

At Belmont Park, Nothing Matters But The Horse And Test At Hand

By: Paul Moran

The heart of American racing, more than a century old, beats hard against the western edge of New York City, a modern-day Circus Maximus that became the nation's most important racing venue on the day it opened and remains without peer. But it is more. It is the place at which the sport's past, present and future intersect; the stage upon which the greatest of the sport's stars, hooved and human, have shined for more than a hundred years. This is home to The Test of the Champion. This is where immortality in racing is achieved – or, denied.

The legends of the American turf, horses and humans, have woven a lush tapestry that remains tantalizingly incomplete as it was on the spring afternoon on which August Belmont II and his partners in what remains the most ambitious development of a shrine to the thoroughbred horse ever undertaken on this continent unveiled the



result of their collective vision. They watched Sysonby, who would be Horse of the Year in 1905 and whose skeleton was later displayed at the American Museum of Natural History, and Race King reach the wire simultaneously in the Metropolitan Handicap, a one-mile race renewed on each Memorial Day and now one of the sport's oldest and most prestigious races. The thread of racing history on the Hempstead plain, often frayed, remains unbroken.

In maturity, Belmont Park is iconic, unique, a monument to a gilded age, something that could have happened only in New York at a time that was very right, a product of a new American aristocracy that emerged from the Industrial Revolution with what was then new money, some of which was spent on thoroughbred horses.

The construction of Belmont Park, which began just after the turn of the last century, was a watershed in the development of racing in New York and the nation. The sport was given life in the new world 240 years earlier and a few miles to the east, shortly after the Dutch surrender of the colony of New Amsterdam to the British, when Colonel Richard Nicolls, appointed governor of colonial New York in the division of spoils, ordered land cleared for a two-mile course, the first in North America, which he named Newmarket, on the Hempstead plain, the present-day Garden City.

In the era that followed the Civil War, the families of what would become the new American bluebloods embraced racing as the embodiment of position and fortune. It was, wrote Bernard Livingston in his 1973 chronicle of racing peerage, *Their Turf*, “the time of Lorillard, Phipps, Whitney, Widener, DuPont, Vanderbilt, the founding sires of the modern American horsey set.”

Competition between Jerome and Morris Parks resulted in a bitter schism among the sport’s most prominent leaders that would, in 1893, inspire James R. Keene to establish The Jockey Club, which replaced the American Jockey Club. A year later, August Belmont II would be elected chairman, a position he would hold until his death in 1924.

From the day it was organized, at a meeting held at the Fifth Avenue Hotel and attended by a group recruited primarily from the Social Registry, the Jockey Club was an organization without parallel in American history in terms of political power. Keene proposed an iron-fisted ruling body similar to the British Jockey Club, with the authority to allot dates for meetings, license riders and trainers, appoint officials, establish and enforce rules, maintain the registry and the American Stud Book.

Newly empowered, Belmont, Keene and other founding members of The Jockey Club organized the Westchester Racing Association and leased Morris Park, where they conducted racing for the next decade. Difficulty in negotiating terms of the lease beyond 1904 and the desire of many of the principals who resided in lavish estates on the North Shore of Long Island to re-establish a prominent presence there, led to a decision to begin acquiring the land upon which racing in the United States was first conducted, or at least land as near as possible to the site of the Newmarket course.

From concept to completion in its original form, the new racecourse that would be named Belmont Park in honor of the first August Belmont, was a project by, of, and for the American aristocracy, which was defined strictly by wealth, position and lineage. Joining Belmont and Keene in the movement to shift the Westchester Association’s operations to Long Island included William C. Whitney, J.P. Morgan, Thomas Hitchcock and William K. Vanderbilt.

Early in 1902, a subtle but distinctly bullish real estate market developed on the eastern border of New York City, an area at the time almost rural. Agents representing anonymous investors were making offers to buy homes, farms and undeveloped land. Quietly, a patchwork of properties was pieced together in what would later become Elmont that grew to 560 acres, 400 of those on the north side of Hempstead Turnpike. The average price was about \$500 per acre. It grew finally to about 650 acres and spilled across the city line. At the center was Oatlands, the estate of William De Forest Manice. The mansion, an immense, turreted, Tudor-Gothic structure surrounded by ancient trees, would be incorporated into the master plan for the new racetrack and used as the first Turf and Field Club, scene of lavish social functions, après-race dinners and galas. It would remain in such use until 1956.

In March 1903, a workforce of 500 that would quickly double in size, composed primarily of Italian, Irish and Polish immigrants, was assembled. From the groundbreaking until completion of the project, Belmont II was in daily supervisory attendance. At first, he was accompanied by Whitney, who died in 1904.

The vision for Belmont was stoutly influenced by the great racecourses of Europe, particularly Sandown Park, in England, from which Belmont engaged consultants. The principal course, a sweeping 12-furlong oval, the largest dirt course in the world, was originally intersected by a 7-furlong straight course. Until 1921, races were run clockwise, in the European tradition. The main course encircled an 11-furlong turf course and a 10-furlong steeplechase course. Another track for training was situated east of the main course at a tangent.

