The Kentucky Association for the Improvement of Breeds of Stock: Natural Advantages and Market Motivations

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The Kentucky Association:

Natural Advantages and Market Motivations

“The Kentuckians over in that part of the State can beat the Dickens talking horse. Upon my word, they don’t talk anything else. Blood! blood! blood!—the most sanguinary conversations you ever listened to. I had horse talked to me until I was ready to cry ‘neigh!’ to it all.”¹ As the observer from the *New York Times* made clear, by 1860 residents of the Inner Bluegrass Region of Kentucky obsessed over breeding and racing thoroughbred horses and the area was widely considered “the head-quarters of fine racing stock.”² This had not always been the case. The Bluegrass’ emergence as the center of the horse-breeding world was facilitated by the efforts of groups such as the Kentucky Association for the Improvement of Breeds of Stock, which worked tirelessly to exploit both the natural advantages of the region and burgeoning national markets for thoroughbred horses. Its success helped create certain social and cultural views and established patterns of land use that continue to impact the region today.

In 1826, a group of sixty subscribers organized themselves into an Association “for the purpose of promoting the purchase and sale of stock, and to encourage the breeding of horses.”³ The men who formed the group came from near the top of the area’s socioeconomic ladder. While all participated in breeding and racing horses, their other interests were quite varied. Their ranks included local politicians, doctors, merchants, and railroad executives in addition to farmers. Unsurprisingly, many also had significant slaveholdings. Simply put, the founders of the Kentucky Association were local elites. Thus,

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² Ibid.
³ Kentucky Association, *A Souvenir from the Kentucky Association, Centennial Meeting, Spring 1926*. 
the goals of the Association reflected those of its gentlemanly subscribers, which were quite different than those of the average farmer.

Racing commenced on the Association track, just east of Lexington in 1828. The new track replaced less standardized courses, and operated continuously until bankruptcy temporarily halted the group’s operations amid the general economic downturn of the 1890s. Early on, races were only held during the fall, but by 1835 spring races were held as well. Typically, meetings would last four or five days with a race or two per day. Normal purses ranged from $100 to $1000 depending on the number and quality of horses entered. Occasionally, however, much larger prizes were offered to the winners of high profile races.

The career of a single horse can illustrate the financial value of a champion, the competition between regions for equine supremacy, and the Bluegrass’ growing reputation for producing quality thoroughbreds. Dr. Elisha Warfield entered his three-year-old colt named Darley in the Kentucky Association’s spring races in 1853. As Warfield was a prominent founding member of the Association and owned an adjacent stock farm, his entering horses was a common occurrence. Not quite as common was Darley’s impressive showing. Winning two races with purses totaling $2,700, in the span of 4 days was enough to convince Richard Ten Broeck, a horseman of national fame, working on behalf of a syndicate that included two Association members, to purchase Darley from his Fayette County breeder.\(^4\) Ten Broeck renamed the colt Lexington and guided his racing career to fantastic success. This choice of name proved significant as it strengthened the connection between the Inner Bluegrass and superior horses in minds across the nation.

Ten Broeck relocated Lexington to New Orleans, where easily won his first race against a favored horse from Alabama. This victory was enough to earn him a spot in the “Great State Post Stake” scheduled for April 4, 1854. A $20,000 purse was on the line as over 20,000 spectators gathered to witness “the great struggle of States for superiority in that contest which had for months enlisted so much feeling, so much State pride, [and] so much individual competition.” Lexington ran for the financial benefit of his owner, but he also raced for the pride and reputation of Kentucky, and specifically for the Inner Bluegrass Region in which he was bred and raised. His very name reflected the strength of his ties to the area. In many ways, he embodied the goals of the Kentucky Association for the Improvement of Breeds of Stock. The Great State Post Stake was a national stage on which to demonstrate the superiority of Kentucky stock.

