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The History of Horse Racing Pre-1840

No doubt Henry VIII had his own views in regards to what constituted the 'sport of kings'; nevertheless it is horse racing that typically carries this appellation. Yet to suggest that racing was the prerogative of an elite is wrong: it was the sport of all, a common interest of peer and peasant, of lord and labourer. Indeed, although William IV himself had no great passion for the turf- he was "bored to death at Ascot" — he recognized its worth as a social institution:

Horse racing emerged naturally out of an environment in which horses played a crucial role: as well as providing a method of transport, they were also status symbols, their quality an overt demonstration of the owner's wealth. Ownership inevitably engendered competition, which in its turn led straight to the organization of races, initially simply matches between two horses but later formalized races with numerous entrants. Some races would also serve an industrial function in letting owners show off their horses prior to offering them for sale. Many race conferences in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were not only for thoroughbred racehorses. At all but the major fixtures there might be events for half-bred horses, hunters, and, sometimes, even ponies.

One reason for this assortment of competitors was the transport situation: so long as horses had to be walked to meetings they tended to race only locally, thus proscribing the amount of entrants at any specific gathering. The usage of heats was another device to get a full day's racing from a limited supply of horses. The winner of an event was the first entrant to win two heats; this can regularly need four or perhaps more races. One more reason for the variability of horses participating was that most race meetings at this time were basically social events, and not just for the privileged leisure classes. They used to be a high point of the social calendar for the bulk of the local populace who, starved of organised public entertainment, came anxious to enjoy their meeting. If it was possible to take part at more than beholder level, then they wished to do so; hence farmers raced, and often rode, their hybrids and others their thoroughbred hunters and racing stock. What greater ambition could there be than to ride one's own horse to victory at one's local meeting?

Races before 1840 were not gate-money events. Spectators paid no entry fee: everybody was able to watch and to look at was free. Unless bystanders wanted to view from the grandstand (not that there always was one), they paid zilch to see the races.

This has led one sports historian to argue that racing was organized only for [horse betting](#) purposes, for if entrance money wasn't charged then clearly racing had no need of spectators. It's right that racing could occur without an audience, but if the group had not been part of the local conferences, then surely they would've been more than the once a year or semi- yearly events that they were. At Newmarket, where racing was exclusive to the higher classes and the masses were actively deterred from attending, meetings were much more frequent. Here, and at a couple of other select meetings, gambling might have been the fulcrum of the game, but elsewhere racing was intimately connected with local holidays: travelling shows, gaming booths, beer tents, cock fights, boxing and wrestling matches, open—air dancing, and, for a privileged few, balls and dinner parties, all contributed to a full day out.

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