PURSE $1500  3 YEAR OLDS AND UPWARD

By

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Dedicated to those thoroughbreds - who in trying to go beyond the limits of mere bone and muscle - are destroyed by their own ability and courage.

With special thanks to Mr. John O'Keefe, General Manager Finger Lakes Race Track; and Mr. Gerard Burke, Steward New York Racing Commission. Without their help this work would not have been possible.

And to all the trainers, jockeys, grooms, and "racetrackers" who couldn't understand why I wanted to photograph them.

Jack Karpen
1975
ABSTRACT

Photographs of persons involved with thoroughbred racing using a direct editorial portrait approach.

The photographs were made at the Finger Lakes Race Track during 1973, 1974 and 1975.
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THESIS PROPOSAL
for
The Master of Fine Arts Degree
College of Graphic Arts and Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Purse $1,500. 3 year olds and upward.

PURPOSE:
For some years I have been involved with thoroughbred racing. At first simply as a spectator and then becoming an addict; spending most of my free time either attending races or reading of them. It has opened up a new world to me, and I count among my friends many people involved in the field. It has opened doors that few people outside of racing seldom are permitted to enter -- from coffee in the backstretch kitchen with jockeys and trainers to cocktails with peers of the realm in the 18th century opulence of the Jockey Club of England.
I hope in this thesis to repay a debt I owe to this world by illuminating it for others.

Submitted by:

John E. Karpen  May 21, 1973

Thesis Board:

Chief Advisor       Charles Arnold Jr.
                    Professor
                    Rochester Institute of Technology

Associate Advisors      William J. Maxion
                        President, Case Hoyt
                        Trustee,
                        Rochester Institute of Technology

                        John Pfahl
                        Assistant Professor
                        Rochester Institute of Technology
SCOPE OF THE THESIS

I feel that there is nothing more beautiful than a thoroughbred race horse. After viewing hundreds (possibly thousands) of races, I still feel a sense of awe at those powerful yet delicate animals. Their courage is probably what impresses me most; for beneath the muscle, bone, and sinew, beats a magnificent heart. I still carry in my mind's eye an image so terrible and heroic I shall never permit it to pass. It was at Finger Lakes a year or so ago; a cheap claiming race made up of $1,500 platers. As the animals turned into the stretch, an old veteran by the name of St. Mawr shattered a foreleg and went down. The horse lay dazed for a moment and finally staggered to his feet; he stumbled forward for a while chasing the rapidly retreating field of horses; then lurched toward the rail and stood, his leg ruined beyond repair, helplessly awaiting the mercy of the veterinarian's needle. His death symbolized for me the tragic timelessness of thoroughbreds who in trying to go beyond the limits of mere bone and muscle were in effect destroyed by their own ability and courage.

As Davison immersed himself in East 100th Street, or as Duncan devoted himself to the men who fight our wars,
I hope to present a work which will give insight into the world of racing and the people who have devoted their lives to it. My treatment will be sympathetic and honest, and at times, I hope, beautiful.

PROCEDURES:

The thesis will be presented as an exhibit. The prints will be B&W and color in whatever size lends itself to the particular photograph. I estimate the final number of prints at approximately thirty.

I will be photographing throughout the summer and fall of 1973. Work will be printed as it is completed and discussed with my thesis advisors. Final editing and printing will be done during the winter of 1973-74. The thesis will be hung the spring of 1974.

Research sources will include:

Personal library and background knowledge of the subject. (Bibliography on request)

The National Museum of Racing, Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

Finger Lakes Racing Association, Victor, N.Y.
Triangle Publications: The Daily Racing Form

Personal Contacts: Trainers, Jockeys, Officials, Writers, etc.

I have been given permission by Mr. John O'Keefe, General Manager of Finger Lakes Race Track, to have access to all areas throughout the season May - November.

I am presently awaiting my final security clearance by the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau.
ADDENDUM TO THESIS PROPOSAL

Clarification of Thesis

PROCEDURES:
The thesis will be presented sectionally— that is— a section on the spectacle; the jockeys; the backstretch; etc. Each section will be introduced graphically, using a large color print or graphic which will illustrate that section. The prints that follow will be of whatever size lends itself to the particular photograph.

Graphic qualities will be very important to the thesis as the introductory image to each section will be designed for maximum impact.

SCOPE:
The phrase "world of racing" was perhaps a poor choice of words. Let the thesis represent the events and the people at Finger Lakes Race Track which on a smaller scale reflect the larger world of racing. In effect I shall be combining the approaches of an illustrator and documentarian.
When I arrived at the point of proposing a thesis, a series of questions had to be resolved. First and foremost was the question of; what should I do my thesis on? This was followed by the more important question of what did I want to do my thesis on? This is a question that I would encourage any MFA candidate to consider carefully. It is quite easy to be driven into a major undertaking on the spurious grounds of what is currently fashionable or "in". In my own case, when it came time for my thesis, the photographic derivation was a very popular area of exploration, and I must admit to some moments of anxiety when I was drafting my proposal.

