

Salt, Nails and Prayer: Horseracing and Superstition

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The Horseracing industry has been an integral part of Louisiana culture for many years. Trainers, owners, and jockeys spend extensive amounts of time preparing Thoroughbred horses for races. Certain measures are taken to ensure that the horse has the best opportunity to succeed. Aside from the obvious practices such as attending to the nutritional needs of the horse and conditioning the horse to the rigors of training and competing in races, there are rituals and practices that are rooted in superstition, faith, and folklore that are employed by individuals to ensure a successful outcome at the races.

With the arrival of British settlers came the advent of horse racing on American soil. Although settlers engaged in horseracing, formal racing was not organized until after the Civil War. Formal horseracing came to the state of Louisiana in 1853 with the establishment of Fairgrounds racetrack in New Orleans, which was appropriate, as New Orleans was the gambling capitol of the South (Skinner).

Frequently, bettors will place their wagers based upon the horse's appearance. Some bettors believe that braided manes and tails or brightly colored shadow rolls, which are thick pieces of material usually made of some sheepskin-like material that is attached to the noseband of the horse's bridle to prevent the horse from seeing shadows, are indicative of a "sure" winner. In reality,

manes and tails are braided to keep them clean, particularly when running on a muddy track, and the color of the shadow rolls are nothing more than the preferred color of the trainer or owner.

Horseshoes are considered lucky. It is common to see horseshoes placed upright above the entrance of homes to prevent the good luck from running out. In addition, to rub a horseshoe is purported to bring good luck. Tangible proof of this belief can be seen on the grounds of the Louisiana Downs racetrack. At the entrance of Louisiana Downs stands a monument to the Thoroughbred racehorse Shish kabob. Born on the farm of Leroy Adcock, Shish kabob's name was conferred upon him at the suggestion of Mrs. Adcock who was cooking Shish kabobs on the day that he was born. Shish kabob had an illustrious but short career. Upon stepping in a hole on a turf course and suffering a broken leg, Shish kabob was "put down". In honor of Shish kabob, the Shish kabob Stakes race was created, he was buried on the grounds of Louisiana Downs, and a monument was erected at the entrance of the track. Embedded in a block of marble, Shish kabob's shoe is displayed for visitors to touch or rub for luck (Adcock). Inarguably there is an incongruity in that the physical monument that is supposed to bring good luck is associated with death.

There seems to be a measure of superstitious belief attached to the equipment used by jockeys. Many jockeys believe that it is unlucky to allow their boots to touch the ground until the moment that they are placed upon the feet. No one seems to know why it is unlucky and there seems to be a discrepancy in this belief in that the boots are worn, cleaned and put away until the next race day, but they are the same boots that have been worn and touched the ground before. For Carlos Gonzalez, who has ridden racehorses for over twenty years, it is more about routine in that he insists that his left boot must be put on first (Gonzalez). There is a large consensus of jockeys that agree that there is some measure of luck associated with the bat that jockeys use during the race. A bat is a short, leather covered riding crop that jockeys use to “encourage” the horse to move faster. It is believed that if the bat is dropped then the race will be lost. In addition, if a race is won with a particular bat then it should be used thereafter to continue winning, much like baseball.

Some degree of routine is intertwined with luck. In response to the question of what rituals he uses, Carlos Gonzalez answered, “ If you get on a winning streak, you should continue wearing the same boots or carrying the same bat that you had when the winning streak began. If the lucky streak seems to be coming to an end then sometimes it helps to do something different like cut the hair” (Gonzalez). Trainer George Northrup concurs in that the clothing that was worn when a horse won a race is worn thereafter (Northrup).

Frequently, individuals will make the sign of the cross or whisper a short prayer for a positive outcome before engaging in sporting events. In 1984, the power of prayer became evident when The Little Sisters of the Poor began to pray for Louis Roussel’s Thoroughbred racehorse Risen Star. According to George Vecsey, the relationship between the sisters and Risen Star began when Sister Mary Vincent, administrator of the Mary Joseph old age home, approached Louis Roussel III soliciting donations for the repair of the roof of the facility. In response to Sister Mary Vincent’s request for a donation, Roussel made a deal with her in which in exchange for prayer he would donate a portion of the horse’s winnings. Initially, Risen Star did not win the Sport of Kings Futurity. However, in spite of the horse’s loss, Roussel made a contribution. Risen Star went on to win the Lafayette, finished third at the Kentucky Derby and won the Preakness (Vecsey).

Many people wear or carry special talismans or good luck charms as an added form of “insurance” for the horse’s success. While C.L. Daniel reports that a four leafed clover and a rabbit’s foot did little to aid his horse in the race, George Northrup wears a horse shoe ring with the opening pointing toward the tip of the finger so that the horse can “see” where to run (Daniel; Northrup).

While there are many beliefs concerning measures to be taken to ensure the horse’s success, it would seem that there are several actions that trainers and jockeys perceive as negative and certain to damn the horse to failure. Many Trainers will not take

an old broom or open bag of salt to the track with the horse. To take an old broom from an old dwelling to the new one or to spill salt invites bad luck or misfortune.

According to George Northrup, trimming the bridle path, which is a 4-5 inch section of mane directly behind the horse's ears, on race day is sure to invite disaster. It would seem that the most egregious act that could "jinx" the outcome of the race is to urinate in the horse's stall on race day, a belief that is shared by George Northrup and C.L. Daniel (Northrup, Daniel).

There will always be rituals and practices surrounding Thoroughbred racing that have some connection with superstition, faith, or folklore. However, the success of a horse ultimately is a result of the concerted efforts of the trainers, jockeys and the horse. The reality of horse racing can best be summed up in the words of C.L. Daniel who said, "If the horse is gonna win, he's gonna win."

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