

Hope is the thing with hooves: Rich Strike's Derby triumph | GUEST COMMENTARY

By Patricia Schultheis
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Sonny Leon celebrates after riding Rich Strike past the finish line to win the 148th running of the Kentucky Derby horse race at Churchill Downs Saturday, May 7, 2022, in Louisville, Ky. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall) (Charlie Neibergall/AP)

Last weekend, a confluence of very public and intensely personal circumstances met when the 148th running of the Kentucky Derby coincided

with the 14th-anniversary of my husband's death — while I was at my boyfriend's house (yes, 78-year-old widows do have boyfriends).

I am a sucker for pageantry, and through the years, my husband Bill indulged my odd proclivity by mixing gin and tonics and watching the race with me. My Derby fascination, however, began long before I met him. As a Polish-Catholic kid in New England, I began watching it in my teens on my parents' black and white TV, probably to catch a glimpse into an elegant world of jilips in silver cups and women in tasteful sheaths and white gloves.



So, for 40 years, Bill and I sipped our drinks, commented on the unfolding spectacle and placed theoretical bets. Even after he was gone, and the Derby had degenerated into an excuse to wear headgear designed by psychotic milliners, I continued to watch. But, with every passing year, my interest lessened.

On May 7, though, while my boyfriend fixed dinner, I happened to walk by his study and notice the Derby was on. So I watched, thinking of Bill, and still grateful for the man in the kitchen. But I knew nothing: not the names of any of the favorites nor of the jockeys. I just sat and listened to the prognosticators: Who would win? Epicenter? Definitely a contender. Zandon? Very possibly. Messier? Can't count him out. All of it mumble-speak to fill up airtime.

Meanwhile, down around the paddock, the hats were zanier than I remembered from times past. And the crowds seemed more raucous, more intent on capturing a grinning selfie than watching the horses being saddled or the jockeys filing out of the changing room.

What hadn't changed was the astounding self-discipline of those brave, athletic men as I watched them answer one inane question after another from journalists, then pose graciously among their competitors for the traditional group picture, and finally hoist their slight frames onto thousand-

pound animals who will thunder at nearly 40 miles an hour around a track not much wider than the Jones Falls Expressway.

Nor had the horses changed. All Derby horses are thoroughbreds, born to run. But they must be trained to race. Like the eyes of football players filing out of a locker room on Super Bowl Sunday, those of the horses I saw that Saturday held an inward sentience: They had a job to do, and the noise, the crowd, the general hoopla, none of that mattered. What did matter? Winning. And only winning.

What followed next validated my decades-long, quirky Derby obsession. What followed next was a triumph of hope.

Emily Dickinson wrote “Hope is the thing with feathers,” a beautiful poetic paean to hope’s irrepressible nature. With all due respect to the Belle of Amherst, however, I must disagree. After that Saturday, for me, hope is not the thing with feathers; hope is the thing with hooves. Out of nowhere, a last-minute substitute named Rich Strike — who drew the number 20 pole position and had to thread through a throng of 19 others, first on the outside, then to the middle of the pack and finally to the inside, where it discovered an equine inner engine — won the first jewel of the Triple Crown.

While Rich Strike won’t win the second jewel at this year’s Preakness in Baltimore — his owner announced Thursday that the horse would skip the race for his well-being — I have hope for his future and ours. I hope that the stalled multimillion dollar redevelopment plan for Pimlico Racecourse receives a much-needed jump-start. And that the Stronach Group, owner of Pimlico; and the Stadium Authority, the body selecting the project’s engineers and architects, get “shovels ... into the ground” as they had pledged to do two years ago, when Maryland sold \$375 million in state bonds to fund the project. And that the leaders of Baltimore and Maryland recognize that horse breeding and racing are industries with rich histories, and that they could once again flourish and provide jobs if they receive the right vision and support.

Is this a lot to hope for? Yes, it is. But why not hope? More wondrous things have happened: On a rainy Saturday evening, a 78-old widow held memories of her husband and hands with her boyfriend, and watched as a terra-cotta horse named Rich Strike raced his heart out and galloped into history.

Patricia Schultheis is the author “Baltimore’s Lexington Market,” a pictorial history of the market, and of “St. Bart’s Way,” an award-winning story

collection based in Baltimore, and “A Balanced Life,” a memoir. She can be reached at bpschult@yahoo.com.