My main area of interest has been the straight photograph, rather than the derived or manipulated image. My major experience and ability was the studio photograph. My question then was "could I combine the straight photograph and the studio approach to come up with a strong photographic work?" The advantages in this approach are - I would be working in my area of expertise, I would be comfortable with my methods.
The great danger would be the temptation to repeat past successful work and not sustain any real growth. In the past I had worked in situations, particularly studio, where I was in total control. Would it be possible to exercise control in location work and still have that spark of spontaneity so important if it was to convey anything but a surface quality to the viewer.

The idea of a major body of work on the race track is one that I had been toying with for years, but never had the time or opportunity to pursue at length. Originally I had planned to photograph in Newmarket, England, the birthplace of thoroughbred racing. However, time and economics prevented this. So, rather than pursuing racing on the elegant English level, I switched to the totally different atmosphere of Finger Lakes, a local thoroughbred race track.

Upon approval of the thesis proposal, I set to work to obtain the necessary recognition and approval of the parties involved. Namely: the management of Finger Lakes Race Track; the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau; and the New York State Racing
Commission. This red tape was unavoidable and necessary if I was to work freely, and in order to work I needed their permission to move about freely and have access to all areas of the track and stable area. This proved to be a most difficult problem. Thoroughbred racing, being a gambling sport, is tightly policed and controlled. No one who is not officially cleared is allowed on the "backside", or the stable and barn area. It took a great deal of talking, pleading, and convincing to get permission to enter these areas. A complete security check was run on me, and even then a visitors pass was issued for only a few weeks at a time. This situation persisted throughout 1973. In 1974, my patience finally worn thin by the persistent questioning of track security, I appealed directly to the Stewards, who are the governing body at any race track, and was finally issued credentials good for the entire season. This removed the constant worry of whether I would be permitted to continue to work, and being constantly questioned by security as to why I needed so much time just to make a few pictures. Of all persons involved in this process, I am especially
indebted to Mr. Gerard Burke, Steward of the New York Racing Commission, for his assistance. Mr. Burke issued the statement that my work would be beneficial to racing and I was to be permitted to go where I wished. I would like to point out that all these negotiations were handled most diplomatically and delicately.

Once on the "backside" I faced the problem that has faced other photographers before me; simply stated "now that I'm here, how do I go about photographing these people. The reader will note, from my proposal, that I wished to use a documentary approach. Perhaps a personal definition is in order here. I regard the documentary approach as a rather formal photograph, that is eschewing the "candid" photograph. I felt and still feel that the strongest photographs would come from a direct and open approach.

In order to produce this type of photograph. I would have to establish contact, communication, and if possible, rapport with the people I was to photograph. This process took two years.
The nerve center of any racetrack is the backstretch kitchens. It is as important to racetrackers as the golf course is to businessmen.Owners contact trainers there - jockeys and their agents contact trainers - plans are laid - excuses are made. People are hired and fired. People also eat there. The highpoint of activity in the kitchen is from about 10 a.m. until noon. Morning workouts are usually over by 10:00 and preparation for the day's races starts about noon. This leaves two hours a day when everyone can relate and unwind, before they wind up again. The kitchen became my hangout.

The racetrack is a closed society to outsiders - it is much like the theatre. The spectators come and bet. The races are run. The spectator leaves. The racetrackers go back to prepare for the next day.

I would show up in the morning and head directly for the track kitchen, get my coffee, sit at a table and wait. Wait for what? A nod of recognition, curiosity, a conversation. Racetrackers are naturally suspicious of outsiders, and I suppose not without
good reason. Usually when a stranger contacts them it is for an ulterior motive. Commonly to obtain information about their horses. They resent this, and as a result tend to flock together and socialize with one another, both on and off the track. For this reason I sat tight and waited for them to make the first move, or at least provide me with an opening so I wouldn't appear obvious. Eventually they became curious about the guy with all the cameras and would say "good morning" or "how are you". Most of the time that's about as far as it went. A few singular incidents proved to be ice breakers however, and one incident tended to lead to another. One morning, while sitting in the kitchen reading the racing form and feeling perfectly ridiculous with two cameras strung around my neck, I was joined by a girl whom I had seen around the track. As it turned out she was a groom and assistant trainer for one of the stables, and a student at Geneseo State. After the usual introductions we had a long conversation about what I was trying to do, and I was invited to drop around the stables. This was quite a breakthrough, as one does not visit a stable without being asked
or at least known. To do so is to risk being chewed upon by watch dogs of large and varying breeds. This lead to what eventually became a rather close friendship with Sharyn Green and Bill Bartlett who train a large stable of horses. Through my association with them, I, in turn, met many other people.

