

Chapter 1

Nearly Decked at the Derby



*Until you go to Kentucky and with your own eyes behold a Derby,
you ain't been nowhere and you ain't seen nothing.*

—Irvin S. Cobb, Kentucky-born humorist

A crowd ten bodies deep packed the main gate of Churchill Downs waiting to storm the Louisville landmark. The city's finest, along with the Kentucky State Police and Army National Guard, stood for order, but the overwhelming number surrounding Central Avenue and South 9th Street, those taking up Racine and Longfield Avenues could have easily threatened with riot if the mob turned unruly.

They'd been gathering since early Saturday morning, 7 AM, when the gates still weren't scheduled to open for another hour. Many had spent the night in their cars or in tents pitched on a strip of grass along the roadside. Double lines of vehicles crammed

both sides of the street pointing to the Churchill Downs lot, long since filled to its limit. The 1973 Kentucky Derby, ninth of a ten-card race, was nearly half a day away, set for 5:32 PM. Nothing of great length, the lines nor the wait, deterred fans who flocked to see an historic duel: Secretariat, the East Coast Superhorse, versus Sham, his challenger from the West.

Few options remained for those without a Derby Day ticket. Most would be sent to the infield. Grandstand seats were long gone; advance ticket sales had been the greatest in the track's history. Even some 1,400 Churchill Downs stockholders had been shut out and put on a waiting list.

The boxes near the finish line, Section F and Section G, belonged to the wealthy and powerful. Businessmen, horse breeders, and racing people took Section F, with Section G reserved for politicians like the Kentucky Governor Wendell Ford and Louisville mayor Frank Burke. Along "Millionaire's Row," the Skye Terrace in the observatory above the clubhouse, the aristocrats of the sport watched from private tables with waitstaff at their call, assuming a caterer hadn't been hired for the occasion.

After the gates opened, thousands began to fill the infield. Despite the increase in the centerfield admission price, nearly double that of the year before, they kept coming. Pedestrians poured through the tunnel leading to the infield, many feeling the need to yelp and holler on their way through, bouncing echoes above, below, and side to side.

Several thousand gate-crashers also made it onto the Downs. An adventurous trespasser climbed a ladder over a locked gate and was soon followed by others. When a forced lock opened

the floodgates, nearly 6,000 more made it through. The infield population continued to rise. The overall Churchill Downs tally came in at roughly 140,000, the largest crowd to see a horse race in America. Considering the entire racetrack seated only 42,000, an overflow of almost 100,000 was left to fill the cracks and crevices of the facility and spill over into the track's center behind chain-linked fence.

The younger set made the infield oval their own, turning the grassy plain into a loud, rowdy, littered carnival. The six-foot-nine frame of Dave Cowens of the Boston Celtics was spotted among the revelers. The signs of vendors hawking their products filled the gaps. Fans made their own signs too, displayed at various times throughout the day.

Too much activity in too little space wasn't exclusive to the infield. Whether the destination was the concession stands for a buck-and-a-half julep topped with a limp mint sprig that looked like a weed the groundskeeper had pulled, the souvenir tables for anything commemorating the day, or the betting lines that seemed to run longer than the one-and-a-quarter-mile main event, no effort to part with one's money was made easy.

Under blue skies amid 70-degree temperatures, the bugle call welcomed the horses onto the track for the Kentucky Derby post parade. They marched along the front stretch identified by the digit on their saddlecloth and the colors of their jockey's silks. Bronze capped spires atop the main building, a green turf track within the main chocolate-colored oval, and blooming geraniums and marigolds filled the eye. Swallows circled calmly above the tension building below.

The University of Louisville Marching Band played the melody to Stephen Foster's "My Old Kentucky Home" while thousands of voices accompanied the tune. Even for those who knew the long tradition, knew the song was sure to come, it could be hard to fight a stir of sentiment. It took an exercise in concentration not to raise a lump in the throat and choke up on the lyrics when joining in.

"The sun shines bright in the old Kentucky home. . . ." It was like a scene from a movie seen a dozen times, but the effect could still be touching, if not overpowering. Thirteen horses on the track turned at the clubhouse and headed down the front stretch toward the starting gate. One would soon be an important part of racing history, his name added to those who could call themselves his peer. The names of 98 past victors hung above a garden of red and yellow tulips and circled the Churchill Downs paddock.

All hype and excitement aside, no one likely predicted the 99th running of the Kentucky Derby would be a battle more worthy a heavyweight contender than a thoroughbred. To begin, Restless Jet, Angle Light, and Warbucks entered the starting gate smoothly, like the tried stakes contenders they were. Next was Sham at the fourth post-position, followed by Navajo at the five. When it came to Twice a Prince, an inexperienced colt with only six career starts to his name, he grew agitated as assistant starters took hold to lead him in.

It might have been the buzzing magnitude of the record-breaking attendance that set him off. Boisterous adulation came from all corners, including those packed in box seats, spread

along balconies, and squeezed into standing room. It came from the infield throng who spread themselves over the grass, dirt, and mud and crammed along the restraining fence that ran the perimeter of the track.

