

THE AMERICAN TURF

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649181896

The American turf by John H. Davis

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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HISTORY OF THE THOROUGHBRED, TOGETHER WITH
PERSONAL REMINISCENCES BY THE AUTHOR,
WHO, IN TURN, HAS BEEN JOCKEY,
TRAINER AND OWNER



PRINTED BY THE
JOHN POLHEMUS PRINTING COMPANY
NEW YORK

1927

1926

1926

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BY

JOHN B. DAVIS.

PREFACE

For a decade more than the three score years and ten allotted by a gracious Providence to man I have been awaiting the solemn call which comes to all human kind to weigh in, and then to the great Steward make account of the use to which I put the opportunities that came to me.

In the active competition of life, when rivalries were keen, when ambitions created new fields and contests kept alert both mind and body, there was little time, indeed, to do more than merely store away in unclassified groups in memory events and incidents each one deserving of a separate chapter. To write a history of the American turf had long been a cherished project, but each day of a life of practically unremitting and exacting labor interfered until the westering sun of my eightieth year warns me that I must be up and doing if I would achieve my cherished ambition and leave behind me something which I trust will be worthy tribute to the best and the noblest sport that it is given to man to enjoy.

If in the chapters which are to come there should be noted a tone of enthusiastic optimism, let the reader realize that sixty-five years of my life were spent in the activities of the turf as a jockey, a trainer and an owner; that I have seen, and in many of them personally participated, practically all of the great contests which gave fame to our thoroughbreds; that I have traveled on foot through valleys and over mountains, when but rough paths pointed the way between places now drawn close together by the bands of great trunk line railroads, leading the horse that was on conquest bent; that I spent weary weeks on journeys that now would be but the occupation of one brief day of luxurious travel; that I have seen the upward and the onward progress which has marked the rise of the thoroughbred in America from a little meet in some isolated though sport-loving place to the magnificent seasons of Belmont Park.

No optimism of my earliest and most enthusiastic days could have possibly created for me a grander vista than that

which in reality has come. No dream that I might have had more than a half century ago could have conjured up the multitude that on last Decoration Day I saw pass through the gates of the vastest and the best appointed race course in the world. No fancy of the years gone by could have pictured the popularity of the sport which has so entwined itself about the American thoroughbred. A long cry truly from famed old Governor Gary's Lane, where our own Washington of ever blessed memory presided and where he raced his own horse Magnolia, to the great courses which now cater to the scores of thousands who pay their devoirs to our noble horse.

Nor do I believe that we yet have reached our highest in the sport. It is better conserved to-day, it has a more popular patronage, it is better regulated than ever before. It is difficult to maintain one's poise and listen to the croakings of those who allege they fear disaster and already can discern ruin. Racing has had its dark days, as what sport or what man or what nation has not, and it may continue so to have at uncertain periods. But I have been in it a lifetime longer than it has been the good fortune of many to enjoy, and I have seen its good name assailed, and its patrons criticised, and attempts made to thwart its progress; but ever and always it has come out of its difficulties better and stronger than it was.

And it did so because of the love of contest which is characteristic of the American people. The American citizen is essentially a man who glories in struggles for supremacy; whether it be man or horse that battles, his sympathies are at once enlisted and aroused. The red blood that courses in his veins—the blood that has built nations and that has made of empires republics—the blood that to-day dominates the world—is quickened by the sight of contest. It glories in the battles of the thoroughbred, whose blood is uncontaminated and whose life is conquest. Tell me not that the day will ever come when the American citizen will look with either disfavor or indifference on a field of thoroughbreds. Tell me not that there is anywhere a scene so inspiring as two horses locked in struggle, neither flinching and neither yielding, their veins in tension standing out like whipcords on their silken sides, their eyes aflame with interest, their nostrils

distended with excitement, giving up their best effort out of exclusively a natural desire to conquer. No prizes for them if they win; no fortunes go with the victory; winner or loser they go back to the stalls, conqueror and vanquished treated alike—the only sport in the world where two combatants struggle with all their might without individual glory save the appreciation in which the public holds them.

But I am digressing and discussing an impossible condition instead of confining myself to a word as to the progress of the sport—a sport which is at once a great and an important industry and a most popular recreation. In our early days it was but natural that it should hold a minor place, for the molding of a nation was work that compelled man's best effort and man's whole time. But no sooner had the country put on its swaddling clothes than the thoroughbred was imported, and every year since then it has grown and has gathered popularity until it stands at the very top of all our recreations.

Later in this book it will be my privilege to discuss this growth and the reasons therefor and also to point out the great practical value of the thoroughbred blood in improving the breed of horses. The Jockey Club—the governing body of the turf in the East—has inaugurated a Bureau of Breeding, which will do much to illustrate this to the public of the Empire State, and I have reason to believe that our National Government, through the Department of Agriculture, may move along a similar line.

Before concluding this introduction I desire to say that for the inspiration for this book I am indebted to that princely sportsman, the late Leonard W. Jerome. Sitting on the veranda of the old club house at Jerome Park one autumn evening after the races, Mr. Jerome and his friend, the elder August Belmont, than whom no better friend the turf ever had, were speaking of the deplorable fact that the only records of the turf up to that time were in the fugitive form of newspaper articles. I chanced along and Mr. Jerome urged that I take up the work. To him, therefore, I am indebted for the inspiration of this book, and to him and to my best and truest friend, George C. Bennett, of Memphis, this work is dedicated by

THE AUTHOR.

