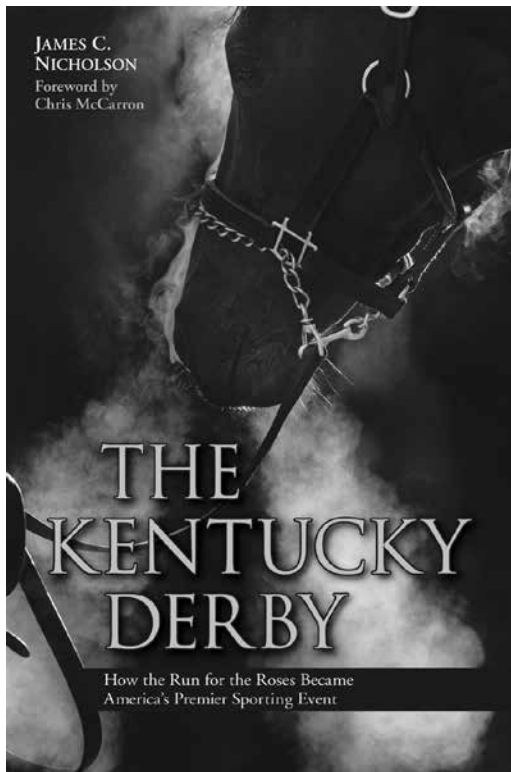


*The Kentucky Derby**How the Run for the Roses Became America's Premier Sporting Event*

James C. Nicholson

Writers—including historians—often draw inspiration from personal experience. Author James C. Nicholson grew up immersed in Bluegrass horse culture on a thoroughbred farm near Lexington owned by his grandfather, John A. Bell III. Just as his grandfather made his mark in the industry as a prominent owner and breeder, Nicholson has made a mark in the world of scholarship as chronicler and interpreter of thoroughbred history. Having earned a Ph.D. from the University of Kentucky in 2010, Nicholson has in short order produced two outstanding contributions to equine literature, the first derived from his dissertation on the Kentucky Derby. As the Ashland *Daily Independent*, published in the mountain region of eastern Kentucky half a state away from the horse country of the Bluegrass, recently observed, for Kentuckians the Derby “is as important as Christmas” (April 11, 2013). The paper exaggerated perhaps, but only a little. Kentucky seems to have its own “national” holiday, one for which a great many residents of the Commonwealth will take time to turn on the television or tune in the radio to partake of what the media promotes as “the most exciting two minutes in sports.” Yet the Derby is also a national holiday in a very real sense, as millions across America also pause to share in the experience. So argues Nicholson in his examination of the Derby. This annual horse race has become not just a national, but an international event in terms of recognition and appeal, and represents an enduring slice of American popular culture. Nicholson’s work is distinguished by a careful analysis of the social and cultural factors responsible for the event’s rise to prominence in the world of sports.

