

FOR MY OLD KENTUCKY HOME, FAR AWAY

BY MATT O'NEIL

By 11 a.m. on May 4 2002, Churchill Downs has already become the third largest city in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. And more fans still are streaming in the gates on Longfield Avenue, on Central Avenue and on Fourth Street. They are clothed, most of them anyway, by Armani, Dockers and Hanes. The sun is held in a soft blue sky as it bathes the scene below in an electric yellow hue. People have come to Louisville and to Kentucky on this May weekend from all 50 states and numerous foreign countries. There is no place on earth they would rather be. It's Derby Day after all.

Twenty three hundred miles away in Portland, Ore., Jared Hayes and his wife Sarah Mace are just rising. As the horses are saddled for the first race in Louisville, they stretch and yawn and are greeted by the anticipation they grudgingly abandoned in favor of sleep late the night before. As in their native Kentucky, the sky is bright and blue and there is a rarefied excitement in the air. It's Derby Day after all.

A boy from Winchester, Ky., just outside of Lexington, Jared was bitten by the Derby Bug in his high school days.

"I worked at a small grocery store/restaurant/bar called Etona's on the Kentucky River in Clark County," Jared remembered. "I had to work there on Derby Day one year, and the bar was packed with people having a great time. The only thing I wanted was two free minutes from work so I could go back to the bar and watch the race. Unfortunately there were people coming in buying gum, soft drinks, milk, who seemed to have no idea that post time was a minute away. I ended up missing the race live and remember being infuriated that everyone didn't drop everything to watch the race. I guess it was a bit much, but I still kind of feel that way today"

If you're a friend of Jared and Sarah nowadays in Portland you have the opportunity to drop everything and spend Derby Day as if you were in the Bluegrass. Ever since they moved to Portland three years ago they have hosted a Kentucky Derby party. In fact "party" may not even be an accurate description. An "experience" is more like it.

Sarah makes her way to the kitchen of their small second floor carriage house apartment, while Jared clicks on the television for the ESPN Derby Day Coverage. Kenny Rice and Charlsie Cantey are discussing the controversy surrounding the entry, then scratch of Danthebluegrassman. Sarah excitedly pops her head in the living room, "Anything new going on?"

"(ESPN) is the best thing we have to keep in a continuous spirit from Friday morning through Saturday evening," Jared said. "It's satisfying to turn on the TV on Friday morning, see Kenny, Charlsie, the local WHAS team, the twin spires, the hats, the happy faces. Since I can't be there, it's like a childhood security blanket. I'm not sure what we would do if we didn't have ESPN/ESPN2"

That longing for home and to share in its biggest day is the impetus for Sarah and Jared's annual Derby Day parties. Both had held their own while in graduate school before getting married — Jared in Boston, Mass., and Sarah in Savannah, Ga. Jared, who had lived for several



Photo by Joseph Thompson

years in the Derby epicenter of Louisville, became particularly homesick during the spring of 1997. It was his first semester at the University of Massachusetts and his first outside of Kentucky.

"I missed Keeneland, the Kentucky prep races, the blooming dogwoods, the slow thawing of winter in Louisville, the Chow Wagons, the buzz in the air, Thunder (Over Louisville). I hadn't planned on having a Derby party until all this hit me," Jared said.

Around 20 people showed up for Jared's hastily prepared soirée. Even on a tight budget he prepared beer cheese, burgoo, biscuits and mint juleps. It was a success in the usual terms — everyone had a great time. But it held a much larger and unexpected consequence.

"People really didn't have a sense of what Derby was all about, and they were amazed at everything that was involved," Jared recounted. "I had everyone bet on the race, which made it exciting. That's the first year the singing of My Old Kentucky Home cut through my heart."

It was also the first year Jared came to realize there really is no place like home.

"From that moment on Kentucky, the Derby, bourbon, horses, high school/college basketball took on more meaning to me," he said. "I was an unofficial ambassador at this point."

For Sarah the sentiment was similar, although she found herself away from her Ole Kentucky home at a much earlier age. The daughter of an Air Force colonel, she spent her childhood in various locations around the country. But on Derby Day she was in Kentucky wherever she was.

"When my Dad taught at the Air Force Academy, each year we had a party for the cadets from Kentucky," Sarah said, "and they usually drank an entire cooler-worth of beverages. I remember a box of Ale-8 would usually arrive pre-Derby from our Kentucky families. Derby was always a connection to back home, something televised regardless of where we lived, a yearly flood of scenes and sounds from home."