Another incident of particular interest was my association with the stable of Bob and Dorothy McCutcheon. One afternoon a horse trained by Dorothy McCutcheon reared in the paddock, fell over backwards, and broke his neck when he struck a concrete retaining wall. The veterinarian worked on the horse for several hours, but eventually he had to be destroyed. I did not know the McCutcheons at the time, but the next morning they happened to sit down at my table in the kitchen and I expressed my sympathy. As it turned out, Mrs McCutcheon was delighted over what I was doing and insisted I visit them. Over a period of time this proved to be a difficult relationship as Mrs. McCutcheon insisted on introducing me as Professor Karpen, and telling everyone I was doing a thesis. This may be true, but in the atmosphere of the racetrack it sounded pretentious.
When anyone asked what I was doing, I simply said I was doing a book on racing. Many times this lead to persons telling me stories and anecdotes they thought I might be able to use. Slowly the ice was breaking. Another person, who was most helpful, is a trainer named Tom Cambisi. Tom is convinced that his horses are the best looking anywhere and that they would make fine photographs for my book. Tom now has dozens of 8X10's of himself and his horses. Actually this was a device I employed time and again. I would photograph a trainer and his horses; without exception they were delighted with the photographs and were very willing thereafter to let me take as many photographs of them as I liked. Some of these give-away photographs were later used in the thesis, on the advice of Professor Arnold. At first I was hesitant to use them as they were not intended to be used as exhibit prints. I now feel it was a good idea to include them.

I found the technique of photographing people casually, in order to later photograph them in a more formal manner, a method that was very effective for me. I would make some quick photographs of them, and within
a week or two deliver the prints. This was effective in a two-fold manner. It was a way to get to know them better, and it built an element of trust since when I delivered the photographs I never asked for anything other than an opportunity to photograph them again in a more formal manner. Eventually word got around about the guy who would give you photographs for nothing - and I went from famine to feast. This occurred near the end of the time I had been allotted to complete the thesis, and I was unable to exploit it fully - particularly with the jockeys - who were the hardest to get to know. I am quite sure, had I been given another season to work, I would have had enough material for a book.

CHOICE OF A COLOR MATERIAL

Due to the fact I would be photographing at all hours of the day, and in all weather conditions, it became necessary to find a color film with wide latitude. I found that both high speed Ektachrome and Ektachrome-X suffered from desaturation as a result of aerial haze, and went excessively blue when used in cloudy or rainy weather. I then tried Ektacolor I.D.
film, a color negative material sold in bulk with an extremely high contrast gradient. The slope of the curve on this film could be changed by increasing exposure. This film produced excellent results, especially in overcoming aerial haze. It's major drawback was its tendency to scratch quite easily. It was abandoned because of this fault. Fujichrome was then tried, and it proved to be the ideal film for the conditions; fairly high in contrast, excellent color saturation and good latitude. It was used throughout the shooting. Four by five (4X5) Ektacolor internegatives were made from selected transparencies.

CHOICE OF EQUIPMENT

When I started on the work, I utilized conventional equipment. A Nikkormat 35mm and a 35mm Minolta SRT 101, with a variety of lenses. In the course of shooting I found much of the action too fleeting to catch with a standard camera. I invested in a Minolta SRM motorized camera. This proved to be an excellent piece of equipment. During the course of shooting I abandoned the Nikkormat entirely, as its workmanship turned out
to be shoddy.

Another investment was the acquiring of a Fujica 0690 2-1/4 X 3-1/4 camera. This was chosen for its large negative size - also the proportion of the negative is the same as the 35mm. This was employed for many of the portraits. A tripod was always used.

EXPOSURE AND DEVELOPMENT:

All B&W 35mm negatives were made on TRI-X rated at E.I. 500. These were processed in D-76 1:1 for 11 minutes. All 2-1/4 X 3-1/4 negatives were made on TRI-X rated at E.I. 250. They were processed in D-76 1:1 for 11 minutes.

PRINTING METHODS:

Prints were made on 14X17 Kodak Ektamatic SC Double-weight paper and processed in the Kodak Ektamatic Processor. They were then fixed and washed in a conventional manner, and air dried between muslin and blotters. Control of the print was exercised in exposure, and by dodging and burning where necessary.
SELECTION OF FINAL EXHIBIT PHOTOGRAPHS

As stated earlier, a great deal of time and effort went into selecting a color material. However, when the final editing came, only four color shots were included in the final thesis. I have been asked, and have asked myself why this is so. Perhaps the simplest answer is they just didn't convey what I was trying to say. Many of them were quite handsome, but seemed to possess little depth of feeling. The four I chose were exceptions to the preceding, and tied the final presentation together as I had hoped when I made the initial thesis proposal.

The black and white photographs I selected have the simple directness and clarity that I had hoped to achieve all along. Each one, I believe, is an insightful statement about the person and their world. Stylistically I have matured and developed an approach to photography with which I am at last comfortable and confident. I achieved what I set out to do.