



The Churchill Downs' clubhouse garden on Derby Day in 1985.

# THE MAIN EVENT

Landscaping at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Ky., is year-round for one of sport's great days: the Kentucky Derby.

by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor

It almost doesn't seem fair: 365 days of preparation for two minutes in May.

Everybody knows about the two minutes in May, but few know about the 365 days of preparation that makes the day one of the greatest in sport.

The famed Kentucky Derby, held the first Saturday in May, is the *piece de resistance* for the men who landscape and maintain the 147 acres at Churchill Downs in Louisville.

It's only one day in a three-month racing season but it's special, in that it gives employees great satisfaction.

The "Main Event," 112 years



1985 Kentucky Derby winner Spend-A-Buck with jockey Angel Cordero. Surprisingly, Spend-A-Buck did not run in either the Preakness or the Belmont, the two later legs of horse racing's Triple Crown.

young, is watched by 130,000 people in person, and another 80 million or so on television. ABC television bills the day as the greatest in sport.

How many landscape workers have their work viewed by such a throng? Churchill Downs' workers don't need a pep talk to get them ready for Derby Day, a time when the twin spires atop the grandstand seem all the more impressive.

Providing the guidance are plant superintendent Raymond "Butch" Lehr and greenhouse manager Don Lord. Lehr supervises 24 landscape employees while Lord oversees a crew of eight greenhouse workers.

The 32 year-round workers manicure fine turf, the dirt track, a new \$3.2 million turf track, annuals, trees, and shrubs. They also perform general maintenance chores such as upkeep on the 47 barns where some 1,350 horses reside.

By early May, Churchill Downs is colored regally, its turf the lush spring green, its annuals a maze of hues, the sky above usually popsicle blue.

It's ready for the 45,000 people who crowd the grandstand and the

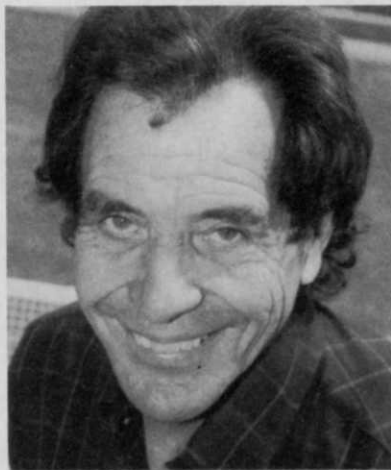
## LANDSCAPE PROFILE



Workers install the irrigation system for the turf track in August 1985.

The track measures  $7\frac{1}{8}$ -miles and should be ready for racing in early 1987.

Right, Don Lord, manager of the greenhouse. Far right, Don Lord's pride, the Churchill Downs' greenhouse, where some 60,000 annuals are nurtured for planting.



90,000 fans in the infield who form one of the nation's largest parties.

### 60,000 annuals

Lord and his crew are busier than usual in the spring preparing for Open Day, the Saturday prior to the Derby. That's officially the beginning of the "Spring Meetings," or spring racing season that lasts until the end of June.

By late April, 60,000 annuals—begonias, marigolds, geraniums, petunias, dusty millers—are in full bloom in the many gardens in and around the oval. Everything is nurtured in the Churchill Downs greenhouse.

The 15,000 tulip bulbs that were planted the previous fall are sometimes in bloom for Derby Day, sometimes not.

In 1985, a warm April left

Churchill Downs tulip-less for the Derby. The tulips came up early and lasted the traditional 7-to-21 days before the blossoms dropped. That was only the second time in Lord's 35 years at Churchill Downs that the tulips failed to show for the Derby.

Lord is used to the unpredictability. "My biggest worry is a freeze or a frost. We've had bad freezes here in April that have really hurt us. They say our last freeze can come anytime through May 10 but I've found that if it doesn't come by the third week of April, we'll be all right," he says, a definite Louisville twang in his voice.

That's the way he's learned his job. "I've educated myself. I've always had an instinct for it," he says. The Louisville native doesn't have a horticulture degree. He works at Churchill Downs because his

father, the late Herbert, got his son a job there when the boy was 17. Thirty-five years later, Don Lord is still there. There's a lot of tradition at Churchill Downs.

### Roots to 1875

That tradition dates to 1874 when Colonel M. Lewis Clark organized the Louisville Jockey Club and directed construction of a thoroughbred race track on land purchased from John and Henry Churchill.

