

GETTING THEIR DUE



Claiming Crown Acknowledges Often Overlooked Racing Subset

By ALICIA HUGHES

COADY MEDIA/JOHN GALLAGHER

This year's Claiming
Crown will be run under
the twin spires for the
third time since 2022



THE THING WITH FOUNDATIONS IS THEY DON'T ALWAYS HAVE AN OBVIOUS PRESENCE.

Stout by design, they serve as support systems providing underlying integrity. And while they are often concealed by more palatable facades, key structures would not exist were it not for the weight shouldered by the load-bearing base.

With claiming races representing roughly 70% of all Thoroughbred contests in North America, the undisputed backbone of the industry are the blue-collar runners who fill those entry boxes and allow horsemen of all ilk to keep their livelihoods afloat. Theirs is an existence both extraordinarily vital to the sport and regularly obscured as race cards across the country would go the way of the dust pile without their presence, yet they rarely garner accolades or a mention outside their respective shedrows.

That dichotomy of their role in Thoroughbred racing's ecosystem is why Eric Hamelback let his emotions take the wheel as he observed what was transpiring during the 26th Claiming Crown card last fall at Churchill Downs. The jubilant trainer showering her victorious charge in pats and kisses. Owners looking for someone, anyone, to hug. A subsequent declaration from said trainer to a gathering of media that the biggest win of her career had just been secured.

"I'm getting goosebumps now when I say it was a magical experience that day, it really was," the CEO of the National Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association recalled. "I've been



Dan Metzger is the president of the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association which partnered with the National Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association to create an event to spotlight the horses who represent the backbone of the industry



Eric Hamelback, the National HBPA's CEO, says he hopes to see the Claiming Crown grow by incorporating additional "showcase days/qualifying days"

lucky enough to be a part of some very big, important racing days but that day with the likes of (trainer) Brittany Vandenberg and her win and just so many guys who won races, to see their faces and how happy they were, it was a truly magical experience."

Since its inception in 1999, the Claiming Crown has been providing one of the most integral subsets in Thoroughbred racing the kind of elevated experience that usually eludes its hard-knocking participants. A concept born from the mind of former Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association president Drew Couto, the premise of the Claiming Crown was relatively simple: create a championship-type series of races that would shine a light on the lower-level horses who are the heartbeat of the sport while allowing them to compete for purse money that would otherwise be out of reach for equine athletes not at the allowance or stakes level.

With the National HBPA and TOBA working in conjunction to shepherd the single-day showcase, the Claiming Crown has grown from its auspicious roots at Canterbury Park—which hosted 10 of the first 12 editions of the series, including the inaugural six-race card 26 years ago—to its current incarnation; namely a brand that has succeeded in raising the profile and changing perceptions around the claiming ranks while also embodying many of the attributes of a desirable racing product.

Seeing its guaranteed purse money grow from \$560,000 in 1999 to the lofty \$1.1 million offered last year is one of several ways in which the Claiming Crown has evolved. It has had six different homes over the decades—Canterbury, Philadelphia Park (now Parx Racing), Ellis Park, Fair Grounds, Gulfstream Park, and its current residency at Churchill Downs. But while its host venue has shifted, the upward trajectory has remained steadfast.

After only once breaking the \$4 million mark in handle through its first 13 editions, the Claiming Crown has been fully embraced by horseplayers, generating at least \$10 million in handle in 10 of the past 13 seasons beginning with the first year of its

THIS PAGE: TOP: RACE TRACK INDUSTRY PROGRAM/JAMES S. WOOD; BOTTOM: DENIS BLAKE/NATIONAL HBPA
OPPOSITE PAGE: CANDY/RENEE TORBIT PHOTOS



Like a Saltshaker (above) was recognized by TOBA as the 2024 Claiming Crown Horse of the Year. His trainer, Brittany Vanden Berg (below), proclaimed it was the “biggest race we’ve won to date” after the gelding posted a victory in last year’s Claiming Crown Rapid Transit at odds of 13-1

10-year run at Gulfstream Park in 2012. Part of the reason for the widespread support is the fact that the full fields bettors often clamor for have become standard in Claiming Crown tests, as evidenced by the 2024 exercise boasting an average field size of 10.75 for its eight races, which are contested under starter allowance conditions.