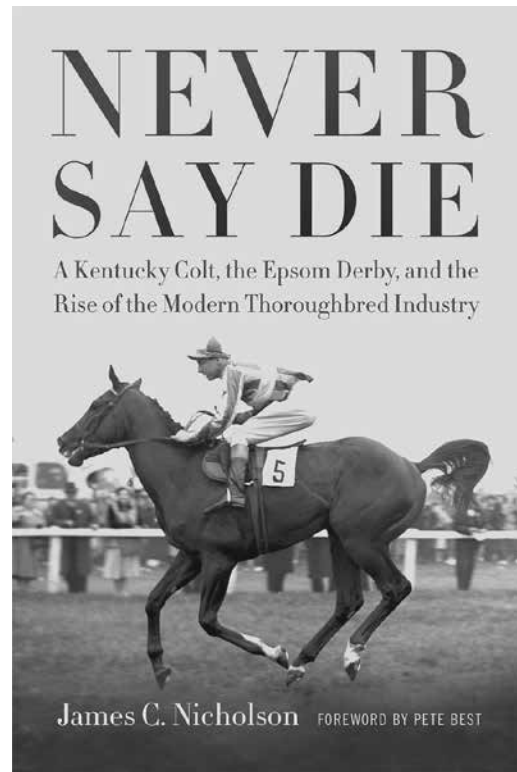
Colonel Meriwether Lewis Clark, grandchild of the famous transcontinental explorer, created Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Derby. On a trip abroad, Clark attended Epsom Downs and the English Derby, and was so impressed by the spectacle that upon his return to the United States in 1875, he established Churchill Downs and its own signature event, the Kentucky Derby. Another colonel, Matt Winn (the title in both cases was honorary rather than indicative of military rank), guided Churchill Downs to national prominence during the first half of the twentieth century. The iconic role of the “Kentucky colonel” embodied by these men represented one aspect of a Derby promotion strategy that involved the deliberate cultivation of the more appealing stereotypes associated with the “Old South” before the Civil War. Kentucky had never been part of the “Old South,” and in fact supplied more volunteers to the Union cause, but after the war white Kentuckians began to identify themselves with the Confederacy and the South. A widespread misperception that slavery in Kentucky had existed in a milder, more benevolent form enhanced associations with idyllic plantation life. Derby visitors who sipped mint juleps and sang the Derby anthem, “My Old Kentucky Home,” could indulge in nostalgia for the “good old days” of a place and time that never really existed. By associating these sanitized images with the semi-mythical legends of Daniel Boone and Kentucky’s pioneer heritage, the allure of the Bluegrass, and the mountaineer culture as romantically portrayed by writers such as John Fox, visitors from outside the state could come to the Derby and become Kentuckian—and



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“southern”—for a day in what Nicholson has termed a “quasi-theme park” atmosphere (67). Churchill Downs on Derby Day became a place attractive not only to the middle-class masses who crowded the infield but for society elites in the clubhouse.

The Derby began to attract national interest early in the twentieth century when, prior to the Depression, Kentucky was one of the few states in which thoroughbred racing still persisted, despite the efforts of moral reformers to eliminate gambling and other perceived vices through the nation. Beginning in 1925, radio broadcasts of the running of the Derby also featured coverage of the host state, increasing popularity of the sporting event and of Kentucky as a attractive destination. The Derby experience became increasingly commodified through



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commemorative glasses and other souvenirs, and tied to the marketing of Kentucky-made bourbon that used images of Kentucky colonels, “happy darkies,” and racing scenes. Allusions to racial and southern stereotypes disappeared with the onset of World War II in reaction to Nazi racism and in an effort to reduce sectionalism, only to reappear briefly at war’s end. With the debut of televised coverage in the 1950s, the effort to appeal to a national audience all but eliminated the focus on the Old South as promoters reshaped the Derby as an American event, the oldest continuously contested sporting event in the country.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the thoroughbred industry experienced rapid growth and became increasingly global, helping to promote greater national and

international prominence for Kentucky and the Derby. The weak dollar attracted more international buyers at Kentucky horse auctions and an increased foreign participation in the Derby as horse owners around the world began to acknowledge the significance of the event. Although the modern Derby still provides a nod to nostalgia, changing American values are reflected in press coverage that focuses on heroic horses, such as Secretariat, and stories of redemption, perseverance, and dreams come true. The Derby has achieved the status of a national institution capable of evolving to suit changing cultural needs and tastes. As a result, it has continued to hold a significant place in the American popular consciousness regardless of era, an evolutionary process likely to continue into the future. Nicholson's examination of the Derby emphasizes context and as such offers a valuable contribution both to the equine literature and the historiography of Kentucky.

In his second work, Nicholson naturally focuses on the celebrity horse *Never Say Die*, who drew its first breath in 1951 in the foaling barn of his grandfather's farm. *Never Say Die*, in Nicholson's opinion, was an outstanding running horse, but fell short of becoming one of the great thoroughbred heroes of modern times. Nevertheless, the Kentucky-bred and American-owned chestnut colt did some great things, all the more remarkable following a difficult birth during which he nearly slipped away, revived only by a judicious slug of bourbon whiskey. After completing basic training in Kentucky, *Never Say Die*'s owners sent him to England where, as a three year-old in June 1954, they entered him as a long shot in the Epsom Derby, long considered the most prestigious horse race in the world. To the astonishment of English observers and to the joy of American horsemen, *Never Say Die* bested the field of twenty-one rivals to win

