial Kentuckian's blood. Yet rural horse sports contributed to the development of 18th and 19th century folk culture. The two-horse race and the one-gallus fox hunter of yesteryear have virtually disappeared, but their legacy has added to the reputation of Kentucky as a horse state where horse racing is indeed a "sport of the people" not just the "sport of kings."



Taking a break after a strenuous game or tennis were Virginia Evans, Joan Paul, Peggy Stanaland, and Ralph Ballou.