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www.golfdom.com Golfdom April 2006 93
Editorial Index

Company | Page No.
--- | ---
American Society of GC Architects | 72
Andersons (The) | 80
Aquatrols | 80
Arysta LifeScience | 14, 80
Augusta National GC | 25, 73
Austin Turf and Tractor | 90
Balboa Park | 20
Barton Creek Resort and Spa | 90
Bauer Voss Consulting | 81
Bayer Environmental Science | 20, 78
Bear Irrigation | 76
Bernhard and Co. | 80
Blue Heron Pines | 90
Broken Sound Club | 72
Bullis Bay GC | 81
Cleary Chemical Corp. | 90
Club Car | 79
Cottonwood Hills GC | 90
Crop Science Society of America | 90
Dow AgroSciences | 90
Dupont | 78
East Lake GC | 8
EPIC Creative | 90
Essener GC | 34
Fairmont Minerals | 80
FarmLinks | 90
Floratine Products | 20
FMC Corp. | 79
GC Builders Association of America | 72, 76
GC Superintendents of America Assoc. | 72
Georgia-Pacific | 80
Golf Strategies | 12
Gowan Co. | 79
Harding Park | 73
Hershey CC | 12
International Sports Turf Institute | 90
Jack Frost National GC | 12
Jacobson | 41, 46, 79
Jacobson Hardy GC Design | 90
Jacklin Seed | 90
John Deere | 41, 46, 74, 90
Joseph Bartholemew GC | 10
KemperSports | 90
Landscapes Unlimited | 76
Lederach GC | 12
Los Lagos GC | 8
Mackinac Center for Public Policy | 18
Majestic at Lake Walden (The) | 82
Marlton GC | 31
Marriott Golf | 90
Marriott International | 84
Griff, Siebels and Williams | 90
Michigan GC Owners Association | 18
Michigan Turfgrass Envmtrnl Stwrdshp Prgrm | 76
Micro Flo co. | 14
Monsanto Co. | 38
National Council of Commercial Plant Breeders | 90
National GC Owners Association | 72
National Golf Foundation | 14
New Richmond GC | 8
Palmer Course Design | 76
PBI/Gordon | 90
Penn National | 12
Profiles Products | 90
ProSource One | 80
Purcell Technologies | 90
Rain Bird Golf | 79
RDC Golf Group | 90
Renaissance Pinehurst Resort | 90
Ridge Creek GC | 90
Royal St. Kitts GC | 90
Scotts Co. (The) | 38
Seabrook Island Resort | 16
Signature Controls Systems | 74
Simplex Partners | 90
SoLoRider | 79
Spring Creek GC | 12
Stone Mountain GC | 90
Syngenta Professional Products | 73, 80, 90
Tee-Jet Spray Products | 79
Toro Co. (The) | 41, 46, 78
Torrance Pines | 38
Traverse City GC and CC | 18
Turbo | 80
Turfgrass Producers International | 90
Turf-Seed | 38
Tuscaloosa CC | 90
United States Golf Association | 27, 34
Univar USA | 90
University Club | 16
Valleymist GC | 16
Waterwood National Resort | 8
Wild Dunes Resort | 81

Ad Index

Circle No. | Page No.
--- | ---
AgraQuest, Inc. | 19
Aquatrols | 49-56
Andersons, The | 75, 93
Arysta Life Science | 30-31
B A S F Corp | 17, 22-23, 91
Bayer | (reg) 21, 36-37
Becker Underwood, Inc. | (reg) 21b
Bell Labs Inc | 06, 11
Bermudagrass | 83
Binturong Turf Farms | cv2-01
Chematuur Corp | 71
Cleary Chemical Corp | cv4
DQ | 32
Eagle Golf | 92
Ewing Irrigation | 40
FarmSavor | 33
From Tee To Green | 92
GC Builders Association of America | 72, 76
GC Superintendents of America Assoc. | 72
Georgia-Pacific | 80
Golf Strategies | 12
Gowan Co. | 79
Harding Park | 73
Hershey CC | 12
International Sports Turf Institute | 90
Jack Frost National GC | 12
Jacobson | 41, 46, 79
Jacobson Hardy GC Design | 90
Jacklin Seed | 90
John Deere | 41, 46, 74, 90
Joseph Bartholemew GC | 10
KemperSports | 90
Landscapes Unlimited | 76
Lederach GC | 12
Los Lagos GC | 8
Mackinac Center for Public Policy | 18
Majestic at Lake Walden (The) | 82
Marlton GC | 31
Marriott Golf | 90
Marriott International | 84
Griff, Siebels and Williams | 90
Michigan GC Owners Association | 18
Michigan Turfgrass Envmtrnl Stwrdshp Prgrm | 76
Micro Flo co. | 14
Monsanto Co. | 38
National Council of Commercial Plant Breeders | 90
National GC Owners Association | 72
National Golf Foundation | 14
New Richmond GC | 8
Palmer Course Design | 76
PBI/Gordon | 90
Penn National | 12
Profiles Products | 90
ProSource One | 80
Purcell Technologies | 90
Rain Bird Golf | 79
RDC Golf Group | 90
Renaissance Pinehurst Resort | 90
Ridge Creek GC | 90
Royal St. Kitts GC | 90
Scotts Co. (The) | 38
Seabrook Island Resort | 16
Signature Controls Systems | 74
Simplex Partners | 90
SoLoRider | 79
Spring Creek GC | 12
Stone Mountain GC | 90
Syngenta Professional Products | 73, 80, 90
Tee-Jet Spray Products | 79
Toro Co. (The) | 41, 46, 78
Torrance Pines | 38
Traverse City GC and CC | 18
Turbo | 80
Turfgrass Producers International | 90
Turf-Seed | 38
Tuscaloosa CC | 90
United States Golf Association | 27, 34
Univar USA | 90
University Club | 16
Valleymist GC | 16
Waterwood National Resort | 8
Wild Dunes Resort | 81

