

Texas owners show class at the Derby



ANNE LANG

Call me biased; I'll admit to some sulking. I was counting on at least one of the two Texas-owned colts to dust 'em in the Derby.

One of them nearly did. But nearly did doesn't make the history books. Still, in terms of a much-needed boost to Texas morale, the mere presence of Personal Hope and Dixieland Heat at Churchill Downs on May 1 was the next best thing to a blanket of roses.

After all, the normally proud state of Texas has been weathering more than its share of negative attention. David Koresh, serial killer Kenneth McDuff, and a deadly shooting spree in Killeen haven't done much to bolster the image of a state still struggling to erase its unwanted affiliation with the 1963 Kennedy assassination.

The Texas racing industry hasn't fared too well, either. The state's three largest tracks have yet to get underway, and local breeding activity is starting to suffer from those delays. Lawsuits between rejected Class I track applicants and licensees are clogging the courts, while the Texas Racing Commission has been dragged into a federal investigation of an alleged cover-up in the death of a commission employee.

That Texans needed something to cheer about this spring was painfully evident. Lo and behold, along came a couple of fast horses and their Texas owners to the rescue.

When it became clear that Personal Hope and Dixieland Heat were serious Derby contenders, the eyes of the Texas thoroughbred world turned to their owners — construction mogul Lee Lewis (Personal Hope) and video game entrepreneur Leland Cook (Dixieland Heat).

Amid Texans' excitement over the prospect of two local Triple Crown candidates, questions were buzzing in tackrooms and boardrooms alike. Who are these guys? Where have they been until now? And most importantly, what kind of image for Texas will they represent in Louisville?

Texans, you see, rank right up there with New Yorkers on the list of Most Frequently Stereotyped Americans. While the majority of Texans don't engage in the boorish, boastful behavior that many outsiders seem to expect from us, that's still the reputation that persists. So God forbid any Texan should actually portray those characteristics on national television.

We needn't have worried.

Neither Lewis nor Cook were particularly well-known in thoroughbred circles outside of their own communities. But during the recent prep race season, they managed to shatter the Texas stereotype with consistent displays of class, dignity and good sportsmanship. They earned the respect of industry watchers throughout the country, from the Fair Grounds to Keeneland to Santa Anita.

Maybe their respective 15 minutes of fame have expired. Maybe not. There are two more races to go. But as far as Texans are concerned, Lewis and Cook are already a couple of classic winners. Thanks, y'all.

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