

Lesson #132

The Kentucky Derby

May 17, 1875 was an exciting day for a horse named Aristides (air is **tide** ez) and jockey Oliver Lewis. That day, a crowd of 10,000 spectators watched as Aristides became the first winner of the Kentucky Derby. The race took about two minutes. Aristides was three years old. Oliver Lewis was just 19.

The Kentucky Derby is the longest-running sports event in American history. But today's event is different from the Kentucky Derby of the 1800s. One difference is crowd size. Nowadays, crowds are more than 10 times what they were at that first race. Most jockeys were African American in the beginning. Today, few jockeys are African Americans. Back then, many of the men who cared for horses were former slaves or children of former slaves. These men had fed and groomed their owners' horses. They had been responsible for riding and training the horses. As a result, many became skilled at horse racing. When horse racing became an organized sport, African Americans were among the best trainers and jockeys. The first winning jockey was an African American.

The Kentucky Derby started with a man named Meriwether Lewis Clark. He was a grandson of the famous explorer, William Clark. While visiting Europe, Meriwether loved attending horse races. Upon his return, he was determined to build a track in the United States. Clark's uncles, John and Henry Churchill, leased him 80 acres of land in Louisville. He used the land to develop a racetrack. He then organized the Louisville Jockey Club. The club helped raise funds to build a racetrack.

The racetrack Clark built is now one of the most famous in the world. It is Churchill Downs, the 147-acre home of the Kentucky Derby. On the first Saturday in May, competitors line up at the start. Jockeys still ride three-year-old Thoroughbreds. During "the most exciting two minutes in sports," the horses run the one-and-a-quarter-mile track. At the finish, a garland of red roses is draped over the winner. "The Run for the Roses" is an American tradition.



The Twin Spires have towered above the crowd at Churchill Downs since 1895.

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Source: Wikimedia Commons

1. From the context clues, you can infer that Oliver Lewis was _____.
A) a horse breeder
B) an African American
C) a famous explorer
D) a radio sportscaster
2. Why did Meriwether Lewis Clark build a racetrack? Underline your answer in the passage.
3. In the early days of horse racing, what did the Louisville Jockey Club do?
A) trained men to be jockeys
B) raised funds to build a racetrack
C) monitored crowd sizes at Churchill Downs
D) attended horse races in Europe
4. In what ways is the Kentucky Derby the same today as it was in 1875?
_____ There are about 10,000 spectators at the event.
✓ Jockeys ride three-year-old Thoroughbreds.
✓ The race takes about two minutes.
_____ Most of the jockeys are African Americans.
5. The Kentucky Derby is called “The Run for the Roses.” Why is this?
A) Churchill Downs was once a 147-acre rose garden.
B) The race takes only about two minutes.
C) The winner is covered by a garland of red roses.
D) Red, white, and blue roses decorate the length of the track.
6. Why were African Americans the best trainers and jockeys in the late 1800s?
A) At that time, most of the men who handled horses were African Americans.
B) Only African Americans were allowed to ride and train horses back then.
C) In the late 1800s, horse racing was very popular in Europe.
D) all of these
7. From the context clues, you can infer that the home of the Kentucky Derby is named for _____.
A) the famous explorer, William Clark
B) Aristides and Oliver Lewis
C) the Louisville Jockey Club
D) John and Henry Churchill