

# WALL STREET JOURNAL WEEKEND

## Where Man o' War Meets Secretariat

### **Champions**

By the editors of the Daily Racing Form  
*DRF, 448 pages, \$50*

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Horseracing people are nostalgic sorts. They love the past not just because their sport has a storied history but also because its contemporary status can be so grim: desolate racetracks kept alive by slot machines and simulcast wagering. Nowadays, the closest that horseracing comes to recapturing its past glory is at a handful of annual events like the Triple Crown races and the summer meetings at Saratoga in New York and Del Mar in California.

When they're not handwringing, racing folks love to float ideas for reviving this flagging sport. One frequently sounded theme is the need to boost live attendance, bring back the grand spectacle and sensory thrills that made horseracing the No. 1 spectator sport in America for decades. This romantic notion is particularly popular among wealthy breeders and owners.

A more practical point of view is held by horseplayers, those great unwashed whose concerns are more along the lines of what the next day's exacta might pay. To them, horseracing is about the joys and sorrows of parimutuel wagering, and their remedy is to provide better information and bigger payoffs for the gamblers.

**"Champions"** tries to find a happy medium between the two camps. The book has handsome photographs of regal Thoroughbreds, jockeys in resplendent silks and champion race horses, from Man o' War and Seabiscuit to Secretariat and Funny Cide. There are also decade-by-decade accounts of these equine athletes by writers from the venerable Daily Racing Form, the book's publisher.

These images and stories go a long way toward satisfying anyone interested in reveling in the trappings and history of the sport. But interspersed among them are pages and pages of "past performance charts," some 20,000 lines of agate type that might look impenetrable to outsiders. To horseplayers, though, they speak with Shakespearean eloquence.

At the racetrack or in betting parlors around the country, handicappers clutching their Racing Forms squint at these charts, crammed with information about a particular horse and his previous races. One can glean what jockey was aboard him, who his sire was, what odds he went off on, how fast he ran the third and fourth furlongs, how wet the track was that day -- and on and on. The parade of data on each line is broken only at the end, with a pithy appraisal of his race, such as "Rallied, drew clear," or "Vied inside, gamely."

It's this information, when set alongside that of other horses in a race, that sends a wagerer into hours of pleasant study as he tries to predict how a race will shape up. ("Champions" explains how to decipher the past-performance information). Baseball fans may wallow in box scores, but horseplayers pore over their charts with rabbinical intensity. Plus, there's money to be won.

Interpreting these numbers is the everyday labor of a devoted horseplayer. The delicious twist offered by "Champions" is that the great majority of the performances it includes are so emphatically in the past. The charts go back to the late 19th century, with the lifetime records, as gathered by the Form, of more than 500 horses designated as champions by the racing industry.

This book is a revised version of the original edition of 2000, but it does more than simply add in statistics from the past few years (racing results through September are included). It offers embellishments such as Beyer speed figures going back to 1992. "Beyers" are the creation of Washington Post racing writer Andrew Beyer, who developed a complex system that assigns a number to how fast a horse ran in a race by adjusting for variants such as the distance of the race and the track conditions. The number is designed to make handicapping easier, and it does. But it's also just another variable among dozens pondered by horseplayers, providing insight in some cases and causing confusion in others.

Non-horseplayers may wonder about the value of a book that mostly takes up, in minute detail, the performances of horses that are either dead or propagating on pastureland. This is where the photographs and text help: They embellish the cold numbers and help evoke racing's glory days. True, examining the facts of long-ago races is a more abstract exercise than settling on your pick with current statistics and rushing to the betting window. But for horseracing fans -- and possibly a few others -- it is a luxuriant one.



Funny Cide won the Kentucky Derby in 2003, but the victory is just another line of agate type in his past performance chart.