

The Sport of Kings and the Kings of Crime: Horse Racing, Politics, and Organized Crime in New York, 1865–1913. By Steven A. Riess. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011. xxvi, 446 pp. \$45.00.)

Only within the past three decades have historians given serious consideration to the importance of sports in American life. Scholars have produced a substantial body of literature, especially on baseball and boxing, but have unfortunately tended to overlook the importance of horse racing. This significant book by the pioneering sports historian Steven A. Riess begins to remedy that neglect, effectively demonstrating how horse racing intersected with machine politics and the rise of organized crime in New York City and its environs from the Civil War through the Progressive Era.

The major appeal of the “sport of kings” was gambling, which produced widespread political corruption. Horse racing flourished in New York after the opening of an enclosed track at Saratoga Springs in 1863 by the onetime prizefighter turned casino operator and future congressman John “Old Smoke” Morrissey. The financiers Leonard Jerome and August Belmont Sr. established the exclusive American Jockey Club and opened Jerome Park in the Bronx in 1866. By 1900 more than a dozen tracks were in operation, catering to all social classes. The popularity of the turf sparked the establishment of illegal offtrack “poolrooms” operated by crime syndicates that proved to be enormously successful in meeting the high demands of working-class New Yorkers. Operators of the betting parlors paid off law enforcement and maintained close connections with Tammany Hall machine politicians, thereby fending off repeated efforts by track owners and moral reformers to shut them down.

Progressive-minded reformers, taking a dim view of gambling’s negative impact on the

working class as well as on the general moral climate of the city, waged an ongoing but futile effort to close the tracks and the poolrooms. At the upper end of the city's social structure, leading men of business and finance enjoyed the social status that came from belonging to a prestigious jockey club where high-stakes private bets could safely be made. Equally important action occurred away from the tracks on the streets of working-class neighborhoods, to the benefit of machine politicians and bookmakers.

A national antigambling crusade gained momentum as the nineteenth century drew to a close, and by 1900 tracks had been closed elsewhere except in Kentucky and Maryland. Reformers were anticipating victory in New York although the thoroughbreds were attracting record crowds and the betting parlors were flourishing. This did not deter Gov. Charles Evans Hughes, who succeeded by the narrowest of margins in pushing legislation through the state legislature in 1910 that forced the closing of the tracks. Even so, racing supporters found a loophole and a compliant judge, and racing returned in 1913, never to be threatened again. By the 1920s organized crime controlled offtrack betting and seamlessly merged it with other lucrative operations: numbers, racketeering, prostitution, and bootlegging.

New York would remain the national center for horse racing when the sport enjoyed a tremendous upsurge in popularity in the 1920s. Attendance at tracks even exceeded baseball attendance, but by the 1960s racing entered a period of steady decline that continues to this day, undercut by the introduction of the point spread that popularized wagering on college and professional football and basketball.

Riess has produced a model monograph illustrating that sports history can inform larger political and cultural issues. His research is massive, the analysis is crisp, and the narrative is engaging. This impressive work deserves the attention of scholars even if they care little about sports per se.

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