

The Only Color they Cared About was the Color of the Winning Silk

From early colonial introduction of horse racing to the continent, and especially in the American south, care of the thoroughbreds were the responsibility of the horse owner's slaves. In the first Kentucky Derby of 1875, in post-emancipation America, 13 out of 15 jockeys were black, including the winning jockey, Kentuckian Oliver Lewis. Black jockeys went on to win 15 out of the first 28 Kentucky Derbies.



The horse industry continued to be ruled by African-Americans into the 20th century. While black jockeys often had celebrity status and healthy salaries as the first sports-stars in post-Civil War U.S., the entire field was also benefiting from generations of finely honed expertise. In 1891, former slave Allan Dudley was the first notable thoroughbred trainer, as well as the first African-American to own a Kentucky Derby winner.

This notoriety would be short lived with the federal support of racial segregation in 1896 with the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling along with unionization of white jockeys in order to push the dominating black jockeys out of the sport. The last black jockey to win the Kentucky Derby was Jimmy Winkfield in 1902. In 1921, Henry King was the last black jockey to ride in the Kentucky Derby until 79 years later when Marlon St. Julien took seventh place in 2000.

Even with the intentional shut-out of black jockeys during the turn of the century, the thoroughbred industry continued to benefit by African-American owners, trainers and grooms throughout the 20th century.

Oral histories with African-Americans in the thoroughbred industry can be found at <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.

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