COMMENTARY ON PAMELA COOPER’S, ROBIN BLEDSOE’S, AND STEVEN A. RIESS’S PAPERS FOR NASSH, SPRINGFIELD, MA

This morning we have heard three very different papers drawn together around the theme of racing. Two dealt with horse racing within the same time period but from separate perspectives and the third covered human road racing. Both Steven A. Riess and Robin Bledsoe explored the world of some of the workers involved in horse racing: jockeys and stable help. Dr. Riess examined professional jockeys as an occupation while Ms. Bledsoe focused on the experiences of one individual. All three papers deal with the community of racing.

Ms. Bledsoe should be commended for bringing to light Frederic Byron Littleton’s diaries. Primary resources from small-time owners, trainers, and stable workers rarely surface, if they existed at all. While we know the history of the great racing stables and wealthy owners such as Calumet and the Whitneys, well-known trainers like Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons and Woody Stephens, and famous jockeys of the caliber of Willie Shoemaker and Tod Sloan, the day-to-day life on the racetrack often goes undocumented.

From the descriptions of Littleton’s life included in this paper, I disagree that he could be considered a typical stable hand of the early 1900s. References to his mother’s wolfhound winning first prize at a dog show; Frederic renting a piano, attending hundreds of theatrical performances, enrolling in business college, and even keeping the diaries, all point to a young man not from a semi-literate, un- or under-educated working class background that typically populated the backside of the track but instead indicate he most likely hailed from a lower middle class family.
More research in the turf publications *Goodwin's Annual Official Turf Guide* or *Krik's Guide to the Turf* may confirm the Lamasney stable's whereabouts in 1904. Racing is a business and while it is tempting to think that a non-winning horse would be regarded as "the stable pet" and "babied along," in reality, unless its career wins and pedigree aimed it toward breeding, many spent racehorses wound up as dog food and glue. When Ms. Bledsoe states that the description of jockey Abel's performance in a race might imply race fixing, I question this leap of faith with scant information and lack of evidence. Also, using black-Irish tensions in fiction, while indicating authorial assumptions, cannot substitute for solid historical, documented fact.

I would encourage Ms. Bledsoe to continue her research into Littleton's life, explore the manuscript federal census records for 1900 and 1910 to glean a little more information about the family, and strive to more accurately place him in societal context with collateral diaries and letters.

In "Ten Kilometers on the Road: The Significance of the Sports Landscape" Pamela Cooper explores the *ensemble* culture created for short road races and the environment in which they are held. Over the years the focus moved from the professional athlete to the community of fun runners in which the race takes on a festival atmosphere. When coupled with a fund-raising cause, the cause often overshadows the competitive aspect of the race. As with the racetrack, except for betting, viewers and participants often attend for the spectacle, camaraderie, and people-watching more so than the sporting event itself. As an "event" a foot race held inside a stadium lacks the participatory nature of an outdoor contest. To the casual participant, an outdoor road race offers a more individualized approach in a less regimented format. The varied geography
breaks the monotony of an oval track akin to leaving the four-lane black-topped ribbon of interstate highway for meandering country roads through villages, farms, and forests. The presence of participatory spectators at water stations, groups of runners from one office, familial runners, and event T-shirts for entrants foster a sense of community.

One historical fact in this paper needs clarification: The Equal Rights Amendment was not passed by Congress in 1972. Rather, it was approved by the Senate in March 1972 but not ratified by state legislatures within the seven-year deadline and three-year extension. Ms. Cooper’s paper could be strengthened by narrowing her focus to women’s races. The unevenness of her treatment of individual races such as the long discourse on Bay-to-Breakers, several pages for the Mini-marathon, and one sentence on the New-York City Marathon are jarring. More interviews with participants talking about their experiences with ensemble would personalize the events. It would be interesting to hear from runners who have been involved in the races mentioned before and after the advent of ensemble. There is no transition from the Lehigh Valley Road-Runners race to Ms. Cooper’s conclusion. I suggest that she eliminate the Bay-to-Breakers section and—explore how “ensemble determines a large part of participant gratification in road racing events” with more participant interviews. We need to understand how and why ensemble developed, why it is popular, and its cultural significance to running and the physical health of the weekend athlete.

One group of athletes whom some of us are fortunate to see in person on our weekend days off or on ESPN’s Saturday coverage of racing across America are jockeys. Not since young Steve Cauthen exploded on the racing scene in the late 1970s has there been widespread media coverage of an individual jockey. The athleticism of these
men—and now women—has been undervalued among the general public. As Dr. Riess has pointed out, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries professional jockeys were the highest paid athletes in North America. His examination of their daily work, social class, and sportsmanship sheds much light on a profession often taken for granted or ignored.

The difficulty in researching and writing about jockeys is the almost total lack of primary manuscript sources. Jockeys busied themselves exercising horses in the morning and racing them in the afternoon. Their lives revolved around the tracks on the circuit on which they rode. Illiteracy at the turn of the century is also a factor. Unless a jockey such as Tod Sloan or jockey-turned-trainer Woody Stephens wrote a book, we have little first-hand documentation of their lives. So, we must rely on newspaper sportswriters to depict jockeys’ lives and discern the fact from the fiction.

Dr. Riess poignantly notes the turnover of the racial makeup of the predominantly African-American profession as white jockeys permanently supplanted black jockeys. To this day, African-Americans have not rebounded as jockeys but are consigned to menial labor on the shedrow. The profession has opened up to include Hispanics and a handful of white women but blacks remain out of the public eye.

Significantly reduced from a longer, more detailed version, “The American Jockey, 1870-1910” still manages to touch on the relevant concerns of a jockey’s life—his difficulties in making weight, contributions to the modern seat style of racing in North America and Europe, and controversies about race fixing. What prompted the change to valuing a jockey’s contributions to race riding in the 1880s? To add to the expanded version, I would like to see more about what drew young men to this dangerous and
exciting profession, what happened to those who grew taller and gained weight and could no longer ride—did they remain working at the track in other capacities or leave that world altogether—their relationships with trainers, agents, and owners, and comments about the jockeys from owners and trainers.

As Pamela Cooper noted the increased popularity of road running as spectators interacted in ensemble with the runners, horse racing as a spectator sport has fallen way behind football in live attendance and television viewership. We can even observe within our own profession—sports history—the proportion of original research and publication devoted to horse racing compared to other professional sports. I am gratified to hear two papers this year on horse racing and am happy to say that one of them wasn’t mine. Keep up the good work to increase the scholarship on the “sport of kings.”