

The Third Sunday in June

On the 150th anniversary of its first running, the Queen's Plate remains the oldest horse race in the country. And yet few in the standardbred industry, I expect, will have it marked on their calendar. But why? Horses are horses -- aren't they? **By Kim Fisher**

As a journalist by trade and an avid reader at heart, I feel no shame in breathing in the scent of a freshly printed page. The best part of starting a new book or flipping through a new magazine, to me, is the initial opening --- the slight cracking of the cover, the first exposure of pages to light...

Maybe I'm nuts -- but I can tell when a book has been opened, even if it's not been read; I hunt untouched books in Chapters like a little kid digs through his Halloween pillow-case for the best candy.

I had a suspicion the moment I pulled Standardbred Canada's copy of *The Plate: A Royal Tradition* off the shelf in our library that it was one of these books.

At home in my living room, I shimmied the oversize hardcover from its embossed casing, and nudging my cat aside, placed it in my lap. An entire book devoted to the history of our country's oldest horse race, I thought. This should be a fantastic read. After all, I love horses, I love racing, I love reading and I'm Canadian. What isn't there to like about the story of the Queen's Plate? Especially now, in the year of its 150th running.

I opened the cover with great anticipation.

Creeeeeecaaaaaaak. My cat, already asleep next to me, opened one eye disapprovingly.

Brand new. No question. If I had doubts my cat just verified them.

The print date? 1984.

My birthday? 1985.

For my entire life (plus one year) this book has survived intact. Untouched. Brand new.

Doesn't it seem ironic that in a library devoted to horse racing, no one has bothered to flip through the story of the country's oldest horse race? It's a standardbred library, of course. But it's all still horse racing, isn't it? And come on! There are cool photos, at least.



This, to me, is indicative of a larger problem.

Tucked away in the basement of Woodbine Racetrack, a small office is crowded with paraphernalia. Paper, pho-

tos and posters burst from every corner -- infringing on space that could be used for people, but real people, in general, are harder to deal with than historical ones.

Wedged between a wide wooden desk and this collection of stuff, I'm face to face with Lou Cauz. That's not a surprise, of course. He appeared in the upstairs lobby and led me through a maze of underground hallways to get here. In fact, I even called him to set up the meeting. No, the surprise is not that I find myself here. It's that I'm feeling a bit tongue-tied. For once in my life, I'm hesitant to speak. If I speak, I have to tell Lou why I'm here, and I'm almost embarrassed to admit it.

He thinks he knows -- I hinted over the phone yesterday afternoon what I might be looking for, and from his stacks of paper he's pulled some material for me to see. There are pedigrees and photos, stories and pages from his life's work; there are ad clippings and Armbr sales pages and even a copy of a book that documents Woodbine's history.

There are two instances, he tells me, where the Queen's Plate was won by horses with trotting sires -- 1861 and 1862. "In the first years of The Plate," Lou grins, "the breeding was a bit suspect."

Who knew? Trotters beating flat horses at their own game? Impressive.

I slide my tape recorder across the table towards him, gearing myself up for the big question. I can see his eagerness -- Lou is ready to offer whatever information I need. So I go for it.

"The real reason I wanted to come here and talk to you..." I begin awkwardly. Clearing my throat, I try again. "What I really want to ask you is... I mean, what I really want to know is why we should care. Why should standardbred people care about the Queen's Plate?"

To me, the answer is obvious. But I'm hoping he can do that great thing that interview subjects do and package it into a nice soundbite. Once he gets over being stunned, that is.

"Well you know Kim," he shrugs, finally, leaning back into his chair, "to me, horses were always four legs, a tail,

and a mane, whether they went on the trot or whether they ran on the flat. Horses are horses -- I've always tried to acknowledge each one just as much at the other."

Silence.

"But anyway..." he returns hastily to the piles of paper between us, pushing a Palermo pedigree chart my way. "Back to what we were talking about before..."

It seems that moment is all I'll get. And while I agree, I didn't find the neatly packaged answer I was hoping for -- no Obama-esque statement I can offer you to get at the crux of this problem.

Turning my attention back to the paperwork, I can't help but think that if Hall of Famer and historian Lou Cauz can't wrap his head around the standardbred industry's general disinterest in our thoroughbred counterparts, what chance do I have?



Back in my living room, the book is hidden under my cat, who's putting it to better use (as a bed) than it's seen in two decades. I'm on the floor again and Lou's papers are spread all around me in an enormous white fan. Another cat is causing some disturbances with those papers but is at least distracting me from my writer's block.

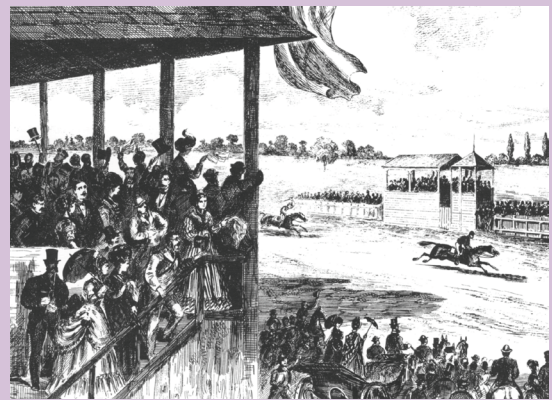
Tapping my pencil on the old hardwood, I keep turning it over and over in my head. My conversation with Lou -- the way he jumped so quickly back to the facts -- and similar conversations I've had with others about these things. Why is it such an uncomfortable question?

Do we care enough about a historic event that is so deeply rooted in the Canadian horse industry? The Canadian gaming and sporting industry? Canadian politics? If we don't, should we? And why?

There is plenty of dissent in harness circles -- talk of the perceived elitism, media attention and glory flaunted by thoroughbred racing. So if the sport of kings seems to reign supreme, is harness racing a little raw about it?

But the truth of the matter is that we're all the same, really. In the important ways, anyway. We're horse lovers, thrill-seekers, and hard-working people who enjoy the game and will fight for our right to make a buck doing it. There are even some people who have their hands in both breeds. And in essence, we're not as different as we think. All standardbreds trace their ancestry through direct male line to the imported stallion Messenger -- an English thoroughbred who was brought to America in 1788. The modern standardbred, like it or not, owes its existence to a rather homely grandson of Messenger named Hambletonian. And yet still, we harbour this resentment. Still, we focus so narrowly on our small picture that we risk missing out on the great moments of horse racing writ large.

Do we care about the Queen's Plate?



Top: Crowds packed Carleton Race Course in the Toronto Junction to witness the victory of Wild Irishman -- a colt with trotting bloodlines -- for Port Hope's George Hendersen in 1961. **Bottom:** Businessman Col. R.S. (Sam) McLaughlin and jockey Frank Mann with a victorious Horometer in 1934. Sam was later chastised by the Queen's accountants for hanging his winning cheque on the wall rather than cashing it.

Not enough. Why should we?

Because we're all in this together -- for better or worse -- and we'd better learn to get along, pool our resources, even, and ensure the viability of horse racing for future generations.

It's an uncomfortable question because we know better. We know we should care and yet we don't. We're embarrassed of our bias... simple as that. Personally, I'm embarrassed that this copy of this book, the story of one of our country's greatest races, can count my cats and I as the only living beings in 25 years to honestly appreciate what it has to offer.

Are you a standardbred person? A thoroughbred person? A horse person?

Is there really a difference?


Kim Fisher
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