

A Day at the Races

The Belmont Stakes may lack the settled tradition of its Triple Crown brethren, but it has its own unique ambience



BOB LATHAM

I had never been to a Triple Crown horse race. But, through some fortunate timing of a business trip and the generosity of a friend, I found myself at New York's Belmont Park in June for the 142nd running of the Belmont Stakes.

There was a time in this country, shortly after the turn of the 20th century, when the two most

popular sports were horse racing and boxing—each accessible to fans across the socioeconomic spectrum. However, it may now be the general impression that championship boxing fights are for Vegas high rollers and the Triple Crown horse races (Kentucky Derby, Preakness Stakes and the Belmont) are for fans as carefully bred as the horses themselves. With that perspective going in, the Belmont provided a number of surprises and revelations.

The first thing I confronted was attire. I was worried that I might have to wear some sort of Bob Baffert/Nick Zito suit to fit in among women with hats the size of Rhode Island. Although there were a couple of Kentucky Derby starter outfits, most of the people were clad as I was—T-shirt and flip flops—though there were also more than a few looks reminiscent of Rodney Dangerfield in “Easy Money.” Oddly, there were different signs on two restrooms under the grandstand—one for “Women” and one for “Ladies.” I’m not sure where the dividing line was, but it may have had something to do with the size of the hat the woman/lady was wearing.

The Belmont has historically struggled to find traditions that would stand the test of time, including this year switching to Jay-Z's “Empire State of Mind” as its theme song. Good luck with that. In 1997, someone invented something called the Belmont Breeze as the signature cocktail of the Belmont, a bourbon-based concoction no doubt meant to mimic the Kentucky Derby's mint julep. This may need some more work in the mixology lab.

I knew going in that the Belmont, by its sheer length (1.5 miles), would show itself as the ultimate test for thoroughbreds. It was also clear why there has not been a Triple Crown winner in 32 years. The distance is imposing. Also imposing are the heat and humidity. It is a different matter to run a mile and a quarter in early May than to run a mile and a half in the humidity of greater New York City in early June.

I also expected to see the legend of Secretariat, the 1973 Triple Crown winner, on display. In fact, my seats were almost exactly 31 lengths from the finish line, or roughly where the second-place horse was when Secretariat crossed the finish line in record time. Surely, the Secretariat statue would be as grandiose as the big horse himself. Wrong. The statue looked like something you would see on a wedding cake—a small model of a horse almost invisible to the general public in the paddock area. It's too bad Secretariat's greatness came when New York was having budget problems.

Obviously, any horse, trainer or jockey who wins the grueling race deserves it, so full credit should go to Drosselmyer, a 12–1 shot. But in the absence of a Triple Crown contender, assessing the Belmont's own sporting allure is elusive. The Kentucky Derby is where we determine the cream of the 3-year-old crop. The Preakness has the advantage of being second, and as long as the Kentucky Derby winner is entered, the buzz of a Triple Crown is still in the air. But the Belmont in a year like this feels like what a day at Belmont Park might have been like 100 years ago.

So the Belmont has sort of a split personality—the center of attention when a Triple Crown is on the line, and the last child in the horse racing family when there is not. In a year like this, perhaps the Belmont should not even try to emulate the Kentucky Derby's traditions. Instead, it should revel in its accessibility for all comers. Take a page from tennis' loud, boisterous U.S. Open, which doesn't try to be the staid, genteel Wimbledon—there is no signature serving at the U.S. Open like Wimbledon's strawberries and cream. Instead it has a little bit of everything. So when someone new to the Belmont asks what the signature drink or the theme song is, the reply could be something that might have come from that most eloquent New York spokesman Yogi Berra: “We've got nothing. Because we've got everything.” ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and is a former chairman of USA Rugby. He can be reached at blatham@jw.com.