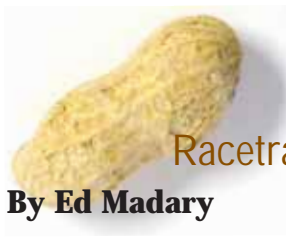




Photo by Z



Good luck, bad luck

Racetrack superstitions abound—many for no apparent reason

By Ed Madary

Of the thousands of people who will flip the turnstiles at Keeneland this spring, few will be familiar with the tricky path a Thoroughbred must negotiate in order to become a racehorse and compete in the afternoon. From mating mare and stallion through foaling, weaning, breaking and training, pitfalls abound.

Fewer still could be expected to know of the less-publicized daily observance of superstition and adherence to oddball ritual that abound—from barn to grandstand—in horse racing.

Brooms, salt, new threads, old threads, black cats, cross-eyed people (to be avoided at all costs while en route to the racetrack), tails-up pennies, \$2 bills, \$50 bills and peanuts, if not respected and handled properly, will conspire to beat even the most stalwart horse. But not all racetrackers believe in the power of the juju, while others come close to obsession.

Setting the silks

Dallas Stewart, the leading trainer during the 2000 fall meeting, represents the pragmatic end of the spectrum.

“Sorry, I can’t help you,” Stewart said when asked to comment on superstitions. “When I go to the barn in the morning and I see all my good people and the horses are good, that’s all I need.”

One of Stewart’s assistants is former jockey Kenny Bourque, whose primary duty is exercise rider. Bourque said he still follows some rudimentary superstition guidelines, like putting his left boot on before his right one, but one of the more curious rituals he has seen occurs in the jockeys’ room.



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In the interest of good luck, many horsemen forbid eating peanuts in the shell in the barn and some jockeys follow certain rituals.

“If we got a brand new set of silks to wear, and you could usually tell because they came to you still on the hanger, you had to throw them on the floor and walk on them,” Bourque said. “The idea was that you put them on the ground first so that you wouldn’t wind up on the ground in them.”

Trainer Al Stall, whose clientele includes Claiborne Farm of Paris, Kentucky, says he considers himself middle of the road when it comes to superstition.

“I do have a stall 13 in this barn,” Stall said about his barn at Fair Grounds in New Orleans. “The first stakes winner I ever ran in my life was out of stall 13. So I don’t go with a 12A or leave it blank like a hotel will do sometimes with elevators.

“The board right there (a large, white felt-tip marker board used to track horses’ workout schedules), everything has to be black, that’s one of them (superstitions),” Stall added. “You put a blue or a green on there, you’re in trouble.

“I like to put the (buckle of the) throatlatch in the second hole to run in,” Stall said, referring to the part of the bridle that passes under a horse’s

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throat and where it must be set before a horse goes to the paddock.

"Every once in a while, I'll have a lucky TV in the grandstand that I'll watch the races from ... but your luck runs out pretty quickly in this game. I've run out of TVs at Belmont Park, the biggest racetrack in the world."

The masters

According to Stall, his mentor is one of the most superstitious people he knows. As a youngster, Stall served his apprenticeship under Frankie Brothers, a renowned and accomplished trainer and a horseman's horseman who set a then-Keeneland record for most wins (14) in a single meeting in the spring of 1999. Brothers spent his formative years with Jack Van Berg and believes much of his super-

stition can be traced back to those days, and that the younger Van Berg's superstitions trace back to his legendary horse trainer father, Marion H. Van Berg. Both Van Bergs are members of the Racing Hall of Fame.

"(Jack) Van Berg, what I got from him were the peanuts and shipping a broom," Brothers said, referring to two old racetrack taboos. Peanuts: Never bring peanuts in the shell into or around the barn. Broom: Never ship a broom from one racetrack to another.

"My superstitions—I can't let everything out—but like a lot of racetrackers, 13 is just 12A, that's just the way it is," Brothers said.