On the backstretch of the fourth and decisive mile Lexington trailed the entry from Mississippi before he “went to work in earnest, gradually closing the gap...striving hard for the supremacy.” Into the home stretch they thundered to the roars of the crowd. Each raced at top speed, “as if life depended upon every jump, but the speed of Lexington was superior,” and he pulled away as they passed the judges stand, managing a four-length victory. In “a brilliant event in the racing annals of this country” Lexington won an impressive victory, both for his owner and for Kentucky thoroughbred breeders as a group.6

The rest of Lexington’s racing career lived up to this sterling standard. He lost a single race to the same challenger from Mississippi but dominated the third and final meeting between the two and set American record over four miles in the process. When

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5 Spirit of the Times “New Orleans (L.a.) Spring Races.” April 15, 1854.
6 Ibid.
blindness forced him from the track, he was widely hailed as the greatest living American horse. In 1856 he was sold for $15,000 to Robert A. Alexander of Woodburn Farm in Woodford County, Kentucky. Many questioned Alexander’s decision to pay such a large sum for an unproven, nearly blind, sire, but time proved the breeder correct. Lexington’s son Norfolk sold for $15,001 in 1864, and a later offspring named Kentucky sold for $40,000.7 Chronicling his accomplishments as a sire is beyond the scope of this paper, but his sixteen years at the top of the sire list gives an idea of his importance to the sport.8 As his obituary in the New York Times proclaimed, Lexington “founded a line of racehorses unequaled by the offspring of any other stallion in this country or England,” a feat that brought considerable fame to the Inner Bluegrass horse industry.9

While the Civil War had a “retarding effect” on racing, the Association continued to meet and hold contests during the conflict.10 This effect was decidedly less pronounced than in southern states that seceded, where thoroughbred breeding and racing came to a virtual standstill. Soon after the conflict, competition on the Association’s track regained its previously high standards. Racing schedules were much the same as during antebellum years, two meets a year, four or five days of racing, two or three races per day. Purses and entry fees remained largely in line with those awarded and charged previously. The growing popularity of “selling races,” in which the winner was immediately offered for auction perfectly exemplifies how the Association course functioned as a market at which turfmen were able to witness the quality of the product prior to purchasing.11

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7 Ibid.
10 Kentucky Association, A Souvenir from the Kentucky Association, Centennial Meeting, Spring 1926. pg. 23.
from outside the region continued to view the “famous Blue Grass Region” as “the thoroughbreds’ paradise” and travelled to the Association track to add some of the celebrated stock to their own holdings.¹²

While racing was what the region became known for, horses were not always the group’s sole interest. Early in the Association's existence, annual stock fairs were an important part of its work and goals. Awards were given in a wide range of categories including cattle, mules, jacks and agricultural products. However, by the early 1840s these stock fairs were discontinued. Contemporary accounts suggest the quality of Inner Bluegrass stock had reached an acceptable level and the Association felt they were no longer necessary. Another factor was that stock fairs did not offer the same type of excitement as horse races, meaning they did not generate the same type of revenue stream from the viewing public. Judging these competitions was necessarily subjective, which meant separating the best bull of the county from the runner-up was largely a matter of personal preference. Because of this subjective aspect, the difference in monetary value between first and second would typically be small.

Compare this to horseracing. The difference between the best and second best 3 year-old colts in the county could mean hundreds of dollars and could be objectively measured in a race over the Association track. Beyond the county level the stakes could obviously rise dramatically. The difference between the best and the rest could mean tens of thousands of dollars for a horse’s owner on race day and tens of thousands more over the horse’s breeding career. The excitement and attendance generated by a horserace is another important difference. In short, due to a combination of factors, the Kentucky

Association racetrack did something its’ stock fairs could not; it connected the sportsmen of the Bluegrass to the competitive and profitable national and international markets for racehorses. Thus, around 1840 the Kentucky Association discontinued its stock fairs while racing continued to thrive.

In 1889 the Association began a program of improvements to the grounds. A new grandstand, clubhouse, and betting shed were erected, making it “one of the best appointed race courses in the West.”\(^\text{13}\) Unfortunately, these improvements came at an inopportune time for the Association’s finances. Accruing $62,500 in debt in a time of general economic downturn forced the Association into bankruptcy.\(^\text{14}\) Racing was only temporarily interrupted, but the 1891 bankruptcy, which saw the members lose ownership of the course, marked the end of an era.\(^\text{15}\)

It is important to note the difference between Association’s bankruptcy and its subscribers continued wealth. The organization’s main goal was not to turn a profit; it was to facilitate subscribers making a profit. It achieved this goal by providing an opportunity for breeders to prove their horses worth. Furthermore, the Association’s debts were often to subscribers who had loaned the organization money to surmount its previous financial obstacles. Thus, assuming the financial difficulties of the group indicate financial difficulties for individual subscribers is too simplistic. Similarly, judging the Association’s success or failure based solely on its bottom line misses the point. That the group played an important role in establishing the Bluegrass’ reputation for producing high quality horses, a reputation it still has today, more accurately reflects the group’s legacy.