When the Pennsylvania-bred gelding Like a Saltshaker got up by a head at the wire to capture the \$140,000 Claiming Crown Rapid Transit over Keen Cat last fall, a triumph that backstopped the now 7-year-old son of Peace and Justice to being named 2024 Claiming Crown Horse of the Year, trainer Vanden Berg jubilantly proclaimed “this is the biggest race we’ve won to date” while his emotional then owner Mike Marsico stated “it’s the premier event we get to compete in.”

For those who have been at the forefront of stewarding the series through its infancy and had to listen to naysayers deride its very existence, being inundated with such feedback has become the truest metric by which they measure its success.

“I remember the early years, there were a lot of whispers around the industry that the Claiming Crown would not survive beyond its initial few years. And it has had its ups and downs, but the last 12-14 years it has really gathered momentum,” TOBA president Dan Metzger said, who has been witness to the Claiming Crown’s ascent since its first outing. “People obviously get into the game for their love of the horse and they’re competitive, but they also do like recognition in terms of, ‘Hey, I won this race.’ The Claiming Crown sheds a light on these horses and gives them their day in the spotlight. We know the majority of horses are claiming horses in our sport; they’re the ones feeding the cards day in and day out. So, I think the Claiming Crown has exceeded expectations and has been a positive for the entire sport.



Mike Maker enters this year's Claiming Crown with the most wins (22) among trainers; Ken Ramsey and his late wife, Sarah, hold the record (16) as owners



"I'll never forget in the first year, Michele Rodriguez from Louisiana won the first Claiming Crown Jewel with One Brick Shy, and to see the emotion from Michele and how happy she was, that was really when I knew this thing had hit the nerve for the sport," Metzger continued. "That first Claiming Crown really laid the foundation for the success it's had over the years."

While the efforts of Canterbury and the Minnesota HBPA were instrumental in getting the Claiming Crown off the ground, notably reworking its own stakes schedule and purse structure to

help bring the series to life, the catalyst behind its most substantial leap forward came when the late Kent Stirling, long-time executive director of the Florida HBPA, pushed for Gulfstream Park to become a long-term host site.

The efforts Stirling made with his board and Frank Stronach, former head of The Stronach Group, which owns Gulfstream Park, to make the Claiming Crown into a Breeders' Cup-esque year-end festival for working class warriors paid immediate dividends. When the first South Florida edition of the event took place on the opening day card at

Gulfstream in December 2012, it offered a purse structure of \$850,000 for seven races—double the amount paid out the prior year at Fair Grounds with five races—and generated more than \$12.2 million in handle, which still ranks as the fourth highest for the Claiming Crown all time.

"Kent felt as if this could become a marquee event if done correctly. And at the time with him having the board structure he did and the influence he did and the support from ownership... we used to laugh that Frank (Stronach) always makes it a party," Hamelback

ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS

"Every time we check a box on a potential claim, we look and think, 'Hey, is this horse (Claiming Crown) eligible?' There are a lot of different factors when you claim a horse and Claiming Crown eligibility is one of those for us."

—TRAINER TOM VAN BERG

said. “Whether it’s a race or a 2-year-old sale, and that’s what Frank did. He exulted it, with Kent’s encouragement, to make it a marquee event.

“Because we typically race after the Breeders’ Cup, the Claiming Crown has become large enough to be considered the start of the next year. Where most of us see the Breeders’ Cup as the end of the season, so to speak, I like to think the Claiming Crown has become enough of an event to kind of kick off, ‘Here we go again, guys, it’s time to get back.’”

Hand in hand with the growth of the Claiming Crown came participation from established horsemen who lacked little in the way of success. The event’s all-time leading trainer is multiple grade 1-winning conditioner Mike Maker with 22 wins while owner Ken Ramsey, who won four Eclipse Awards for outstanding owner along with his late wife, Sarah, reigns with 16 Claiming Crown triumphs to date.

Rather than being a deterrent, the presence of such accomplished connections has made the Claiming Crown all the more impactful for the barns whose bread and butter comes primarily from horses in the proletarian ranks. While competing for high-end stock at public auction is a non-starter for most smaller outfits, the Claiming Crown puts them on a level playing field with some of the super trainers and allows them to flaunt the diamond in the rough they discovered.