Sarah continued the tradition while attending Savannah College of Art and Design. Although her parties were typically smaller than Jared's, everyone wore hats and she served Savannah-style burgoo made with crab and shrimp.

Jared had taken the previous day, Oaks day, off from his job as a school psychologist, to make the burgoo and benedictine (while keeping an eye on ESPN, of course). Just after Farda Amiga won the Kentucky Oaks, he finished putting up a pair of small canopy tents in the small yard between their landlord's house and the carriage house to shelter the food, the two borrowed televisions and a portion of the mingling areas. Derby drinks will be served upstairs.

Friday evening, after Sarah returns from work, until the guests arrive on Saturday afternoon is filled with all the minor details one must take care of to host 50 or so guests. Supplies must be purchased, food and table ware must be laid out, and there are always the last minute trips to the store for forgotten or unconsidered items. Luckily for Jared there is Off-Track Betting in Portland,

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and before the guests begin arriving he slips away to make his bet on the Kentucky Derby.

By 5:03 p.m. the crowd at Churchill is ebullient, intoxicated by the constant flow of beer and bourbon and by the collective energy of 130,000 people under cloudless blue skies. Beat Hollow has just won the Woodford Reserve Turf Classic, the final race before the Big Race. The infield tote boards and the hundreds of television monitors throughout the track show that the Kentucky Derby will be run in 57 minutes. The reality that the race is imminent ratchets up the excitement level. The buzz grows louder as more and more people settle into the place from which they will view the "Greatest Two Minutes In Sports." The months of prep races and the weeks of Derby-related events — the parties, the parades, the fireworks, the balloon races — have all led up to this. The final countdown has begun.

Bonnie, a docent at the Portland Art Museum where Sarah serves as assistant curator of art, and her husband Bob are the first to arrive at the Hayes'. Sarah, wearing a flowered turquoise skirt, black blouse and homemade turquoise hat, greets them with her large and gracious smile. She ushers them upstairs for drinks. Everyone is encouraged to wear a festive hat, and Bonnie has complied. Bob is dressed smartly as well, in khakis, a yellow polo shirt and a navy sport coat. Not to be outdone, Jared is donned in blue seersucker trousers, a white shirt and a yellow tie.

Betting on the Derby is permitted,

DERBY STORIES AN INFIELDER'S PERSPECTIVE

The fun simply never ended on my first and my last trip to the most famous horse race in the world, the Kentucky Derby. In previous years, I experienced this tremendous event about three yards from my fully equipped home entertainment center with dolby surround sound. Alright it was a 13-inch black and white TV with a highly intricate antenna set up, but it still let me see my horse come across the finish line — dead last. I think the jockey could have dismounted and run faster than my Derby pick.

My good friend J.T. offered to drive four of our friends and myself to the great city of Louisville for this grand equestrian event. He offered because he was confident he could acquire his parents new Suburban to ensure a comfortable ride to the races.

About 7:30 a.m. on Derby Day, J.T. arrived on my doorstep with his 1976 Volkswagen Beetle. As the clowns started to exit from the trunk and side doors, an old Nat King Cole tune sprang into my head — "Unforgettable in Every Way." After piling back into the Beetle with my dearest buddies, I quickly decided that I needed more girls in my life. Deodorant should not be an option, but a requirement, but try telling that to a guy who has drunk his breakfast.

Arriving at Churchill Downs, I was in awe at the numbers of people... not wearing shirts. Common conversation during our trek to the infield (later the mud pit) involved ingenious ideas for smuggling alcohol past security. The most common — Evian water bottles filled with a slightly more potent clear liquid.

My friend, however, beat all — a colonoscopy bag strapped to his inner thigh. It's a true experience taking a drink from a small hose hanging out of your friends trousers. It worked, and needless to say I saved a great deal of money.

A day full of hot sun, cool drinks, no shirts, no discretion, good friends, no horses in sight, a losing ticket and some of the best memories.

I think a conversation with a woman just after the final race summarizes just what an experience the infield offers. I was sitting on the grass waiting for my friends, when the lady laying on the grass two feet from me remarked, "I really would like to see Jeff Gordon win this one."

Enough said.

