

The First Kentucky Derby

by REX A. EWING

There could not have been a more auspicious day to have a horse race. The sun rose pleasantly warm over northern Kentucky in a sky bereft of clouds, and though the birds were doubtless singing, their tunes could not have been heard over the spirited chatter preceding the first running of the Derby.

May 17, 1875, was a Monday. Most businesses in Louisville had locked their doors by noon in observance of the event. Wise merchants knew that the only money exchanging hands around Louisville that day would be at the new racetrack south of town.

And they were right. By every possible means men, women, and children, rich and poor, black and white, made their way to what was then known as the Louisville Jockey Club. Horse-drawn buggies and carriages filled the streets alongside mule drawn trolley cars. Coal wagons were packed with former slaves. Even the Short Line and Louisville & Nashville railroads had laid down tracks to deliver patrons to the new racetrack.

The permanent grandstands were built to hold 2,000 persons, with temporary stands for a few hundred more. But the total attendance that day was said to be 10,000 which was one-tenth the population of Louisville. Those who, either by lack of means or punctuality, could not secure a seat packed the infield of the mile oval to watch the Derby from atop the multitude of wagons.

The new racecourse had been built the previous year by Col. M. Lewis Clark and the Louisville

Jockey Club and Driving Park Association. As the original estimate had been \$32,000, each of the 320 members had contributed \$100 for the new facility. A loan from a local merchant provided extra funds for the grandstands and 400 stalls.

The track was a horseman's dream. The 80-foot-wide stretches and the 60-foot-wide turns were each a quarter-mile and the track was as flat as it could be. The surface had been worked that morning by mule-drawn equipment and was in perfect condition.

There were 15 horses in the race: 13 males and two fillies, who carried only 100 pounds and 97 pounds, respectively. Every jockey but one was black.

The favorite that day was a stout and spirited bay colt named Chesapeake. He was owned by H. P. McGrath, a gambler, speculator, and, sometimes, hot-tempered brawler. Chesapeake was generally unruly at the starting line and was known to be a come-from-behind runner. In order to wear down the field for Chesapeake's late charge, McGrath had entered another horse, Aristides. By the imported sire, Leamington, and out of a daughter of Lexington, this finely sculpted red chestnut was to set a quick pace early on, sapping the energies of the horses in the field, and then drop back for Chesapeake's victorious trek to the wire.

Betting on the Derby, scheduled as the second race of the day, was brisk and heavy. Four "pari-mutuel" machines were imported from France for the occasion. But, by far, most of the wagering

that day was done in auction pools, the common form of betting at the time. In this method, each horse was auctioned to the highest bidder and all the money held in a pool. The winner took all. Long-odds horses were often sold together as one entry.

Since Clark envisioned his Derby as the American equivalent of England's famous Epsom Derby, the first running of the Kentucky Derby was run at nearly the same distance as its English counterpart: 1-1/2 miles. The horses were started from a line drawn in the dirt across the track. A drummer was used to alert the jockeys (who were often too busy controlling their mounts to pay attention to anything else), that the race was about to begin. A flagman down the track would drop a flag the instant the horses were in order.

Chesapeake reared and tried to throw his jockey, and the race had to be restarted. Then the flag dropped and they were off. Aristides was out in front with Volcano and McCreery. Chesapeake was far in the rear.

In his autobiography, Col. Matt J. Winn described the race as seen from the back of his father's wagon. He was 13 at the time: "There was the usual jamming at the break, but the horses hadn't gone very far before I spotted my hero – the great Chesapeake. He was pretty far back, but that's where the men said he would be until he decided to make his famous stretch run. I kept following Chesapeake around, not paying much attention to the others in the race. I just didn't want to miss seeing Chesapeake when he moved into action."

But he never did. In fact, Chesapeake was a beaten horse. He had run two races in the previous week, including a two-mile race against another Derby entry, Ten Broeck. He simply couldn't rise to the occasion.

It was McCreery who took the early lead but fell back after the first half-mile sprint past the grandstands. Aristides picked up the lead and held on past the one-mile mark and into the clubhouse turn, with Volcano and Verdigris close on his heels.

Just out of the turn, Aristides's rider began to pull him up a bit to make way for Chesapeake to run by to glory. McGrath, knowing that Chesapeake was finished, was waiting at the turn. He motioned for his jockey to go on ahead and take it, if he could.

Aristides could and he did, with Volcano, Verdigris, and Bob Wooley close behind. Ten Broeck, who would later prove himself as a great distance horse, finished fifth. Aristides had run the distance in 2:37-3/4, the fastest 1-1/2 miles ever run by a three-year-old in America at the time. He earned \$2,900 for his efforts.

For Clark and the founders of the first Kentucky Derby, it could not have been a better day.