“It gives the smaller guys a chance to be able to get a horse that is maybe not quite expensive and be able to compete against some of the ones that were,” said Jeff Hiles, who trains and co-owns 2023 Claiming Crown Horse of the Year and graded stakes-placed Time for Trouble. “A lot of horses fall through the cracks of some of the bigger barns. With Time for Trouble, (Repole Stable) paid \$170,000 for him as a yearling. We paid

\$8,000. I’m not going to the sales paying \$170,000 for horses every year, but I came up with \$8,000 to where I could buy him. So, it gives someone like myself a chance.

“When we got Time for Trouble, we won a 13-way shake to get him. So, you still have to get lucky, you still have to get



A loyalist to the Claiming Crown, trainer Tom Van Berg won two races at the event in 2022

the horse. But you have more of a chance to do it with less money. You’ll have Mike Maker and those guys in there, but you also have people like myself and (trainer) Tom Van Berg that don’t have 200 head of horses. We may only have 10 or 15 or however many we’ve got at the time, but we can compete against them.”

For Van Berg, the accessibility of the Claiming Crown and level of purse money it offers has been key in helping him attract new clients to the sport, specifically the Grit to Glory Racing syndicate he formed a handful of years ago. By working the claiming ranks, he can provide an entry point for owners at a more feasible level financially.

And because of the starter conditions

the Claiming Crown is contested under, said owners can watch their horse compete without the fear of a tag hanging over a charge they’ve become emotionally attached to.

“Most people cannot go out and spend \$200,000-\$300,000 on a horse and go compete in maiden special weights or allowance races. This way, a lot of them can get into the industry and be able to learn about it and see how much fun it can be,” said Van Berg, who won two Claiming Crown races in 2022. “The Claiming Crown is the pinnacle of that. When you’re running in those starter races leading up to the Claiming Crown or the Claiming Crown itself, there is not a tag on those horses, and it makes it more enjoyable.

“Every time we check a box on a potential claim, we look and think, ‘Hey, is this horse (Claiming Crown) eligible?’ There are a lot of different factors when you claim a horse and Claiming Crown eligibility is one of those for us.”

Topping itself has become a happy problem the Claiming Crown has encountered of late and the 27th edition taking place beneath the Twin Spires Nov. 15 has been set up to try and do just that. For the first time, a Claiming Crown Showcase Day was held at Colonial Downs in August with the top two finishers in each of the eight races earning an automatic berth in the corresponding tests at Churchill Downs. Being situated in Louisville has been a boost from a logistical standpoint for horses shipping in and this year will also feature the Chilukki Stakes (G3) on the card as well as a National Handicapping Challenge qualifier.

“I would like it to stay at Churchill for a little while,” Hamelback said. “I think we had 12 different states represented in last year’s Claiming Crown, and that’s

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pretty cool. I’m certainly not opposed to moving it around but what I want to expand upon is the showcase days/qualifying days. I want to see more jurisdictions host a day leading up to it, just like Breeders’ Cup does with their Win and You’re In; that’s what I’m hoping to try and expand.”

What has swelled over the years is what the Claiming Crown has come to mean to its backbone of a population. Day in and day out, the claiming outfits and horses in their care are responsible for holding up the majority of the nation’s racing product.

The chance to see them feted at a level worthy of their contribution is both a professional achievement for the horsemen involved and a deeply personal victory for all who keep beating the drum for the heart and soul of the sport.

“There is kind of a knock that we don’t value these horses as much as a stakes horse or allowance horse,” Van Berg said. “Incorrectly, they assume they don’t get the care or the appropriate respect from the horsemen’s population—and that couldn’t be further from the truth.”

“These trainers, they work so hard... and this is their reward for it, same with the owners,” Metzger said. “And some of these horses are blue-collar stories from humble beginnings to success at the Claiming Crown. It’s a great, great story for Thoroughbred racing that I think sometimes has been overlooked because at the very beginning, there were a lot of people who scoffed at it. It’s proved its critics wrong.” 



Time for Trouble was a \$170,000 Keeneland September Yearling Sale purchase in 2018. In 2021, he was an \$8,000 claim by trainer Jeff Hiles. The English Channel gelding took down the 2023 Claiming Crown Horse of the Year, and as of the end of August was approaching \$700,000 in career earnings