By Todd Mercier, entertainment junkie

encouraged and expected. As has been the case at all of Jared's Derby Day events, a simple pari-mutuel style pool is run: put up two dollars, pick a horse and those that select correctly divvy up the pot. (It's never happened, but if no one picks the winner all bets are refunded). Bonnie likes Saarland; Bob takes Perfect Drift.

"Hosting the Derby party is like being an interpreter," Sarah said. "We're there to explain the food, the customs, the songs, the reason, the (two-minute) time (of the race) — everyone is surprised by the time — all the while having a good time," she said. "And it is a good time. I think it gives Northwest people a glimpse into a whole new yet traditional world. People are now looking forward to it. They've marked the first Saturday in May on their calendars. Now it's part of their spring."

"Most people know about Kentucky either because of negative stereotypes, basketball, or

DERBY STORIES AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Heading home from my first Kentucky Derby, in 1960, it surely did not occur to me that I had begun a personal cycle which would remain unbroken to this day. Perhaps it was because I had beginner's luck with my win ticket on Venetian Way that day, or maybe it was the euphoria of the experience was like none other I had enjoyed to that time. And when War Emblem claimed his roses last May, I was there for a 43rd consecutive year, rejoicing in that same euphoria and realizing that I continued to be blessed with a kind of beginner's luck — not with a 43rd winner mind you — but with the extraordinary fortune over the years to enjoy good health, good friends and the great pleasure of being a part of Kentucky's signature day.

I have read that Arturo Toscanini, when asked which was his favorite Beethoven Symphony, replied, "The one I have just finished conducting." Which has been by favorite Derby? "The one I have just attended!" The most memorable? In 1963, I was able to convince my drill sergeant at Fort Knox where I was "attending" Army basic training, to give me afternoon leave to keep my string — three in a row — in tact for Chateaugay's wonderful win.

In 1967, the stretch was flanked by National Guardsmen (it could have been me!) to ward off any protesters, as Proud Clarion stormed through mud to his upset victory. The 1970 race produced the longshot Dust Commander, trained by Don Combs, a fraternity brother from college. Three years later, Secretariat blazed home faster than any before or since.

I have enjoyed the Derby from the infield, the grandstand, the first turn, the press box, the roof, Millionaires' Row, and a finish line box in the third floor clubhouse. And I have never had a bad seat. There are no bad seats at Churchill Downs on the first Saturday in May.

Charlie Stone
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they may have watched or at least heard about Derby," Jared said. "I think most people are honestly touched by the genuine pride we show throughout the day. Nobody really has any idea it's more than just a race: it's a celebration of spring, of Kentucky, of friends, of food, of drink, of merriment. They get it after they experience it."

Sarah and Jared's stint as "unofficial" Kentucky ambassadors' ended in the months following last year's party, when the certificate declaring them Kentucky Colonels arrived in the mail. The Kentucky Colonel organization was founded in 1931 and confers membership to "Kentucky's ambassador(s) of good will and fellowship around the world".

"We realize there are a lot of Colonels out there, but we feel especially proud of ours because we truly feel that we spread the good word about our home," said Jared.

It's 5:45 p.m. in Louisville, Ky., and 2:45 in Portland, Ore. At Churchill, track bugler Steve Buttleman steps out of the infield pagoda and onto the terrace that rings the Derby winners circle. With military precision he raises his bugle, and with the brassy sound of his horn, calls the horses to the post for the 128th Kentucky Derby. The 130,000 revelers at Churchill Downs roar as if someone has turned on a plutonium-powered vacuum. In a backyard on the other side of the country 50 more revelers join in. All of the labors of the past weeks, while sometimes tedious and stressful, have now born fruit for Jared and Sarah. They have an yard full of friends, many wearing hats and suits coats, many more with a mint julep in hand, all wearing smiles. It's Derby Day after all, even if one is not in Kentucky, and it is a particularly satisfying scene for the hosts.

The NBC television cameras are fixed on the horses as they file out of the paddock, through the grandstand tunnel and onto the sun splashed racetrack. Right on cue the University of Louisville marching band begins to play "My Old Kentucky Home."

Sarah and Jared had made a point this year to pass out the lyrics to Stephen Foster's classic song. While the party will go on long the after the race, it is this moment that proves most fulfilling for these Kentucky natives.

"We had a chorus of Oregonians singing My Old Kentucky Home," he said. "Talk about holding back the tears."