

Q & A with Donna Barton Brothers

What prompted you to write *Inside Track*?

Donna Barton Brothers: When I married Frankie (trainer Frank Brothers) I began having more contact on a social level with horse owners than I had when I was a jockey. What I found was that he trained for some people who *loved* the horses and horse racing but felt somewhat alienated from their spouses and/or family who did not share their passion. In talking with their family and/or spouses I began to see that it's not that they knew horse racing and just didn't embrace it; it was more that they simply did not understand horse racing.

That's why I began my book with Chapter 1: "What to wear to the races." We have many authoritative guides on wagering and biographies about horses and people in racing but there wasn't a "basics" book. It was a book I felt needed to be written so I wrote it.

How did your experience as a jockey and now TV reporter influence the way you wrote the book?

DBB: I suppose it helped that I now have so many perspectives of horse racing. As a jockey I never would've thought to write this book because I didn't recognize the need for it and, if I had, it would've been to "inside baseball" because I wouldn't have yet had the experience I've had with the casual fans who maybe only watch the Derby.

Obviously, my experience as a jockey gave me the "inside track" perspective so that was an easy place for me to go. However, my experience as a broadcaster has helped me to see that on the backside of the racetrack we speak a language all our own. Not everyone knows what it means when they hear "he breezed in :59 flat," or "he was lugging out so badly I couldn't let him run." Common language on the backside requires and deserves some translation to the casual fan.

What is your favorite aspect of going to the racetrack?

DBB: I love the horses. I love to see them walk into the paddock and, for me, it's a challenge to predict from their body language, coat, and the look in their eye whether or not they'll run to form. I especially love the 2 year olds and the top-level stakes horses. The 2 year olds because you never know what you'll see—especially at Keeneland, Churchill Downs, and Saratoga—and the top-level stakes horse because of the aura of greatness that they often

exude.

But I also love the social aspect and I love that when I go to the races at Keeneland in the spring I know I'll be seeing friends and colleagues that I have not seen all winter. I love the camaraderie and, of course, the big days. It's great to see everyone dressed up and in a festive mood and even better to see those same people win on the big days.

You devote a chapter on what to wear to the races. Why is this an important topic?

DBB: Because I believe that not knowing how to dress appropriately for an event makes people feel discombobulated and out of place from the outset. It's like being invited to a party by someone you don't personally know with no "attire" on the invitation. Having an idea of how others will be dressed and what you might be expected to wear tackles that first social obstacle. Then we move on to what to take with you to the races and how and when to wager. Having an idea of what an event will be like and what your place in it will be eliminates the fear of the unknown we've all experienced at some time or another.

Another chapter discusses the Kentucky Derby as an experience not to be missed. Why is the Derby considered "the greatest two minutes in sports?"

DBB: Well the Derby is no longer just a horse race; it's an event. An event unlike any other event you *have* ever or *will* ever experience. The race itself is the crescendo to that event and with all of the weeks, days, then hours of festivities that take place in advance of those two minutes, those two minutes become both the most anticipated and greatest two minutes in sports. *During* that two minutes you witness the crème de la crème of the 3-year-old crop of Thoroughbreds look each other in the eye and then step up or lay down. The winner of the Kentucky Derby has not only won the two-minute race, they've also won the war of attrition it takes to get there.

Given all the entertainment options available today, why should people choose to spend an afternoon at the track?

DBB: The track has so much to offer! First of all, it's a place you could go to alone and your attention could be fully captivated simply by the fact that the races are every 25 minutes and during the time in between you need to make your selections. You could handicap from the past performances alone

but I always recommend looking at the horses in the paddock and on the track and assessing their present state of health and readiness. Between betting, handicapping, and looking at the horses your day will be fairly full but there's still the option of mingling with the crowd if you desire.

Second, it's a great "date" day in that you have enough time between races to chat and get to know more about each other and then the action of each race to act as a creative and exciting diversion from the pressure of chatting each other up. Third, it's a wonderful group outing in that if you'd like to play the races there will be likeminded people in your group and you can use them to help you narrow down your own choices.

Conversely, it's also very likely that there will be people in the group who are far more interested in the social aspect of racing than the gambling aspect of it so if you're not inclined toward playing the races, you can always mingle instead. And fourth, it's a perfect family outing. Again, something for everyone, even the kids. Yes, you have to be 18 to wager with the house, or the track, but you only need be old enough to have an opinion to make friendly wagers among your family.

It costs \$10 to go to a movie—for each person—and "mingling" during that time would be rude. Going out to eat is nice, but it only lasts for about two hours. Baseball is great—if you're all into baseball. And sunbathing all day is free but it's a proven carcinogenic. I recommend a day at the track.

How can racetracks be more welcoming to new fans?

DBB: One, by having an information booth at the entrance that offers the answers to all the questions a fan or potentially new fan could pose. Two, by providing a *free* booklet with all of the day's racing information. It should have a race-by-race listing of all of the horses with their respective post positions, jockeys, and the trainer's name. Essentially, a condensed version of the program but *free*. Not everyone wants to spend \$3 to \$4 on a program, especially, if they're there for the social aspect. However, having a list of the entries will make everyone feel included in the action. Three: *listen* to the fans. Have you ever seen a suggestion box at a track? I haven't. Ask. They'll tell you what they need.

What do you hope racing newcomers will learn from your book?

DBB: I hope they'll learn everything they wanted to know but were afraid to

ask. Mine is not a comprehensive book on horse racing; it's a guide for newcomers and it's the perfect place to begin. My hope is that it will bridge the gap between the hardcore fans and the would-be fans and give newcomers the confidence they need to give horse racing a chance.