

A Good Sport

I watched Michael Jordan play in a Final Four game, saw the first World Series game ever played in beautiful Kauffman Stadium in Kansas City, witnessed first hand how crazy Ohio State football fans are on game day, saw Kareem play in the fabulous Forum and used to go to the Rose Bowl Game every year. But I have never enjoyed myself at a sporting event as much as a day at the horse races in Australia.

I fell in love with horse racing as a teenager and the sport became an obsession with me the year we spent in Australia, where practically every small town had its own racing meet. That's why it breaks my heart to see horse racing decline in popularity so badly. And I don't understand it. People will watch NASCARS go round and round a track but they won't watch horses do the same thing. And horses have much more personality than a Ford, Chevy or Tony Stewart.

I don't understand why people will watch soccer and hockey but not horse racing. Horses have much more to recommend them than our spoiled athletes; they aren't paid \$100 million like A-Rod or Manny, rarely kill or rape anyone, they aren't tattooed up like the Denver Nuggets and the equine's English is just as good as most modern day football players. And yet the sport is racing backwards in popularity.

Part of the problem, I'm sure, is that there hasn't been a Triple Crown winner in many years to capture our fancy. And young horses being euthanized on the track is not good public relations either. We all fell in love with Barbaro, but when he died many people fell out of love with the sport.

There needs to be more cowboys winning races like this year's Kentucky Derby and fewer sheiks and billionaires for people to really accept the game. But if you ask me the biggest thing that has hurt horse racing is off track betting. I know, it has increased the money wagered on races but it has also meant that people could play the ponies without being there in person.

And there is nothing quite like a day at the races to make a person appreciate the sport. The

It's the Pitts

Written by Lee Pitts

rows of bettors at the bookie joints in those big fancy Vegas casinos might as well be betting on corn futures. (I hope I haven't given anyone an idea.)

What was so great about horse racing in Australia was that the entire town turned out to watch a bunch of nags from neighboring farms and cattle stations run the opposite way around the track. (In the southern hemisphere even the water swirls around the drain backwards!)

Many of the horses arrived that morning at the track in the same stock trailers that hauled bullocks the previous day. The rural folks came to town in their best clothes and it was all very civilized as we spent the time in between races in a big tent drinking cordials and Aussie beer, and eating meat pies and chips.

The only racing guides were written by local amateur hacks and if a local horse had a bad outing or two the owner just changed its name. The bookies all stood on boxes in a common area with chalkboards above their heads and fistfuls of cash in their hands. If they weren't getting enough action they'd simply change the odds on their chalkboards to attract more business. It was all very free market.

We all watched the horses warm up and many people, myself included, placed our bets on how the horses looked and acted. I always preferred my horses to be calm, but not comatose, and if it went to the bathroom right before the race I considered that a very favorable sign. (Less weight to carry.)

Believe it or not, I was actually quite good at picking winners and I'll never forget the time I picked a horse with 95 to 1 odds and he won! I had placed \$20 on him and I figured with a few more days like that I wouldn't need the education I was in Australia to get. So you can imagine how disheartened I was when I went to the bookie's stand to collect my considerable winnings and he wasn't there. Vanished without a trace. Probably changed his name too.