\(^{15}\) Kentucky Association, A Souvenir from the Kentucky Association, Centennial Meeting, Spring 1926. pg. 26-27.
The Kentucky Association, and the Kentucky thoroughbred industry generally, succeeded because of a confluence of economic and environmental factors. Over the course of thousands of years, factors as long lasting as geology and soil types or as short-lived as a single bison or deer, combined to form a natural landscape that was an ideal habitat for large herbivores. The Association publicized the region’s natural endowments by providing an opportunity for Kentucky horses to display their quality.

The Inner Bluegrass region of Kentucky is a geologically and therefore environmentally unique zone. Middle Ordovician Lexington Limestone characteristically underlies the area. The nuanced differences in subsoil that distinguish the region from the surrounding areas might take a geologist to truly appreciate, but the secondary effects are readily apparent. The limestone explains the higher soil fertility in the Inner Bluegrass compared to the surrounding Outer. The gently undulating topography of the area is the result of underground drainage dissolving underlying limestone in low areas.

At the time of European settlement, fertile open woodlands, savannas and the presence of large herbivores, characterized the Inner Bluegrass region. Scientists concerned with such questions postulate that large animals such as the bison, elk and deer, played a key role in maintaining vegetation patterns. Great herds of grazers trampled and ate tree seedlings thereby ensuring dense forests did not come to dominate. The presettlement success of bison and elk both foreshadowed and paved the way for the

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17 Ibid.
19 Ibid. pg. 19-50.
immense success of domestic species like cattle and horses. Thus, the formation of the Kentucky Association for the Improvement of Breeds of Stock should be viewed as a self-conscious effort by breeders to publicize and exploit the land’s phenomenal ability to support grazing animals. That they chose to emphasize blooded stock specifically was economically quite rational, as the profit margins on “higher quality” stock, as defined by the market, are higher.

None of these environmental advantages would have amounted to much if market forces had not placed such high value on quality racehorses. Lexington’s career, both racing and breeding, illustrates the vast sums of money to be made in the horse industry. It also highlights the importance of the Inner Bluegrass’ connections to the larger regional and national markets. It is fitting that Lexington raced in the South while many of his offspring won fame on racecourses in the North because the Civil War marked a sort of watershed event that changed the face of the industry. The devastation brought by the war permanently stunted horse racing in the former Confederate states.20 While Kentucky avoided the worst impacts of the war, their traditional southern markets shrunk, meaning Bluegrass breeders needed new buyers for their bloodstock. They found them in the northern “capitalistic aristocracy which had both leisure and cash” to take up the “breeding and racing of superior horses.” As northern tracks like the Union and Saratoga racecourses became the center of the American racing scene, Kentucky’s “native nurserymen were essentially the suppliers of that larger racing market.”21

Both the Inner Bluegrass’ natural advantages and the existence of profitable markets for its livestock played necessary roles in the Kentucky Association’s founding and success. While the natural heritage of the region made it particularly well suited for raising grazing animals, it was not an independent determining factor. If the markets had valued hemp, a crop the area was also uniquely suited to cultivate, dramatically more than horses, then Kentucky farmers might have invested less in pure-bred livestock and it might not be the “horse capital of the world” we recognize today. Individual men and women have little influence on shifting markets and even less on nature’s endowment, but conscious efforts to work within these parameters can yield fantastic results. The Kentucky Association for the Improvement of Breeds of Stock is a perfect example. Its subscribers saw the benefits of raising livestock in the Bluegrass and organized a venue to publicize their animals in order that they might profitably participate in regional and national markets. The Association’s eventual bankruptcy should not obscure the important role it played in establishing the Inner Bluegrass region’s reputation for equine supremacy.
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