Riess, Steven A. *Horse Racing the Chicago Way: Gambling, Politics, and Organized Crime, 1837-1911.* New York: Syracuse University Press, 2022. XIX + 413 pp. Illustrations, Tables, Appendix, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

Reviewed by Duncan R. Jamieson, Ashland University, Ashland OH USA

Thoroughbred horse racing, “The Sport of Kings,” is immensely popular in both the United States and Great Britain among many other nations around the globe.  The Royal Ascot, run in June is undoubtedly England’s most famous and prestigious flat track racing event.  In the United States, The Kentucky Derby, run at Louisville’s Churchill Downs is the first race for the famed Triple Crown.  The Run for the Roses is followed by the Preakness at Baltimore’s Pimlico Race Course.  Finally, the longest of the three races at one and one-half miles is the Belmont Stakes in Elmont, New York, a suburb of New York City.  While these represent the summa cum laude for thoroughbred horse racing, there are thousands of tracks across the United States and Great Britain, in large and not so large cities that thrill and delight millions of fans, male and female who turn out to witness the drama, and, perhaps pick the winner to take home more money than they hoped for.  In addition to the thoroughbreds, harness racing can be found in virtually every community which hosts a county fair, though here it will be trotters and pacers rather than thoroughbreds, with drivers in a two wheeled cart rather than jockeys atop the horse.  In Ashland where we live, the fairgrounds are about a mile away from our house and we can hear the races being announced.  In Wooster where my wife works, she can see the trotters going around the track in the morning as she drives to the College of Wooster.  Whether thoroughbreds or trotters, it is exciting to watch the power of the horse and the skill and strategy of the jockey or the sulky driver.

               I’ve watched the trotters in both Ashland and Wooster and before them thoroughbreds. I grew up in Queens Village, New York, about four miles from Belmont Race Course. I have fond memories as a child seeing the horses as we drove past the stables on our way to wherever. The father of one of my friends was very interested in thoroughbred horse racing.  He would follow the horses’ pedigrees through the mare’s line, and far more often than not he picked the winners, though he rarely bet. That friend often went to Belmont, placing $2.00 bets more for entertainment than the hope of winning, but not being interested in betting myself, I only went to Belmont Race Course once. As Steven Riess points out in his Preface, “people would quickly find it very boring to watch horses ride around an oval unless there was money involved” (xvi). In contrast, my friend and I went to the Bronx to watch the Yankees play multiple times, and I went with my father to Brooklyn to watch “dem bums” play in Ebbets Field before they decamped to the West Coast in 1957.

As will become evident very quickly to anyone who picks up *Horse Racing the Chicago Way*, Steve Riess’ knowledge of horse racing is encyclopedic, and his writing is lively and engaging. This follows his 2011 book, *The Sport of Kings and the Kings of Crime: Horse Racing, Politics and Organized Crime in New York City, 1865-1913*, also published by Syracuse University Press. The greatest interest in the United States was in New York City, followed closely by Chicago. Early on it was more with trotters and pacers, as saddle racing was seen to be “too English.” By the 1830s, however, the memory of America’s colonial past had sufficiently faded which allowed thoroughbred racing to gain in popularity, the huge draw underpinned by gambling, which over time became racing’s downfall. Despite baseball being “America’s pastime,” with Chicago’s White Stockings winning multiple pennants in the 1880s, thoroughbred horse racing had consistently larger audiences.

Riess builds his understanding of horse racing, America’s first sport, around three main points that run throughout the book. First and foremost, gambling made horse racing a successful spectator sport for without the gamblers there would be no way for the tracks to turn a profit, without which there would be no racing. Because the races were all relatively short, the number of races increased the opportunity to bet. On the one hand, gambling was viewed as a victimless activity, though on the other, some believed it ruined families, leaving the wives and children impoverished. Yet it was, as Riess argues, this financial support that allowed two types of tracks to develop. One model is exemplified by Chicago’s Washington Park Club, a nonprofit race course with luxurious stands and large purses to attract the moneyed clientele necessary to build and maintain the facility. Alternatively, smaller and less ostentatious tracks were built with the intent of turning a profit. Like Washington Park they survived because gambling brought sufficient paying fans to allow the tracks to turn a profit. Finally, regardless of location, track personnel needed the protection provided by city governments. While individuals might have been neutral on racing in and of itself, many objected to the betting, either on or off the track, which they saw as sinful, and to the people who participated, seen as immoral and potentially dangerous. This was especially true for those who lived near the venues who believed the tracks brought unsavory characters who reduced the property values and the quality of life for the neighborhood’s residents. All of this was made worse by the reality that politicians protected the track owners. In reality, however, for the moral police, prostitution and alcohol use were far more pressing problems, with gambling on the ponies coming in a distant third.

On the other side, track owners often kept admission prices low to attract spectators, encouraging families to come for an inexpensive outing. The tracks did stimulate the economy as people would spend money on ancillary activities and items. For example, in 1902 horse racing added perhaps $900,000 to Chicago’s revenue. Western Union benefitted financially by providing the wire services for off track betting. Public transit benefited by taking spectators to and from the tracks. Yet despite political protection, the opponents were able to reduce the number of tracks significantly, though ultimately the sport, the tracks and the gambling continued.

The list of people involved with racing is close to endless, some well-known while other names are more anonymous. Financier August Belmont, politicos Carter Harrison, father and son, John Peter Altgeld, machine politicians Mike “Hinky Dink” Kenna, “Bathhouse” John Couglin, “Blind John” Condon and “Big Ed” Corrigan, gamblers and race track owners—are richly described and integrated with Chicago life, racing and politics.

Like its predecessor, *Horse Racing in Chicago* Is an encyclopedic work that will be enjoyed by any and all who have an interest in horse racing, Chicago history, and the biographies of the colorful characters involved in either furthering or lessening its impact on society.