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by Randy Moss

WHEN TRADITION FAILS THE TEST OF TIME

(Warning: what you are about to read has *absolutely nothing* to do with making the Triple Crown easier to win.)

Suppose that *Daily Racing Form* columnist Charles Hatton had not first described Gallant Fox's victories in the 1930 Kentucky Derby, Preakness S. and Belmont S. as a "Triple Crown," yet the races became highly successful on their own, and now, in 2014, plans are underway to finally link them as a series.

How would the races be organized on the calendar?

Would Pimlico choose to run its Preakness two weeks after the Derby? No chance. That would be absurd, given the way today's horses are campaigned.

In such a scenario, the Preakness would likely be positioned a month or so after the Derby, if it hadn't been moved there already. The Belmont would be another month or five weeks after that. This along with a bonus provision would encourage participation in all three races.

Then, as gravy, the Kentucky Oaks, Black-Eyed Susan and Mother Goose would become a Friday Filly Triple with its own bonus, as would other undercard stakes races for older dirt males, older dirt females, older turf males, sprinters and anyone else that wants to join the party. Remember the Early Times Turf Triple? Imagine that times six. The winners of each series would get expenses-paid berths in the Breeders' Cup, which would further give its blessing by contributing to purses.

The resultant rivalries could boost public and media interest, which, of course, would have been the objective to begin with.

Naaaahhh. That would make too much sense.

But get the point?

Not the unreasonable point an anguished Steve Coburn tried to make, but the point he should have made was the point winning owner Shel Evans made in his post-Belmont news conference.

"I think it would be better to spread it out a little bit," Evans said of the time between Triple Crown races. "It's better for the horses, and it would be better to promote it, I think, a lot more time to create interest. Things change in the world."

Or at least, things change in most worlds. The current format of two weeks between the Kentucky Derby and Preakness, then three weeks to the Belmont --locked in rigor mortis for 66 years--is terribly outdated. Momentum is slowly building for a change.

But even as Pimlico President Tom Chuckas proposes extra time between the races, he is shouted down by otherwise sensible racing enthusiasts hell-bent on keeping the game stuck in a black-and-white newsreel time warp.

The NBA instituted the shot clock in 1954 and the three-pointer in 1979. Baseball got around to playing a World Series game at night in 1971. The NFL moved the goal posts to the back of the end zones in 1974.

Meanwhile, the Triple Crown is stuck in neutral, circa 1948, while the world has changed dramatically around it.

That year, Citation's 3-year-old juggernaut began with four starts in February, then races on Apr. 12, Apr. 17 and Apr. 27--the latter four days before the Derby (and to make sure he was fit, Ben Jones also worked him three furlongs Friday morning). He cruised to easy scores in the Derby and Preakness in the first year of the two-week gap between them, had a 1 1/4-mile tightener in the Jersey S. two weeks before his Belmont S. romp, then finished the year with nine more outings--all wins.

If horses were managed that way today, undercover PETA operatives would be lurking in every barn. Training philosophies have undergone a seismic shift, partly because Thoroughbreds are perceived as more fragile.

Handicapping author Tom Ainslie recommended 35 years ago to never bet horses that hadn't run in a month. Now, two of every three Todd Pletcher trained winners have at least one month since their most recent starts.

The change is more dramatic at the upper levels, where the Triple Crown has been adversely impacted. In the half-century from 1950 to 1999, Derby runners-up ran in the Preakness a steady 86% of the time, as one would expect. That dropped to 50% from 2000 to 2009. In the current decade, Derby runners-up and third-place finishers have been *80% likely to skip the Preakness*. The second through fifth Derby finishers bypassed Baltimore this year, which never happened from 1952-2007, but now has occurred three times in seven years.

It would be hyperbole to describe the Triple Crown as "broken," but as a three-race entity it has problems that are getting worse. New Yorkers seldom complain, because the Belmont S. has capitalized on the scheduling misfortune of the Preakness. But if Affirmed and Alydar had come along today instead of 1978, Alydar might have skipped the Preakness to wait for the Belmont. Is that what we want?

As for the argument that more time between the races would tarnish future Triple Crown winners with a Roger Maris asterisk, take California Chrome as an example. He would have benefitted from extra weeks of recuperation.

But he also would have faced a stronger Preakness field--including Commanding Curve, Wicked Strong, Samraat, Ride on Curlin, Medal Count and possibly Tonalist and Commissioner--because skipping the Preakness to wait two months for the Belmont would be impractical, especially if a participation bonus is also on the table.

A fully restored Derby-Preakness connection might actually make the Triple Crown *tougher* to win.

But again, the objective is not to make the Triple Crown easier or more difficult. The next Seattle Slew will sweep it regardless. The purpose is to improve the series and its supporting races as a whole, benefitting the entire sport.

For those consumed with tradition and history, there is even precedent for shifting dates. The first of the 11 Triple Crown winners, 1919's Sir Barton, had four days between the Kentucky Derby and Preakness, and the next six to accomplish the feat had a one-week gap. Five who swept the Triple Crown had a full month between the Preakness and Belmont--although Citation and the other four all managed to squeeze in races between, a striking example of how much the sport has changed.

Perhaps a 21st Century dates shift could be viewed as embracing tradition, taking us back to the good old days when the best 3-year-olds competed in all three races.

Chuckas is proposing the Preakness be moved to the first Saturday in June, and the Belmont Stakes on the first Saturday in July--perhaps even the Fourth of July.

More power to him. The Kentucky Derby should always be the first Saturday in May, and the Belmont should always be 1 1/2 miles. But just because horse racing has the oldest demographic and richest history of any sport doesn't mean everything about the Triple Crown must be preserved in a jar of formaldehyde.

And one more thing: it's too bad horses don't have a say. As Evans said, extra time between the Classics could be beneficial to long-term soundness and possibly keep superstars in action longer. Might that alone be a valid reason to drag Thoroughbred racing kicking and screaming into the new world? [CLICK HERE TO SHARE THIS STORY](#)

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