

Bill Rea ? My first mint julep

?I loved covering the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness. These are great events and thoroughbred racing people are great people.? Howard Cosell

Most of us have things we plan to do, but alas never get around to them.

One of the items on my to-do list was watching the Kentucky Derby while working on a mint julep. I did it Saturday. Granted, I didn't see the race live. My wife and I had to attend a family birthday party (our nephew Jacob is now officially a teenager, and I'm officially feeling old as a result). But Beth recorded the whole thing, including the all-important pre-race show, and we watched the spectacle late at night, while sipping my first attempts at a mint julep.

It is a fact, confirmed by the TV coverage I eventually was able to watch, that mint juleps are as much a part of The Run for the Roses as the hats the ladies wear and the horses that compete. Every year, we watch ladies wearing hats I can't begin picturing Beth wearing sipping on their glasses filled with tradition. According to the TV coverage, some 120,000 of these drinks are sold at the track over the weekend. Makes sense, since they said more than 170,000 were on hand to take it all in.

I resolved this year to try my skill with making them. It wasn't easy, as some simple googling provided me with a myriad of different mint julep recipes. Indeed the early TV coverage, which I was able to watch about an hour of before I had to go to the birthday party, obligingly provided a classic recipe for the julep, priced at \$2,500. This one required three-quarters of an ounce of pecan syrup. I knew we didn't have any of that in the house, and Beth assured me we had no syrup of any kind.

Thus I googled until I found a recipe with ingredients that were available (I had already acquired the mint and bourbon, even finding a bottle of Kentucky bourbon at LCBO).

What it all proves, I think, is one need not travel to Kentucky to get into the spirit of the event. On the other hand, I think I might like to take in the Derby one of these years, simply for the experience and ambiance, from the fashions, to the drinks to the playing of that beautiful song My Old Kentucky Home.

I am no expert on what is sometimes known as The Sport of Kings. My exposure to horse racing has been limited. I have been to the track maybe five times in my life, and every time it was to harness racing. The last time was more than 30 years ago, when a group of us spent a Sunday afternoon at the track.

I put \$2 down on every race, meaning I had gone to the track fully prepared to lose \$18 (\$18 went a lot farther in those days). My winnings amounted to about \$10. Like a chicken, I picked what I thought was the most likely horse to win, and then bet it to show. I know I will never get rich on the ponies.

Actually, I had known that for many years. There were a couple of times when I was kid that my family spent the evening at the track. Dad would bankroll the betting, but as my brother Michael and I got older, he let us do the picking. If memory serves, he went along with our recommendations, but he insisted he bet the horse to place. My old man evidently had somewhat more guts than I. The debating sometimes got a bit heated. Michael tended to concentrate on the odds, while I focused more on the track records, and what success individual horses had had with others in the field. Mom tried, without much success, to hide the feeling of terror she felt as she reflected that the family finances would one day fall into the hands of these two characters (meaning Michael and I). Dad was uncharacteristically laid back. He got a good chuckle watching the scene. In strict economic terms, the entertainment he was receiving was probably worth the money coming from his pocket. While I don't think he was ever much of a follower of the ponies, he offered some of his paternal wisdom to his offspring. He admonished Michael about getting too enamoured of the favourite, pointing out we weren't taking in the upper echelons of the sport.

?At this level of racing, the favourite is liable to stop for a (call of nature) in the back stretch,? he remarked, much to my big brother's amusement.

The main point is I really know next to nothing when it comes to picking winners in a horse race. On the other hand, how many of you are much better?

So it all boiled down to who I would have bet on, had I been at Churchill Downs with money in my pocket (accepting the fact that the TV coverage also told me it would have cost \$120 to get Beth and I into the cheap seats).

Nyquist was the favourite, having never been defeated. The words ?too good to be true? filled my head. I remember Dad admonishing us to be careful when it came to betting on favourites, although it is a fact my old man made most of his money away from the track. His odds at the start were 2-1.

Mor Spirit was trained by Bob Baffert, who's known a lot of success. He trained American Pharoah, who won the Triple Crown last year. He couldn't be counted out. The odds were 12-1 at the start.

For reasons I can't explain, Suddenbreakingnews caught my attention. He went off at 24-1

Lani is a Japanese horse. My mind went back to the 1971 Derby, when Canonero II from Venezuela took the roses, then won the Preakness a couple of weeks later. We watched it at home.

?What a horse!? Michael said almost under his breath as the pony crossed the finish line.

Dad worked Saturdays in those days, and I remember my mother grabbing the phone to call him at his office to tell him the news.

Lani was also the only horse in the field who had raced the Derby distance. He went off at 29-1

I haven't addressed the jockeys yet.

I opened this column with a quote from the late Howard Cosell. Here's another one.

?I have long been on the record as feeling that jockeys are the best athletes, pound for pound, in the world. It takes uncommon strength to handle a 1,200-pound animal and it's extremely dangerous.?

When it came to the crunch, I picked Mor Spirit to win.

Now you know why I never expect to get rich on the ponies.

Oh yeah! About the mint julep! I was frankly a little disappointed at my effort, but I was also mindful that it was the first attempt of a confessed amateur. I had to give it a try, and I did.

Another good reason to fork up that \$120, so Beth and I can have mint juleps prepared for us by pros at Churchill Downs.

