

Steeplechasing's Rich History

American steeplechasing traces its lineage to England and Ireland, but owes its life to nine men from New York. August Belmont, H. DeCourcy Forbes, Samuel S. Howland, James O. Green, Frederick Gebhard, A.J. Cassatt, Foxhall P. Keene, John G. Follansbee and Frederick H. Prince founded the National Steeplechase Association. The purposes of the organization, according to the original charter dated February 15, 1895, have changed little.



Those men created an association to keep records; govern, promote and hold races; advance steeplechasing throughout the United States; license individuals and race meetings.

Racing itself spawned from the foxhunting field had occurred earlier, but never under such sanction. Meets took place on Long Island and in northern New Jersey before spreading to the south to the Carolinas and Tennessee.

In Europe, racing started much earlier. The first recorded steeplechase occurred in 1752 in County Cork, Ireland. A horseman named O'Callaghan and Edmund Blake engaged in a match race, covering about 4 1/2 miles from Buttevant Church to St. Mary's in Doneraile. Church steeples were the most prominent, and tallest, landmarks on the landscape. The sport took its name this simple "chase to the steeple." History did not record the winner of the O'Callaghan Blake race.

Cross-country match races spread to England, where the first reported race involving more than two horses occurred in 1792. Steeplechasing then migrated to established race courses.

Though pointing out the first U.S. steeplechase is a difficult assignment, several of the oldest and most prestigious races are still run. The Maryland Hunt Cup, raced over tall post and rail fences, celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1994. The American Grand National began in 1899. The National Hunt Cup in Radnor Pa. dates to 1909.

The above mentioned men could never have guessed at the future of their sport. Steeplechasing occurs in 12 states, offers over \$4.8 million in total purses, is seen by millions of people, includes the best horses and horsemen thoroughbred racing has to offer and each year raises millions of dollars for charity.

Steeplechasing's backbone from the start was a group of one day meetings in rural communities. Gradually, the focus shifted to major tracks like New York's Belmont and Aqueduct, and New Jersey's Monmouth Park. That trend reversed itself in the 1970s and 1980s as race meetings run for charity expanded throughout the country. The 2001 schedule includes 35 race meets throughout the country. Major track racing now includes stops at such storied hosts as Arlington Park, Belmont Park, Churchill Downs, Keeneland, Pimlico and Saratoga.

The association today, based in Fair Hill, Md., includes 1,000 dues paying members and licensees, a 15-member Board of Directors and a six person staff. Racing occurs March through December and attracted an estimated one million fans last year.

In celebration of its centennial in 1995, steeplechasing refocused its attention on the future by forming the National Steeplechase Foundation. The foundation funds a program for amateur and apprentice jockeys each year, helped secure state of the art photo finish cameras for the sport, created a steeplechase promotional videotape and has helped put the sport on national television.