



op/ed

by John P. Sparkman

Welcome to the Revolution

When the Breeders' Cup debuted in 1984 it was a revolutionary concept. The fertile mind of the late John R. Gaines combined the idea of extraordinary purses of \$1-million or more with the idea of running seven championship events on the same day, funded by a variation on the funding mechanism of Futurity races that depended on breeders' contributions to build the huge purses.

With all revolutions though, time corrupts the purity of the original concept and what was once revolutionary becomes conventional as others co-opt the innovations and make them their own. While the Breeders' Cup has expanded from seven races on one day for total purses of \$10-million to 15 races over two days for \$25.5-million in purses, other countries have devised their own days of championship racing.

As shown in the accompanying box, other major racing nations around the world have created racing festivals of their own that at least attempt to emulate the Breeders' Cup concept of clustering championship races all on one day. Although only G1 Dubai World Cup (G1) day truly rivals the Breeders' Cup meeting in prize money, the imitative meetings in England and France, usually held about two weeks and a month, respectively, before the Breeders' Cup have had a deleterious effect on European entries in the American equivalent.

While imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, flattery is seldom good for your health. It has not been good for international competition at the Breeders' Cup.

No winner of the G1 Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe (G1) has run at the same year's Breeders' Cup meeting since Sakhee (GB) just failed to hold off a resurgent Tiznow in the 2001 Breeders' Cup Classic(G1). (2004 Arc winner Bago (Fr) ran fourth in the 2005 G1 John Deere Breeders' Cup Turf [G1]). In the last decade only one G1 Champion S. winner, the remarkably tough Twice Over (GB), has run at the Breeders' Cup meeting. The other international festivals exert a less potent effect on the Breeders' Cup, although European trainers will often choose the Hong Kong races as easier targets than the Breeders' Cup.

From a historical perspective, the inauguration of the Breeders' Cup in 1984 anticipated a transformative trend in the wider sporting world. Gaines and his cohorts were consciously emulating the National Football League's Super Bowl in attempting to create a championship, season-ending event. Since then, partly fueled by the contemporaneous rise of ESPN, other sports have markedly increased their emphasis on the spectacular big event, and the sporting public has responded to the hype. People who otherwise pay little or no attention to the quotidian events in any sport pay big money to attend Major League Baseball's World Series, the NCAA Final Four, or the NBA Finals.

In Thoroughbred racing, that trend has made the GI Kentucky Derby a huge event, the GI Preakness S. and GI Belmont S. important only if the Derby winner is going for the Triple Crown, and the Breeders' Cup a viable (so far) event on television and an overall money maker for the sport.

The question now, though, is how do we not just hang on to but grow that audience. The Breeders' Cup has, more or less successfully, doubled the number of races and race days, but what else can they do to make their event more significant? What would make the Breeders' Cup—and horse racing in general—more appealing to the average American?

How about making stars out of someone besides the horses who, by necessity, are generally only around for two or three years at most? The surprise retirement of Chantal Sutherland should have pointed out to the powers that be in Thoroughbred racing that her career was a huge missed opportunity for the sport. Sutherland is a personable, intelligent young woman, also attractive enough to work as a model, but what did we do to use her talents to attract other young women who might have identified with a woman athlete competing on equal terms with male athletes? What have we done to make great jockeys, arguably the most courageous athletes in the world, into public figures?

Thoroughbred racing has always been and will always be about the horses, but it is also about the jockeys, trainers, exercise riders, grooms, and yes the owners and breeders as well. Other sports tell those stories and create stars.

Why can't we?

Global Championship Days

Country	Festival	No. races	Total purses (in millions)
USA	Breeders' Cup	15	\$25.5
England	Champions Day	5	\$4.72
France	Arc Day	7	\$7.8
Dubai	World Cup Day	8	\$27
China	Hong Kong Intl	4	\$9.2
Argentina	Estrellas	7	\$0.75