

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 Cauthen, a Kentucky-born jockey, also rode Affirmed to the Triple Crown the year I lost my money. He was named Sportsman of the Year by *Sports Illustrated* for his accomplishment.

Any dreams I had of being a jockey 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

THERE'S NO SURER BET THAN THE THRILLING TWO MINUTES PROVIDED

BY THE PONIES AT THE KENTUCKY DERBY **BY MARK LUCE**



"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.

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 on Millionaire's Row to the singing of

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