Twice a Prince refused to enter his stall. He reared and rose to his hind legs for a stand-up fight, rattling the starting gate. His jockey, Angel Santiago, fell backward and hung from the stirrups, dangling upside down by his feet for several seconds. An alert assistant starter caught the jockey and helped to free him. Shaken, Santiago was escorted from the gate while Twice a Prince continued the scrap. Another assistant starter to the right of the colt grabbed at the bridle to contain him. Still free and still on his hind legs, Twice a Prince stood in retaliation, throwing vicious hooves at the man. It looked as if the two were trading punches as the man swiped at the bridle trying to take hold in between the colt's jabs. Twice a Prince also banged about his adjacent competitors with wildly flailing hooves. He clanged Navajo's stall to his left, then Our Native's on his right. As he became more belligerent, the fit-pitching colt entangled himself in Our Native's saddle.

Don Brumfield, who witnessed the attack on his mount, Our Native, later described it: "First, Twice a Prince got his feet in Navajo's stall, then in my stall. He kicked my horse once, and his hoof made a mark on my saddle."

As Twice a Prince concentrated his battery to the man on his right, a second assistant starter was able to grab the reins to the colt's left. Twice a Prince froze, finally accepting a truce. Brumfield and Weston Soirez on Navajo were forced to dismount. To untangle the unruly Twice a Prince, handlers opened the gate in

front of Our Native and took him from his stall. He was brought to the rear of the starting gate and reloaded.

“He was bad all right,” starter Jim Thomson later said about Twice a Prince. “He gave us enough trouble for all of the rest put together.”

Assistant starters walked Twice a Prince in a circle in an attempt to calm him down. Santiago climbed back aboard and the two re-entered the gate. The delay cost nearly five full minutes. Jockey Ron Turcotte, who had the number ten post-position, watched while waiting on the track. He had wisely led Secretariat from the gate during the scuffle, away from the assistant starter who had attempted to take the bridle and lead him in.

“We weren’t in the gate yet,” Turcotte said afterward, “so the delay didn’t hurt us. But it sure didn’t help the horses who had to stand in there all that time.”

It didn’t help Sham, who was left alone in his stall with no assistant starter.

“When I went into the gate,” Sham’s jockey, Laffit Pincay, said after the race, “I asked the man to help keep Sham’s head straight. But for some reason nobody showed up. He was alone in the gate. When we broke, he went sharply to the outside and hit the door-bars hard.”

As the starting gate doors burst open, Sham banged his head on a support strut, cutting deep gashes along his jaw line and loosening two teeth. It was like taking a shot from Muhammad Ali wearing brass knuckles. The blow knocked Sham off balance. He stumbled, brushing the gate, then collided with the rushing Navajo. Somewhere along the way, Sham suffered a cut to his left front leg.

The brave bay continued. Sham had no time to coddle his wounds. The battered colt dashed the entire length of the stretch to avoid being boxed in by the mass of charging horseflesh swarming the clubhouse turn.

All the cheers, applause, and uproar from along the rails up to the highest luxury box walled the course in from both sides. Thousands crammed in place, shoulder to shoulder, with barely enough room to shift their weight. Waving programs and flashing cameras added to the mass enthusiasm, all of it spent as the horses had only begun their route. For their second pass around, in the final stretch, the intensity would multiply with the shouts of agony for the losers and elation for the winner, of which there could be only one. Beyond and above it all, a glimpse of the twin spires peeked from the rooftop, two accent marks over what was to come. But the jockeys out on the track had no time to admire the view.

As practically every horseman in Louisville had called, the speedy Shecky Greene took the early lead and set the pace. Jockey Larry Adams steered the leader all the way from his number eleven post-position to the rail. To get there, he had cut off ten thundering competitors, quality horses who had run big races, like Forego, a giant at 17 hands who had finished second in the Florida Derby; Royal and Regal, winner of the Florida Derby and the Bahamas Stakes; Our Native, winner of the Flamingo Stakes and second in the Blue Grass Stakes; Navajo, second in the Louisiana Derby; Warbucks, third in both the Arkansas Derby and Blue Grass Stakes and one of the favorites in the traditional Derby Eve preliminary betting; Angle Light, winner of

the Wood Memorial; and Restless Jet, winner of the Everglades Stakes, second in the Stepping Stone Purse, and third in the Florida Derby.

From further out at post-position thirteen, Gold Bag followed a similar route to fall in behind the leader. Royal and Regal took third alongside Gold Bag, with Angle Light fourth. Sham ran fifth. Secretariat ran last in the field, all of twelve horses in front of him, causing no lack of concern for his trainer, Lucien Laurin, who watched nervously from his box near the finish line. Earlier in the season Laurin had seen his horse take on Sham with spectacularly disappointing results. Sham had beaten Secretariat soundly by four lengths. As the entire Kentucky Derby field ran ahead of his horse, Laurin exclaimed, "God Almighty, don't tell me it's gonna be another one of them!"

