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COAT OF ARMS

An owner's choice of racing silks can reflect history, personality, and the desire to stand out from the crowd

By Christopher Oakford

Keeneland's lawn jockeys sport the silks of owners of recent grade I stakes winners.

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In 1898 the industrialist and Thoroughbred owner/breeder W.C. Whitney set about to find a set of racing silks. Like many other powerful people, Whitney knew what he wanted; in this case silks of a single color. After all, single-color silks traced to the early days of organized horse racing in England, and Whitney greatly respected the sport's heritage and traditions.

And luckily, Whitney knew were he could find them. The Earl of Durham's set, in the colors of his old school, Eton College, were some of the most famous and historic in England. But by the late 1890s, the earl was in significant financial difficulties. Wasting no time, Whitney approached him with an offer to buy them but miraculously got away without having to pay a cent. "You can have them," said the down-at-heel earl. "They've been no luck to me!"

Unlucky for the earls of Durham, the silks proved to be charmed for the Whitneys. The family's Eton blue-and-brown silks subsequently adorned generations of runners from Artful and Regret to Equipoise and Top Flight and remain among the most iconic in American racing.

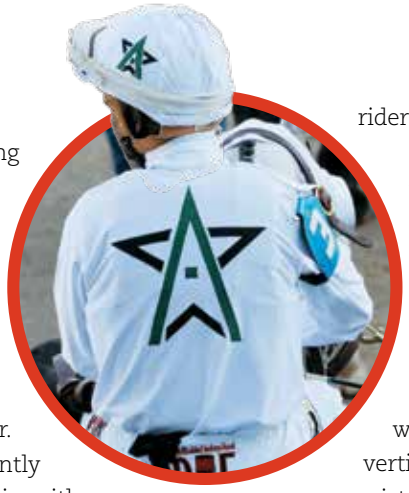
Some owners, such as Ken Ramsey, use a straightforward approach in their choice of silks.

Silks, the jewel-bright jackets worn by jockeys, help identify horse and rider and make racing one of the most vibrant and elegant of sports. They have a long and fascinating history, with the use of color in horse racing chronicled in both ancient Greece and Rome.

The formal establishment of racing silks occurred in 1762, when members of England's Jockey Club met at Newmarket to decide which colors their horses would race in "for the greater convenience of distinguishing the horses in running, and also for the prevention of disputes," according to the minutes. Of the 19 members present, 17 chose single colors, such as sky blue, yellow, deep red, and black. Many of the colors had a long association with their families, being either the liveries worn by their servants or on their coats of arms.

The "straw" registered by the Duke of Devonshire is still used by the family's racing stable and likely the oldest racing colors in existence.

Like the coats of arms from which racing silks evolved, today's colors can contain historical references as well as reflect personal sentiment or a sense of individuality. For example, owners whose silks are adorned with a sash, such as Prince Khalid Abdullah, have adopted what is known in heraldry as the "bend" — a symbol that often denoted that the bearer had performed some heroic military deed. Silks with a chevron (derived from the French word for rafter) indicate a builder



of churches or castles.

And while today's owners might not be trying to convey quite the same information, many nevertheless take pride in having a meaning to their silks. Some, such as WinStar and Ken Ramsey, take a direct approach, stamping their emblem or initials in the center of their jockey's jacket. Calumet's original devil's red with blue collar and hoops came from the packaging of its eponymous baking powder. And others, such Stephen Valente, who recently started Loudmouth Racing LLC in partnership with his cousin, choose colors with a different significance. "My cousin went to Michigan State and I went to Siena College, and both of their colors are green. So it was kind of a natural choice," he said.

American individuality

The story of silks in American racing is somewhat different. Less is known about their development here, in part because while English sportsmen employed artists such as Stubbs and Wootton to paint their horses and jockeys, American patrons preferred portraits of themselves.

As in Britain, the first record of an American owner trying to claim colors occurs in the late 18th century, in the 1770 diary of Jacob Hiltzheimer, a general contractor and member of the Philadelphia Jockey Club. But whereas the English Jockey Club's efforts to impose order were eventually successful, in America a lack of central authority meant that owners would often race their horses on consecutive days in two completely different colors. Even as late as 1826, the rules governing the fall meet in Lexington, Kentucky, still needed to stipulate that: "It is indispensable that … riders should be dressed in silk jackets and caps."

Today, with the exception of New York, an owner's silks only need to be approved by the steward in the relevant jurisdiction. Patterns that would be prohibited in Europe are free to be chosen here, and in theory there is little to prevent two owners having the same colors and design.