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Out of Bounds

something completely different

horse racing

with $16 tucked into a Banff Canada wallet, I walked into the Quad City Downs on a somewhat cloudy spring afternoon back in 1978. Some of my dad's buddies were in town and wanted to play the trotters, so we headed across the Mississippi from Davenport and settled ourselves in the grandstand.

I learned plenty that day: what odds were, how grown men would go crazy over horses, a plethora of new words from said men, and the rules of harness racing. Dad would place my bets for me (obviously, an 8-year-old can't put $2 on Giggly Girl to win), and I would watch the wheels go around on the harnesses, marvel at the colorful slicks and watch, slowly, as my wallet lost its bulge.

The day didn't make me a horseman, but it did impart a healthy fascination with the ponies. I recall that Steve Caution, a Kentucky-born jockey, also rode Affirmed to the Triple Crown the year I was, how grown men would go crazy were quickly quashed by puberty, but the appeal of the race game never left me. I hit the tracks whenever possible. And every first Saturday in May, late in the afternoon everything gets dropped for the two minutes of sheer excitement that's known as The Kentucky Derby.

The Derby has been run since 1875, the brainchild of Lutie Clark, grandson of explorer William Clark, and his two cousins, John and Henry Churchill. The first race was an unmitigated winner, with Aristides winning the 1 1/2-mile race (it switched to 1 1/4 miles in 1896) in world-record time in front of 10,000 fans. Interestingly, he was ridden by Oliver Lewis, an African-American jockey; moreover, black jockeys nabbed 15 of the first 28 Derbies but were entirely absent from steeds from 1921 until 2000.

Over the years the Derby developed into America's grandest race, a spectacle that now is watched by 140,000 fans who squeeze into Churchill Downs. The race day is steeped in tradition: from the fancy hats of well-heeled ladies that now is watched by 140,000 fans who squeeze into Churchill Downs. The race day is steeped in tradition: from the fancy hats of well-heeled ladies on Millionaire's Row to the singing of "My Old Kentucky Home" as the horses parade to the gate, from the garland of 554 roses presented to the winner, to the debauchery that takes place for the not-so-well-heeled in the infamous infield.

But if you can't make it down Kentucky way, there remains one tradition you can keep alive in your own home — the mint julep, the official drink of the Derby. Start with boiling 2 cups of sugar and 2 cups of water for five minutes. Let the mixture cool and then add eight sprigs of fresh mint. Refrigerate overnight. Come race time, fill a julep cup with crushed ice, pour in a few ounces of premium Kentucky whiskey and add 1 tablespoon of the syrup. Stir well and garnish with mint. Enjoy the race with the 1956 words of John Steinbeck, who wrote after his first Derby, "This Kentucky Derby, whatever it is — a race, an emotion, a turbulence, an explosion — is one of the most beautiful and violent and satisfying things I have ever experienced."

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where he picks fresh mint from his wife's garden for his juleps.

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96 Golfdom April 2008

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My Old Kentucky Home as the horses parade to the gate, from the garland of 554 roses presented to the winner, to the debauchery that takes place for the not-so-well-heeled in the infamous infield.

"My Old Kentucky Home" as the horses parade to the gate, from the garland of 554 roses presented to the winner, to the debauchery that takes place for the not-so-well-heeled in the infamous infield.

But if you can't make it down Kentucky way, there remains one tradition you can keep alive in your own home — the mint julep, the official drink of the Derby. Start with boiling 2 cups of sugar and 2 cups of water for five minutes. Let the mixture cool and then add eight sprigs of fresh mint. Refrigerate overnight. Come race time, fill a julep cup with crushed ice, pour in a few ounces of premium Kentucky whiskey and add 1 tablespoon of the syrup. Stir well and garnish with mint. Enjoy the race with the 1956 words of John Steinbeck, who wrote after his first Derby, "This Kentucky Derby, whatever it is — a race, an emotion, a turbulence, an explosion — is one of the most beautiful and violent and satisfying things I have ever experienced."

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