easily by two lengths. To say that the American victory surprised the English is an understatement; shocked better describes their reaction. The English developed the thoroughbred horse during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries by breeding British mares to stallions imported from the Middle East, and their belief in the superiority of English bloodlines was deeply ingrained. They considered American horses vastly inferior, even "half-breeds." The 1913 Jersey Act passed by the English Jockey Club refused for a time to recognize the pedigrees of American thoroughbreds and effectively discouraged Americans from importing or racing their horses in England. The decimation of European bloodstock by World War II pushed the Jockey Club to amend the act to allow recognition of American pedigrees, but even so the English presumed their horses' bloodline supremacy and dominance of the racing world a virtual "divine right."

*Never Say Die*'s victory at Epsom proved no fluke. At St. Leger's in September of the same year the upstart American challenger galloped to the finish line a full twelve lengths ahead of his nearest competitor, claiming victory in the final leg of the English Triple Crown. With two commanding wins of classic English races by an American horse, even the most diehard English observer found it difficult to assert the unquestioned superiority of English stock, especially when American horses again won the Epsom Derby on four out of five occasions between 1968 and 1972. These victories signaled a great transformation taking place in the world of thoroughbred breeding and racing, one that ultimately shifted the balance of power from England to the United States. The American upsets at Epsom and St. Leger's served as heralds of this impending evolution, while their success hastened unfolding developments. American bloodstock,

long considered inferior by Europeans, became the most sought after and valuable horses in the world. Nicholson traces the roots of this shift in power to the misfortunes of two world wars, which not only decimated European bloodstock but the wealth of the owners and breeders who had built the thoroughbred industry in the Old World. In the twentieth century United States, in contrast, banking and manufacturing fortunes little affected by the wars produced a class of men able to invest heavily in acquiring the best thoroughbred stock from Europe and developing lavish breeding operations, many located in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky. Their efforts produced outstanding bloodstock lines, capable of competing abroad, in America.

Nicholson tells the story of this transformation through an unlikely assemblage of characters, including the heir to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune, the author's own maternal grandfather, the spiritual leader of a major Islamic sect, and the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed rock band of all time. Robert S. Clark, the Singer heir, sent his American mare, Singing Grass, to Ireland to be bred to the top stallion Nasrullah. Later sent back to the United States to Jonabell Farm near Lexington, Singing Grass gave birth to a foal, Never Say Die, whose maternal bloodlines included three winners of the American Triple Crown. Nicholson's grandfather, John A. Bell III, into whose care the mare was entrusted, helped deliver Never Say Die and gave him the resuscitating shot of bourbon, the name that commemorated the event, and the colt's first few weeks of training. The stallion Nasrullah proved the culmination of years of effort and some astute breeding

choices made by the Sultan Mohammed Shah, the third Aga Khan and leader of the Nizari Ismaili Muslims, the second largest branch of Shia Islam. In the years prior to World War II, the Aga Khan became fascinated by British culture and with the sport of thoroughbred racing, and developed one of the most successful thoroughbred operations in the world. Nicholson tells these stories adeptly, and introduces readers to other major players along the way to his conclusion that the world of thoroughbred racing has more recently undergone a shift away from the nouveau American dominance to become an international industry. The progression of owners, equine pedigrees, and races run, although necessary to tell the story, can fatigue the reader at times. Still, Nicholson once again delivers a solid work that, like *The Kentucky Derby*, is both entertaining and a significant contribution to the equine literature.

Oh, and the rock band? In 1954, a middle-class Liverpool housewife named Mona Best pawned her jewelry and placed a substantial bet on the longshot, Never Say Die, because she liked his name. With the proceeds of her thirty-three to one payoff, she purchased a large Victorian mansion and opened a coffeehouse in the basement that became known as the Casbah Coffee Club. An obscure group of teenagers who called themselves the Quarrymen played on opening night, and found a steady gig at the club for nearly two months. Led by John Lennon, the group soon became an international sensation, and Mona's son, Pete Best, became their first regular drummer: the Beatles, of course.

Gary A. O'Dell  
Morehead State University