As Barbara Borden, Kentucky's chief state steward, explains: "We do have some criteria for what can and can't be on them, we don't allow advertising or anything vulgar or inappropriate, but as far as registering silks, we don't have that in this state."

That said, the less stringent rules that allow owners to place their initials on silks, such as the Z for Zayat worn by American Pharoah, or have colors depicting the Stars and Stripes perfectly express American freedom and individuality.

Wittingly or not, some owners are keeping alive the ancient symbols of the heraldic age, while others reflect their sporting, college, or business connections, For some, however, a more pragmatic need takes precedence. Jaime Roth of LNJ Foxwoods, a rapidly expanding outfit that started with four horses in 2012 and now has more than 70, settled on a gold chevron and stars on a navy blue jacket on the advice of her trainer. "He said to me, 'You want something simple that you can really see on the track.' That's when we came up with the blue and gold. The gold really pops out and catches the eye, especially the cap," she explained.

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Top, WinStar Farm uses a star emblem on its silks while Ahmed Zayat's silks, above, display the now well-known Z.

Recently, Antoinette Brocklebank, who makes Roth's silks, was asked to create a special set for the owner so they could be included in a painting by Andre Pater — a thank-you gift for her parents whose financial backing has been crucial to LNJ Foxwoods' success. The commission called for a full satin jacket that would catch the light and a large, lined satin cap — something that is becoming increasingly rare, as jockeys, trainers, and owners look to modern fabrics to give them an edge.

"Nowadays, I do more of the aerodynamic silks. They're

CLUB BUTTONS

Since 1968 Keeneland has taken the opportunity each year to honor a prominent individual in the sport by producing buttons in their racing or farm silks. Keeneland Club members wear the highly coveted buttons at the spring and fall meets. Past honorees include Hal Price Headley (1968); Calumet Farm (1969); Claiborne Farm (1970); Louis Lee Haggin (1972); William S. Farish and Lane's End Farm (1987); William T. Young and Overbrook Farm (1997); Juddmonte Farms and Prince Khalid Abdullah (2006); and Helen Alexander (2009.)

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Clockwise from top: Prince Khalid Abdullah's Juddmonte Farms silks contain a "bend" or sash; a version of the Whitney silks appeared on Marylou Whitney's Quality Bird in 2015 at Keeneland; the Duke of Devonshire's colors are the oldest continuously used silks.

form-fitted and don't flap in the wind. And they're lighter, so the jockeys like them. The other thing is the aerodynamic caps are stretchy; they'll fit over all the different styles of skull cap that the jocks wear now," said Brocklebank.

Aerodynamic silks are similar to the jerseys worn by cyclists. A relatively recent innovation, they are now, according to many silks makers, the preferred choice among owners and trainers.

Valente, whose trainer advised him to purchase aerodynamic silks, said, "I don't how accurate he is, but [our trainer] said: 'It's one second for every mile.' I go, like, we could use all the help we can get! Even if he's not exactly right, if I can shave a half a second, I'll be happy!"

It's all a far cry from the velvet waistcoats and billowing shirts worn by jockeys in the days of Charles II when the world's first Thoroughbreds strode across the turf. What hasn't changed, though, is the role color plays in the sport of kings. And racing being what it is, it is tempting to ask whether some colors win more or simply seem luckier than others. Certainly, in Hong Kong, red is often a favorite being considered a lucky color in Chinese culture.

ABOUT SILKS

Despite first establishing the use of silks in 1762, owners in the UK were only formally required to register their silks in 1971.

The oldest silks in continuous use are the "all straw" of the Duke of Devonshire, which were claimed at the first "silks" meeting in 1762.

Until the 1770s, all jockeys wore plain black velvet caps. The same decade saw the introduction of many familiar patterns, such as hoops and stripes.

The oldest American silks are thought to be the scarlet jacket and cap of the Morris family. The family owned Ruthless, the winner of the first Belmont in 1867. The silks were registered in 1895.

An average pair of silks by Antoinette Brocklebank starts at $350.

The Jockey Club oversees registration only in New York. It applies a strict policy of what is permissible, and charges an initial fee of $100, followed by an annual renewal of $25.

And in Britain, analysis of the past 100 winners of the country's most popular steeplechase, the Grand National, revealed that a disproportionate number (40 percent) were carrying either blue or green.

For the Whitneys, at least, the acquisition of the Earl of Durham's silks proved fortuitous. The Eton blue silks continued strong through three generations of Whitneys. In 2004, C.V. Whitney's widow, Marylou, raced her Birdstone in a version of the family silks. He won the Belmont Stakes in an upset that denied the popular Smarty Jones a Triple Crown. **KM**