

Experience the thrill and style of a steeplechase.

And They're Off!

by Tracy Williams

Straining horses pound the turf and vault effortlessly over hurdles, and surrounding their athletic struggle, are clusters of chic ladies and gentlemen drinking champagne out of crystal stemware. Steeplechase blends elegant traditions with racing excitement, creating a concoction of contradictions that is the delight of the event.

History of the Steeplechase

The sport traces its roots to a historic race between the steeples of Buttevant Church and St. Mary's Church in 1752. In the pastoral town of Doneraile, Ireland, Mr. Blake and Mr. O'Callaghan raced their two Irish foxhunters over 4 ½ miles of terrain. During this time, church steeples were usually the most prominent objects in the landscape, but the logical landmarks for this match race unwittingly birthed the title and the sport of steeplechase.

Eventually the sport spread from European soil to American, although its actual beginning here is unknown. However, steeplechase became an official sport on Feb. 15, 1895, when nine men founded the National Steeplechase Association to "keep records; govern, promote and hold races; advance steeplechasing throughout the United States; license individuals and race meetings," according to the NSA. Since then, steeplechase's popularity hasn't waned; it currently exists in 12 states throughout the East.

A Sport of Kings

Steeplechase heightens the excitement of flat racing by punctuating an even plane with hurdles to be cleared at dizzying speeds. "Steeplechasing includes the thrills and speed of Thoroughbred racing at flat tracks. It mixes in the precision of jumping to create a hybrid - like hurdle events in track and field where the premium is on speed, but the concern is focused squarely on the jumps," says the NSA. Steeplechase races are generally two to four miles long and include a series of fences - either timber jumps of varying heights or 4-foot-4-inch hurdles, which are the more popular fence type of the two.

Like any other sport, steeplechase is brought to life by the perfectly-conditioned competitors that battle through each grueling event.

Steeplechase horses must be supreme athletes and possess a blend of talents that enables them to meet the demanding requirements of this sport.

"The ideal steeplechaser has speed, stamina, smarts and enough athletic ability to run and jump at the same time," says the NSA. Oftentimes they are converted flat racers who either used to or still compete in the sport, but they are always Thoroughbreds registered with the Jockey Club. Steeplechase horses can begin competing at 3 years old and generally have long-lived careers - many continue to compete until 10 years old or beyond. Generally they run six to ten times per year, but there is no racing in January and February and only a light season during the summer months. In their off-periods, these horses spend much of their time basking in outdoor freedom, which is perhaps a secret to their longevity. "A steeplechase horse in the off-season is often dirty, hairy and happy," says the NSA.

### A Day at the Races

To attend a steeplechase is to experience more than just the races themselves - the atmosphere is warmed by old-world class and tradition. Spectators arrive mid-morning, and the infield is quickly crowded with vendors and tailgating parties, which bump up against the track railing, allowing an unrivaled closeness to the excitement. Family grilling and barbequing is alternated with themed parties housed in pristine white tents, offering sparkling champagne and sumptuous snacks. Sprinkled throughout the infield are ladies adorned with elegant summer dresses and hats, mingling with the old-timers who disregard the fashion and focus on the thrill of the sport. There are generally five to seven races in a day, but tailgating competitions, hat contests and Jack Russell terrier races liven the spaces between them, making a day at a steeplechase an experience to remember.