

The Hidden Black History of Horse Racing



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Did you know that thirteen of the fifteen jockeys in the first Kentucky Derby were black men? Black horse jockeys were black America's first sports stars, winning fifteen of the first twenty-eight Kentucky Derby's. Black jockeys would dominate the sport for its first thirty years. The first Kentucky derby was ran in 1875 at Church Hill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky. Oliver Lewis a black jockey was the first winner of the Kentucky Derby, the three-year old thoroughbred horse he rode named Aristides recorded the fastest time ever for a horse that size. Blacks learned to master horses and horse racing through the time they spent caring for horses during slavery. Slave masters forced blacks to serve as the riders, groomers and trainers of their horses. Because of the amount of time blacks spent with the horses, black riders had a superior connection with the horses compared to the white riders and trainers. Black jockeys dominated horse racing in the South through the Emancipation period while white jockeys dominated horse racing in the North.

Ansel Williamson was a former slave and trainer who trained the horse Aristides who won the first Kentucky Derby. Williamson was able to defeat fellow black jockey Oliver Lewis in a later race; Lewis rode the horse named Chesapeake. Ed Brown was the black Jockey that won the 1877 Kentucky Derby riding the horse Baden-Baden, Brown would also go on to own his own stables for horse racing. Horse Jockey Isaac Murphy is considered the greatest jockey in American history and was one of the most popular sports figures of his time. He was the son of a former slave and would win one third of the races he entered. He was the first rider to win back to back Kentucky Derby's and the first rider to win three Kentucky Derby's total. His career was threatened when he was accused of drinking on the job, he was not found guilty and bounced back by winning the following Kentucky Derby. The horse Murphy rode was owned by a black man named Dudley Allen

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a former slave who is the only black man to own a winning Kentucky Derby horse. Black jockey Jimmy Winkfield won back to back Kentucky Derby's in 1902 becoming the second rider to do so. Winkfield was a very successful jockey in America and abroad, the Jim Crow era forced black jockeys from the race tracks so Winkfield raced in Russia, Poland and Germany ending his racing career with 2,600 wins.

The black presence at the Kentucky Derby came to an end because of systematic racism which was allowed at Church Hill Downs. The rise of unequal segregation and Jim Crow gave whites the gumption to literally force black jockeys off of the race track. In 1900, the white jockeys band together to sabotage black riders and keep them off of the tracks. White jockeys would often force black riders to have accidents by literally boxing them in and forcing them to crash into other horses or the rails. They would beat the black jockeys with their whips during the race causing them to fall off of their horses; black jockeys would become critically injured or even killed because of the actions of the white jockeys. The white race officials often turned a blind eye to the terrorism the white jockeys were inflicting upon the black jockeys. Willie Simms is the only black jockey to win the Triple Crown, but even he couldn't race because of the systematic racism. 1904 is said to be the year that black jockeys were unofficially banned from horse racing; information shows that the banning was significant because no black jockey participated in horse racing from 1921 until the year 2000. In the year 2000 jockey Marlon St. Julien was the first black to race in over seventy years and earned a seventh place finish.

Black Jockeys were forced to take their talents to Europe, some were able to find success others were not. Pike Barnes and Soup Perkins were black jockeys who would earn large amounts of money from winning races until they were kicked out of the sport they helped to popularize.

Perkins won the Kentucky Derby at the age of 15 but died at the age of 31 from drinking because he was locked out of horse racing. White riders demanded and received segregated races to further keep blacks out of the sport. Black jockeys faced severe hardships because they could not earn a living through racing, some committed suicide, some found other ways to make a living, while others died from the compounding effects of systematic racism. The story of black horse racing is another example of why black Americans have to learn to protect what we build as long as we exist within the grasp of white supremacy. To all of the black horse jockeys who paved the way for the Kentucky Derby and horse racing to thrive, we proudly stand on your shoulders.

J.A. Ward

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