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# **The History Of Horse Racing Leading Up To 1840**

No doubt Henry VIII had his very own views as regards what constituted the 'sport of kings'; nevertheless it is horse racing that commonly carries this appellation. Yet to suggest that racing was the prerogative of a prime is wrong: it was the sport of all, a common interest of peer and peasant, of lord and labourer. Indeed, although William IV himself had no great passion for the turf- he was "bored to death at Ascot" — he acknowledged its worth as a social institution:

Horse racing emerged naturally out of an environment in which horses played an important role: as well as providing a method of transport, they were also status symbols, their quality an overt display of the owner's wealth. Ownership inevitably engendered contention, which led to the organization of races, initially simply matches between 2 horses but later formalized races with a number of entrants. Some races would also serve a business function in letting owners show off their horses prior to offering them for sale. Many race conferences in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were not only for thoroughbred racehorses. At all but the major fixtures there could be events for half-bred horses, hunters, and, occasionally, even ponies.

One reason for this range of rivals was the transport situation: so long as horses had to be walked to meetings they tended to race only locally, so proscribing the number of entrants at any actual gathering. The utilisation of heats was another device to get a full day's racing from a limited supply of horses. The winner of an event was the 1st entrant to win 2 heats; this could frequently need four or maybe more races. Another reason for the variety of horses participating was that most race meetings at this time were essentially social events, and not just for the privileged leisure classes. They used to be a high point of the social calendar for the bulk of the local people who, starved of arranged public entertainment, came determined to enjoy their meeting. If it was feasible to take part at more than spectator level, then they needed to do so; therefore farmers raced, and frequently rode, their hybrids and others their thoroughbred hunters and racing stock. What larger ambition could there be than to ride one's own steed to victory at one's local meeting?

Races before 1840 were not gate-money events. Spectators paid no entry fee: everybody was again able to watch and to watch was free. Unless watchers wished to view from the grandstand (not that there always was one), they paid nada to see the races.

This has led one sports historian to argue that racing was arranged only for [horse betting](#) purposes, for if entrance cash was not charged then clearly racing had no requirement of spectators. It's correct that racing could take place without an audience, but if the group had not been part and parcel of the local meetings, then surely they would be more than the yearly or semi- annual events that they were. At Newmarket, where racing was exclusive to the upper classes and the masses were actively deterred from attending, conferences were far more frequent. Here, and at one or two other select conferences, betting could have been the fulcrum of the sport, but some place else racing was intimately linked with local holidays: travelling shows, gaming booths, beer tents, cock fights, boxing and wrestling matches, open—air dancing, and, for a privileged few, balls and dinner parties, all made a contribution to a full day out.

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