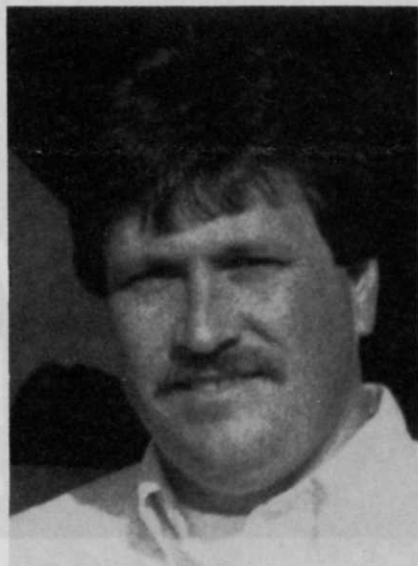
On May 17, 1875, Aristides won the first Kentucky Derby in front of 10,000 spectators.

Since that time, 112 Derbys have been run, each one seemingly a greater spectacle than its predecessor.

That success has meant adequate funding for Churchill Downs, and



A view of Churchill Downs' famous grandstand and twin spires.



Raymond "Butch" Lehr, Churchill Downs' plant supervisor and 19-year employee.

the Board of Directors has made continued improvements over the years. The latest, a \$6.5 million improvement program begun early in 1985, is spotlighted by the addition of the turf track, nestled inside the dirt track and edged by burning bush shrubs.

Other improvements: a practically new centerfield with new fountains, flower planters, and alterations around the winner's circle; a new 500-foot tunnel from the infield to the main parking lot; new dining and entertainment areas; a remodeled lounge known as The Jockey Club; and a general repainting.

Superintendent Lehr oversaw construction of the fescue track (it's actually 90 percent fescue and 10 percent Kentucky bluegrass) that will host its first race in the spring of 1987.

He assures a visitor he didn't choose the fescue turf arbitrarily. "We did tests on grasses before choosing. We also talked to a lot of turf people. It was almost unanimous—most recommended the Kentucky 31 fescues," says Lehr, another Louisville native who has worked his way up the corporate totem pole since joining Churchill Downs in 1967.

Ground was broken for turf track July 5, 1985, at 10 a.m. (Evidently, Lehr keeps records to the minute). The grass was sowed on Sept. 30, mowed on Nov. 5, and again on Nov. 18. A Rain Bird irrigation system was installed near the turf track, the only area at Churchill Downs that is

irrigated. The system was turned on March 10 of this year.

The baby track experienced some kill over the winter but was resowed in March, fertilized shortly thereafter, and greened-up by April 1.

RVA Omnisports, based in Ontario, Canada, designed the mortar sand-based track.

Lehr says he chose the Rain Bird irrigation system because other Rain Bird users he spoke with noted the system's low maintenance requirements.

### The Breeder's Cup

It's no secret that Churchill Downs built the  $\frac{7}{8}$ -mile turf track with an eye on playing host to the annual Breeder's Cup, held each November. To date, no Breeder's Cup is scheduled for Churchill Downs, but there's a good chance that will change in the future.

Walter Hagan has recently been named turf track superintendent.

For Lehr, the turf track means even more responsibility. At 37, he handles the pressure smoothly though there's no doubt he's a man with a lot on his mind.

He credits his employees for his success. "It's frustrating at times, but our people go farther than expected when the chips are down. I've got good men under me and they feel the same as me—there's something special about working here and it leads to pride in your job," says Lehr, in between answering his walkie-talkie and the telephone.

Since 1967, he's seen every Kentucky Derby with the exception of the two he missed in 1969 and 1970 when he was serving in the Army. He'll probably see a lot more.

"I guess if I had to work somewhere for the rest of my life, I'd like to work here," says the blue-eyed father of two.

His co-worker and friend Lord has seen 35 Derbies. He can rattle off the names of most Derby winners, especially those in long-past years. He has trouble with the recent winners.

That could be because of the growing pressure Lord faces preparing the track for Derby Day. The greater the spectacle, the greater the pressure. The race becomes secondary for Lord.

Still, it's a job he wouldn't trade. "I love what I do. I couldn't imagine doing anything else," he says, inhaling a Marlboro.

After the Derby, Lord and crew take the role of landscape maintenance workers—flower care, spraying, mowing, fertilizing, pruning, and the other tasks presented in a 147-acre landscape.

In preparing for the Fall Meet (the fall racing season which runs from late October to late November), Lord plants chrysanthemums and other fall bloomers. The flowers, he says, cause his biggest worries but are most rewarding.

When they're right and Churchill Downs is at its finest, then the 365 days of toil and worry are worth it for the employees. **WT&T**