But a former Brothers employee has a story from several decades ago that may make a superstitious guy take another look at the lowly peanut—or maybe not.

Curse of the peanut

Lifelong horseman Allen "Pancho" Fontenot was working as a groom for Brothers at Louisiana Downs in the 1980s when during a lull in one morning's activities he decided to get busy with a bag of roasted-in-the-shell peanuts. Unaware of the detrimental effect the activity could have on the fortune on even the most formidable barn, Fontenot was taken aback when accosted by the boss.

"I was out there (in the shedrow of the barn) eating peanuts and he (Brothers) walked by me and ... said, 'You can't do that in here,'" said Fontenot. "I said, 'What you mean, man?' and he said, 'That's bad luck.'"

"He run six horses that day, he win five and had one second. He didn't say no more after that, and I said, 'You really had bad luck today, huh?'"

But what about the one that ran second? Could the curse of the peanuts have put the kibosh on the one that did not win?

"That's probably what I was thinking at the time," Brothers said with a chuckle. "But Pancho was right. It doesn't get any better than that, and he ate those peanuts under there (in the barn)."

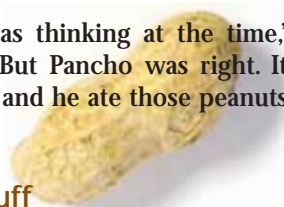
Write stuff

Suzanne Mundy, like many in the business, was born into horse racing. Her grandfather, Dixie McKinley, and father, Thomas McKinley, owned racehorses, a tradition she now continues as she races her own horses under her grandfather's red, white and blue silks. Her Grandstand box at Keeneland was chosen by her grandfather while the Grandstand was still under construction, and it has been in the family ever since.



Noted trainer Frankie Brothers shared a few superstitions he learned while working for two generations of Racing Hall of Fame horsemen.

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More than a few horsemen are not too crazy about the number 13.

Good luck, bad luck


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Mundy and her husband, George, a veterinarian, own a farm minutes from Keeneland and run a small Thoroughbred breeding operation. She also is an enthusiastic racing fan who began developing her handicapping eye at a young age.

As for superstitions, Mundy says there were many among the old-time gamblers and horsemen she associated with while hanging with her grandfather and she subconsciously absorbed them.

“You never really thought about it; there were just certain things that you grew up knowing,” Mundy said.

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“You never took to the racetrack or accepted from anyone at the racetrack \$50 or \$2 bills. You never wrote on your *Racing Form*. You could write on your program but never on the *Form*.”

“And now, with the kids, I’d take them to the races and they’d get a pen and they’d be bored and they’d start doodling and I’d have to give up my *Form* and buy a new one.”



Handicappers might view certain denominations of money with a wary eye.

As an owner, Mundy has a different set of rituals.

“You always have to have something with your colors on (in the race-day wardrobe),” said Mundy. “I never call anyone on race day to tell them the horse is running—it’s just bad luck, bad karma. I wear the same perfume to Keeneland I’ve worn since I was allowed (to wear it).”

Wrong place, wrong time

Most gamblers and those involved in athletics are superstitious to some extent, but in a sport where so much is out of the control of any human and the animal is the competitor, horseman and gambler naturally both look for a little more supernatural assistance than usual. A trainer cannot snatch a horse by the facemask and incite a good, old-fashioned mauling with an inspirational rant, nor can he, as Al Stall puts it, “call time out at the half-mile pole.”

But where did the superstitions originate? Why was the peanut vilified so?

“Probably old man (Marion) Van Berg,” Brothers said. “Somebody was eating peanuts and (Van Berg) had a bad day when he walked in that shedrow and the guy’s throwing the shells on the ground, and he said, ‘Get them things out of here.’”

And an innocent nut was incriminated while a superstition was born. 🐿️

Ed Madary is a freelance writer and assistant trainer who spends much of the year at Keeneland.

