Book relates pivotal role Blacks have played in horseracing

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“One of the best points in the character of the colored men is their strong love and devotion to the racehorse,” a writer for The Spirit of the Times declared in 1872. Indeed, throughout the 19th century, Katherine Mooney reveals, African-American slaves and freed men played pivotal roles in the sport of horseracing, as grooms, jockeys and trainers.

In Race Horse Men, Mooney, a postdoctoral fellow in American History at Washington University in St. Louis, draws on the experiences of a host of long-forgotten men in a fascinating account of “how complex and insidious human bondage could be, how deeply and how differently it marked the disparate people who lived in it.”

At the track, she demonstrates, Southern Whites saw “in miniature the hierarchical world they wanted, its boundaries policed by violence and stories that defined the parameters of the possible.”

In contrast, Blacks saw opportunities to extend the reach of opportunity and freedom.

‘Daily series of tiny revolutions’
Mooney tries to set her story in the context of American party politics. The sport was a “consuming passion” for powerful and wealthy men, she writes, who saw it as “a means of imagining and constructing a national and racial order.” Mooney does not adequately explain, however, why Southern Whigs (and not Democrats) dominated racing in the antebellum era and Northern Democrats (and not Republicans) ran the show in the decades following the Civil War.

Race Horse Men is at its best, in my judgment, when Mooney describes incidents in the lives of Black jockeys that reminded them – and remind us – that freedom was not an abstraction, and often consisted of “a daily series of tiny revolutions.” In the 1870s, she points out, the surname of Abe Hawkins was included in the official list of jockeys. And a White journalist shook Hawkins’ hand when he encountered him in the stands of the Jersey Derby.

Backlash against ‘uppity Blacks’
Powerfully and poignantly, Mooney also describes the backlash against “uppity Blacks.” Isaac Murphy, whose mounts won 44 percent of their races, still a record, including three Kentucky Derby contests, was making more than $10,000 a year in the 1880s. But when he finished last in the Monmouth Handicap, detractors accused him of drunkenness. Within a few years, Murphy’s career was over. He died of pneumonia and heart failure at age 35.

Winner of the Derby in 1901 and 1902, Jimmy Winkfield never got another Derby mount. Amidst “a rising tide of sentiment against Black riders and trainers” that emboldened White riders to unseat, box in, or injure their Black competitors during races, and convinced owners not to contract for their services, Winkfield moved to Europe, establishing himself as the darling of French racing fans, who dubbed him “le blackman.”

Nonetheless, whenever he returned to the United States, Winkfield attended the Derby and wept openly when “My Old Kentucky Home” was played.

About 5 percent Black jockeys in 2013
By the 1920s, Black horsemen had virtually disappeared, with a few hanging on at smaller and less prestigious tracks. Some journalists attributed the change to the incompetence and intellectual inferiority of Blacks. Black activists, Mooney writes, knew better: They were witnessing at the track “the overt and crude, the subtle and insidious workings of Jim Crow exposed.”
In 2013, the Jockeys Guild noted that only about 5 percent of professional riders were Black. But there were some evidence of progress.

In 2000, Martin St. Julien became the first African-American jockey in the Derby since 1921. And in 2013, another Black rider, Kevin Krigger, who kept a picture of Winkfield in his locker, approached the gate aboard Goldencents. Her father, Liliane Winkfield Casey opined, would surely have said, “It’s about time somebody else won.”

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