



WHEN THE SIDESHOW TRUMPS THE HEADLINER, THE SPORT OF HORSE RACING LOSES OUT

I watched Golf Channel's *Feherty* the other day when the host, David Feherty, was interviewing the CEO of the PGA

Tour, Tim Finchem. I found one segment of the show particularly interesting.

Finchem told a story about 2003's Colonial tournament, an all-male event, which accepted the entry of golf legend Annika Sorenstam. Sorenstam, a conqueror of women's golf, was taking on the men on their turf; the first time in modern history to ever occur. This of course created a big buzz, but Finchem and others were not prepared for just how big it was. He noted it was the first time the PGA Tour website servers ever went down due to massive web traffic. It seemed that everyone--men, women, casual sports fans and the hardcore golf fans--wanted to see how she was doing. They followed her round like it was the last round of Jack Nicklaus's 1986 Masters.

This golf event did what big events in any sport should do: Drive many demographics, new users and old, to watch the sport itself. You hope it encourages more people to watch other tournaments on TV, visit one live, or take up the game of golf. Not many would argue that Ms. Sorenstam's effort was not only wonderful for women's golf, but golf as a sport. This is vitally important for a niche sport, or at least one not named football or baseball.

Three weeks ago at the Kentucky Derby, I glanced at the pre-game show for the first time in many years. There was very little talk about the Derby itself, but there was a whole lot of chatter about seemingly everything else; red carpets, fashion, movie stars. This sometimes does not sit well with traditional racing fans, but when the ratings themselves came out, the show delivered. The Derby telecast was the highest rated in 23 years, and over 15 million watched.



Infield crowds and the Preakness contenders: never the twain shall meet? *Steve Sherack photo*

Two weeks later, as American Pharoah splashed towards a hopeful Triple Crown at the Preakness, a funny thing happened. When the overnight ratings came out, they were not very good at all. They were the second lowest since NBC began televising the event 15 years ago. How, logically, do near record numbers watch the Derby, see a favorite win, and then not tune in two weeks later? Where and how did the sport lose so many viewers (more than six million) in only a fortnight?

I think a strong case can be made that the Derby viewers were viewing an event first, and a race second. Those who were captured by the sport itself were happy to tune in two weeks later. Those who were mesmerized by the rich and famous and celebrities found something else to do.

I read with interest [Harper Hutchins's article in the TDN](#) not long after the Preakness. She had a mandate to report on what she saw with her (younger) demographic at the event itself. She wrote:

"Standing in and around the concert venue for the day I would have had no idea that there were races going on. The separation of the concert goers from the racing fans was evident and impossible to ignore. Walking from one side of the infield to the other was like walking through a music festival and somehow ending up at the Preakness."

If a tree falls at the finish line, would anyone in the infield hear it?

This is something that racing--struggling with attendance and relevance--has leaned on for some time. Food trucks, festivals, bands. For the Belmont this year, I have seen more ads for the Goo Goo Dolls than I have since Clinton's third year in office. It's a formula that racing has used to try and up attendance for events. But have the concerts, bands, food trucks, infield, hats and fashion trumped the event itself? How much good do they do long-term for horse racing?

It wasn't always like this.

In October of 1938, a horse embarked on a whistle-stop tour on his way from California to Pimlico, for a Nov. 1 match race against the mighty War Admiral. It was reported that over 40 million listened to the Seabiscuit--War Admiral race on the radio, and thousands made their way to Pimlico to see the race live. They were there for one thing and one thing only: To see a horse race. I realize it was a different time, but the race itself drove everything, not sideshows. And that event transcended the United States sports audience.

Seven decades later we saw a highly rated Breeders' Cup Classic. Zenyatta, the undefeated mare, fresh off an appearance in front of millions on CBS's 60 Minutes, was taking on the boys in her last start. Fans of the sport tuned in, paid a huge ticket price to watch live, or huddled around computer screens to see if the big mare could go out a winner. The stretch drive, the electricity, the crowd, the setting, everything was pure, unapologetic horse racing. It was magic.

Although those two races were 72 years apart, the sport, not sideshows, drove viewership or listenership. There were no bands, no food trucks, no bobblehead giveaways or urinal runs. There was just a good old-fashioned horse race.

I don't for a second blame Churchill Downs or Pimlico doing what they've done. Big-event days are important to their bottom lines, and in some cases they can make or break a meet. In addition, with horses retiring early, racing infrequently, or unable to meet (for goodness sakes, the sport could not even get Rachel and Zenyatta together, despite numerous opportunities), perhaps maybe that's the method of operation needed. However, to look at an attendance figure, or ratings number for a Derby, I have no idea what to feel. 15 million? 20 million? It just seems hollow, meaningless; a nothing for the sport.

Like Annika Sorenstam's visit to the Colonial in 2003, I believe horse racing has equally compelling stories and interesting races that can capture the hearts and minds of casual sports fans. I simply wonder, the way the sport is presented, if anyone will care. After all, it's tough to understand the meaning of a stretch drive--two horses digging deep for every inch in a display of equine sporting excellence--if the announcer's voice is being drowned out by a cover band.