Laffit Pincay's strategy was to stick close to the pace-setter. Sham concurred, passing rivals with no urging from Pincay. He took Angle Light first, while heading to the turn. By the quarter-mile mark, Sham moved over Royal and Regal and ran within a head of Gold Bag. Gold Bag chased three lengths behind the leader. Shecky Greene, a sprinter, would be dangerous if allowed to build too great a lead.

Shecky Greene carried the lead to the backstretch, while Sham edged past Gold Bag by a length. Now, only one horse ran before Sham, and the leader's stamina was spreading thin.

"The only way Shecky can win at the Derby distance," *Sports Illustrated's* Whitney Tower had sarcastically predicted, "is to open up 10 lengths and hope that the opposition runs through or over the stable gap on the backstretch." His words, to some

degree, were proving true, and other horses in the field had something to say about it.

Running sixth near the half-mile pole roughly 15 feet out, Forego veered from another horse and slammed the rail halfway through the turn. “You should have seen the whitewash dust fly when he hit,” jockey Pete Anderson commented later. “I hit the fence so hard when he changed leads, I don’t know how I stayed on him,” he said. “I don’t know how we both didn’t wind up in the infield.” Forego recovered to continue, sporting a white strip of paint along his side as a mark of the altercation.

Pincay wanted to sit in the second position a little while longer to save as much horse as he could for the final stretch. His plans changed when Shecky Greene veered out sharply, perhaps startled by the shadows cast upon the rail. He nearly bumped Sham. To avoid the danger of a collision, or possibly having to yank the reins to check Sham’s speed, Pincay set Sham after the leader rounding the far turn.

Working from the outside, Sham nudged ahead of Shecky Greene. Entering the final stretch, Sham ran in the clear and in front. But Pincay still kept Sham under a hold to prevent him from moving too fast too soon. The long Churchill Downs stretch stared them both in the face.

Royal and Regal battled for the third position, and jockey Walter Blum had not yet asked his horse for a closing move. About a month earlier in the Florida Derby, Blum had gotten Royal and Regal in the clear at the top of the stretch without yet asking him to run. Royal and Regal had come through for him then. Blum couldn’t help but think he was setting up the Kentucky Derby

for a replay. While he entertained the idea of charging strongly to the wire for victory, the hope was dashed when a muscular red colt in a white and blue hood of checker-board design blew past him—Secretariat. Royal and Regal could only watch.

“Secretariat came by us and took a little bit of heart out of him, *and* me,” Blum recalled later. “I thought I had a good chance. Thought I had a chance until this chestnut freak came on the outside of all of us.” As Sham and Shecky Greene battled on the front lines for position, Secretariat had assaulted the flank, gradually building momentum. “I felt this big whoosh of air go by and that was all there was to it,” Blum remarked.

Aboard Shecky Greene, Larry Adams saw Secretariat gaining on the outside. “I glanced back and saw him coming and thought, if I get in his way, I’ll get killed!” Adams said after the race.

Sham refused to give up anything. Pincay put him along the rail to save ground. Ron Turcotte took Secretariat to the outside, then swatted him with the whip. Pincay didn’t need the whip to keep Sham to task, not yet. Sham knew what to do.

To complement Secretariat’s stride with his momentum, Turcotte forced his body forward, driving his weight and strength as the colt thrust forward, then pulling back to repeat the drive. Turcotte stood only 5 feet 1 inch but possessed a muscular frame he had built as a lumberjack cutting New Brunswick timber.

Trusting his colt’s courage, Pincay let Sham drift as close to the action as possible hoping to coax a greater reaction. When Sham saw Secretariat, he responded, running in a game effort.

In the upper stretch, Pincay cocked the whip to prepare for the final drive. Secretariat gained ground. The remaining field

faded from contention in the dust behind the furious pace. It was now a two-horse race.

Secretariat drew eye-to-eye with Sham. Pincay's and Turcotte's silks bellowed with the rush of air, Pincay's green with gold diamond hoop, Turcotte's blue and white blocks. Sham and Secretariat seemed stuck side by side, neither one able to put away the other.

Writhing for position, spectators in the grandstands stood on seats and benches for a better look. Beneath the low grandstand ceiling, onlookers braced themselves from a fall by pressing a hand above and shifting their feet below. From the infield, they crammed together in various styles of dress and undress. Unless they had stationed themselves in prime real estate for viewing along the fence or had climbed atop a step or stand of some creation, they unlikely saw anything in the way of a horse. Even those along the fence saw little more than the area of track directly in front of them. But they knew when the charging Sham and Secretariat approached. The crowd's roar followed them around the final turn to the top of the stretch. Collective voices of the record-breaking crowd built like a tidal wave, cresting and curling as if to crash over the horses to sweep them down the final furlong. Sham and Secretariat continued neck-and-neck through the flood of cheers.

Sham's dark, black legs traded even strides with the one red and three white of Secretariat. Pincay and Turcotte worked the whip, Pincay delivering quick lashes with his left hand. Tearing down the final stretch, swallowing his own blood, Sham fought the gutsiest battle of his life.