Barns sufficient to house 750 horses and cottages for trainers and staff were enclosed along the southern and eastern perimeter of the grounds by a mile of ornamental iron fence topped by gilded spears, which still stands. An enclosed bridge connected the lavish clubhouse, which was closed to all but members of the association, to a 650-foot-long grandstand. Throughout the massive, often-delayed construction, meticulous attention was devoted to the preservation of trees, most of which remain, including a landmark white pine more than two centuries old that dominates an oval-shaped saddling enclosure and walking ring, which is bound by intricate ornamental ironwork and a tiered gallery.

The trees survive no less surely than four stone piers set in place in May, 1903 at the clubhouse gate, a gift to the horsemen of the Westchester Association from the kindred spirits of the South Carolina Jockey Club. The piers originally stood at the entrance to the Washington Course, in Charleston, S.C., placed there in 1792.

The \$2.5 million project (more than \$51.3 million today) was delayed by accidents, weather and political squabbles, but two years to the day after the installation of the Charleston piers, the gentlemen of the Westchester Association opened the first race

meeting at the most commodious, elegant racecourse the nation had ever seen, the equal of Newmarket, the center of British racing, and Longchamp, in France.

Post time on May 4, 1905 was 2:30 p.m., an hour dictated by the leisurely luncheon habits of the privileged class. By noon, what is believed to have been the first traffic jam on Long Island developed, the roads leading to the new track choked by a combination of horse-drawn and horseless carriages, the status symbol of the era. The less prosperous arrived on Long Island Railroad trains that pulled into a newly built terminal. By post time, more than 40,000 had made their way to the countryside for the first day in what has become more than a century of racing at Belmont Park that remains a work in progress.

The Brooklyn Eagle reported: "There were more of New York's aristocracy at Belmont Park yesterday than ever before attended any meet at any track in America." The paper proceeded to list the clubhouse guests, beginning with the titled and moved to the merely fabulous. "The Vanderbilts, Belmonts and Pells were there in full force. Miss Alice Roosevelt was with the Monson Morris party, which also included Alfred G. Vanderbilt. Mr. and Mrs. O.H.P. Belmont had with them Mrs. William Jay. The dowager Mrs. Vanderbilt had a striking costume of gray veiling."

Beneath the grandstand, 300 bookmakers operated in a spacious betting ring. Important stakes races that originated at Jerome and Morris parks were moved to Belmont – the Withers, the Jerome, Ladies Handicap and Champagne – and Belmont Stakes -- all fixtures on the present-day New York racing calendar, as enduring as the original vision of the second August Belmont.

Beyond the leafy enclave unveiled by Belmont II, the nation was in the early months of Theodore Roosevelt's first full term as president. Revolution raged in Russia. It was the year in which Albert Einstein proposed what came to be known as the theory of relativity. Orville and Wilbur Wright tested what they called the first "practical" aircraft, which was capable of an altitude of 50 feet and had a range of 25 miles. In the west, a new town, Las Vegas, was founded and the first pizzeria in the United States was opened in New York. The jukebox was invented. Formal education beyond elementary school was rare for most Americans. Some 3.8 million who owned telephones were provided with the first yellow pages.

In its early years, Belmont Park endured anti-gambling legislation that forced two years of operation without betting, and then closed the track for two years, 1911 and '12, a calamitous fire of suspicious origin in 1917 and the Great Depression. The original structure was completely rebuilt after the fire. Its replacement opened in 1920 and was razed in 1963 to make way for the present structure, the first built from concrete, brick and steel. Belmont's third incarnation was completed in 1968, the design of architect Arthur Froehlich, who fashioned a sweeping, cavernous building, 1,266 feet long – roughly as long

as the Empire State Building is high – that elegantly preserves the look of its predecessor, a monument to tradition and continuity.

A century after its opening, Belmont Park remains the keystone of thoroughbred racing in North America; hallowed ground on which every great American thoroughbred has claimed its place in history. It is racing's Broadway, destination of the immortal and merely great, a place defined not by its founders, but the horses who have run here -- from Man o' War, Colin, Count Fleet, Gallant Fox, Whirlaway and Citation to Jaipur, Buckpasser, Kelso, Fort Marcy, Arts and Letters, Key to the Mint, Native Dancer. Their spirits live in the very winds that sweep the Hempstead Plain.

The history of the Triple Crown, which is central to American racing, is written in a century of defining moments in the Belmont Stakes, the Test of the Champion: Secretariat's epic tour de force in 1973, Seattle Slew's 1977 sweep of the series while still undefeated, Affirmed's survival of Alydar's last desperate onslaught in '78, and eight others who have won the most rare of American sporting titles. The place echoes with the thunder raised in salute to memorable, charismatic horses who have been embraced by the racing fans of New York – Dr. Fager, Ruffian, Bold Forbes, Forego, John Henry, Lady's Secret, Easy Goer, Personal Ensign, Go for Wand, Sky Beauty, Cigar and a legion of others. On this lush, verdant expanse, almost every American champion of the last century and several from abroad have chiseled their legends into the bedrock of racing history.

Belmont Park, like the great city to the west, provides the ultimate test, exposes every flaw of the imposter. It is also a refuge for those drawn to the horse, entirely detached from human strife on those days when important issues are settled by the best thoroughbreds of the day, cloistered from the world beyond the Charleston piers on those days when nothing matters except the horses and the test at hand -- things judged exclusively within the context of a century of history, horses measured against those who have traveled this ground en route to residence in the pantheon of legend and whose auras linger in the ether.