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STYLE

Derby lore for fans consigned to TV

Every year, Louisville becomes the mecca of the racing world

By Hunter Drohojowska

There is no photo finish among horse races in this country: For 111 years, the Kentucky Derby has been winning the nation's attention hands down.

The first Saturday in May is treasured by individuals who have never even considered a visit to Santa Anita. To many, the twin spires of Churchill Downs are as familiar a landmark as the Washington Monument. A Louisville native once remarked of her hometown's race, "It is one of the things, to me, that is more impressive in real life than on TV."

You don't have to be a gambler to be captivated by the romantic spirit of the longest consistently run race in this country. The Derby traditions have drawn their own fans, such as the official drink of the race, the mint julep (see accompanying story). Above all, the

Derby is party time: Eighty thousand to 100,000 drunken fans squeeze onto the infield.

But you can't go to the Derby on a whim. Tickets and hotel rooms are sold out months in advance. What to do? Well, if you can't wait until next year, just turn on Channel 7 at 1:30 p.m. and watch the festivities. We'll provide some background that will help you imagine you're there.

In handicapping a horse, the indefinable quality that marks a potential winner is called class. Louisville is a city of class acts. Although there are 10,000 hotel rooms there, only one embodies the Derby spirit: the Seelbach Hotel. There is no hotel in this modest city better designed to mirror the traditions and sentiment of the Derby.

Built in 1905, the era of other grand hotels like the Ritz in Rome and the Plaza in New York, the Seelbach is a graceful dame in the downtown area near the Ohio River. It had been abandoned for 10 years when, in 1978, it was bought by Roger Davis, an actor best-known as the lead in a '70s TV

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Louisville lore for all the Derby fans in L.A.

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series called "Alias Smith and Jones." Davis, together with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Co., spent \$20 million renovating the hotel to fine Southern standards.

From the cobblestoned entrance path, a doorman in top hat and livery guides a visitor to an elegant lobby of marble floors and travertine, furnished with overstuffed leather armchairs and polished mahogany furniture. You expect every guest to be wearing a rumpled white linen suit or veils of lace.

It is not just the four-poster beds and armoires in every room, or the library on the mezzanine where guests actually read, that make the Seelbach special. It is the horses: sepia-toned photographs of past Derby winners hanging in the elevators and near the upstairs bar. The ceiling fixtures are printed with images of tack. There is an abundance of hunter green and shiny brass.

The hotel Davis designed is far different from the original. He invented a new version of the old Seelbach as the perfect set for the Derby drama. The old marble and old wood was imported, while the patina of tradition was re-created Hollywood-style.

Seelbach rates for Derby weekend start at \$700 and they're booked for years to come. (On the second Saturday in May, a room goes for \$95.)

The town's newest institution is the Kentucky Derby Museum, which was completed just in time for today's race. Next to Churchill Downs, the \$7.5 million, 46,000-square-foot museum is topped with a matching spire.

Here, according to executive director William Ray, visitors to

Louisville can "experience" the Derby all year. The interior of the building is as oval as the track, and the bluegrass-green carpets are embedded with the hoofprints of Triple Crown-winner Secretariat so you can see the impressive length of his stride: 28 feet.

"By the time they leave, people will have the feeling they have been to the Derby," Ray said. "There are three themes: the thoroughbred horse, the sport of racing and the Derby as the past."

A minitheater shows a short film explaining why Kentucky produces fine thoroughbreds. (It's because of limestone. What's good for making bluegrass and healthy horses also produces the best water for distilling bourbon.) You can see the historic first starting gate and mount a mannequin horse. A mirror with the outline of a jockey's position challenges you to do what looks so simple on television. The original scales remind one that each horse carries 126 pounds including the tack.

But the feature that most excites Ray is a movie screen that encircles the lobby of the museum and includes six-channel sound.

"It's the largest audio-video show in the world," Ray said. "It tells the story of Derby day, what's going on in the minds and emotions of the particular partnerships of the race. It will give visitors a sense of what makes it special, the race that any horseman will tell you they'd rather win."

Then there are the exhibits of mint-julep glasses. "That's the official drink of the Derby, which is funny because a lot of people can't stand them," said Ray.

Now that you've absorbed a bit of Louisville lore, turn up the volume, slouch over a julep at home — and make reservations for next year.

Hunter Drohojowska is a frequent contributor to the Herald.