

# Horse Racing Keeps Trying to Redesign the Test Instead of Confronting What Changed

## Can Greatness Survive Pressure Without Accommodation?

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### **Abstract**

This essay argues that the current push to move the Preakness farther from the Kentucky Derby misdiagnoses the problem. The issue is not simply that modern horses need more time between Triple Crown races; it is that modern campaign construction has changed. Derby qualification pressure, ownership incentives, stallion-value economics, physical management, weather, training interruptions, and developmental timing all shape whether a horse returns in the Preakness. The essay distinguishes “lightly raced” from “lightly trained,” uses current examples such as Cherie DeVaux’s cracked-heel management, Sovereignty’s glue-on shoes, Chief Wallabee’s blinkers, and Journalism’s résumé-driven campaign, and compares international Triple Crown structures to show that more spacing alone does not manufacture Triple Crown winners. The central claim is that racing should confront the incentives that changed how horses arrive at the test before redesigning the test itself.

### **Keywords**

Triple Crown; Preakness Stakes; Kentucky Derby; Belmont Stakes; Derby points system; campaign construction; Thoroughbred racing; horse racing incentives; lightly raced horses; lightly trained horses; horsemanship; race spacing; stallion value; ownership philosophy; Derby qualification; cracked heels; glue-on shoes; Chief Wallabee; Cherie DeVaux; Bill Mott; Sovereignty; Journalism; fresh horses; Preakness new shooters; racing weather; Baltimore precipitation; international Triple Crown; English Triple Crown; Irish Triple Crown; Japanese Triple Crown; greatness under pressure.

Horse racing is once again discussing whether the Preakness Stakes should be moved farther away from the Kentucky Derby.

The public argument sounds simple enough. Modern horses are supposedly too lightly raced, too fragile, too carefully managed to run back in two weeks after the Derby. Therefore, move the Preakness back another week, create more recovery time, increase participation, and preserve the possibility of another Triple Crown winner.

The problem is that this argument diagnoses the wrong thing.

The issue is not simply race spacing.

The issue is how modern horses arrive at the Kentucky Derby in the first place.

And until horse racing honestly confronts that reality, it will continue trying to redesign the test instead of understanding what actually changed.

That distinction matters because horses do not exist in a vacuum.

Every campaign is a chain of interconnected physical, developmental, environmental, and business decisions. Every horse arrives at Churchill Downs carrying the accumulated effects of months of training choices, ownership priorities, qualification pressures, weather complications, physical management, recovery compromises, and commercial calculations.

Public conversation keeps flattening all of that complexity into one simplistic conclusion:

“The horses just can’t do it anymore.”

That is not serious analysis.

And it ignores how horse racing actually operates in modern reality.

The Triple Crown is one of the last American sporting structures that still openly asks whether greatness can survive pressure without accommodation.

That question is the test itself.

## **The Triple Crown Was Never Supposed To Be Easy**

The current conversation often gets framed emotionally. Traditionalists supposedly want to protect history. Reformers supposedly want to protect horses.

But this is not really a battle between old thinking and new thinking.

It is a debate about incentives.

The Triple Crown was never designed to produce annual winners. It was designed to identify exceptional horses capable of surviving exceptional demands under exceptional circumstances.

That includes:

- talent
- soundness
- recovery
- adaptability
- conditioning
- management
- campaign construction
- ownership patience
- tactical placement
- mental resilience

The difficulty is the feature.

Not the flaw.

Before Secretariat won the Triple Crown in 1973, the sport had already gone 25 years without one. Then Seattle Slew won in 1977. Affirmed followed in 1978. Then another drought lasted until American Pharoah in 2015.

Long droughts are not evidence that the structure is broken.

Rarity is the point.

The public conversation now increasingly sounds like horse racing wants the appearance of preserving the Triple Crown while simultaneously reducing the demands required to achieve it.

But if every horse can comfortably navigate the sequence, then the sequence stops identifying exceptionality.

The Derby horse returning in two weeks is not supposed to have an easy assignment.

The fresh horse waiting in Baltimore is not supposed to be guaranteed victory.

And the Belmont Stakes is not supposed to reward survival alone.

The entire structure is designed to reveal whether an exceptional horse can withstand different distances, different recovery windows, different surfaces, different competition, and different campaign pressures within a compressed period of time.

That is why the accomplishment matters.

# More Spacing Does Not Automatically Create Triple Crown Winners

The American Triple Crown is not the only Thoroughbred racing structure that asks difficult questions of three-year-olds.

Britain has its own Triple Crown:

- the 2,000 Guineas
- the Derby
- the St Leger

In 2026, the English Triple Crown schedule looked like this:

- 2,000 Guineas: May 2 at Newmarket
- Derby: June 6 at Epsom
- St Leger: September 12 at Doncaster

That creates approximately:

- five weeks between the Guineas and Derby
- fourteen weeks between the Derby and St Leger

Those races are run on turf.

They occur in a racing culture that traditionally values patient development.

They unfold over more than four months instead of five weeks.

And yet Britain has not produced a Triple Crown winner since Nijinsky in 1970.

That matters.

Because if spacing alone created Triple Crown winners, Britain should be producing them regularly.

It is not.

And participation itself narrows despite all that spacing. Many Guineas horses never even attempt the St Leger because modern breeding and commercial preferences increasingly produce horses optimized for shorter distances. The St Leger tests stamina many modern bloodlines no longer prioritize aggressively.

That matters too.

The problem is not simply spacing.

The problem is incentives.

Ireland tells a similar story.

Its Triple Crown consists of:

- the Irish 2,000 Guineas
- the Irish Derby
- the Irish St Leger

In 2026:

- Irish 2,000 Guineas: May 23
- Irish Derby: June 28
- Irish St Leger: September 13

That creates:

- roughly five weeks between the Guineas and Derby
- roughly eleven weeks between the Derby and St Leger

Ireland has produced only two Triple Crown winners:

- Museum in 1935
- Windsor Slipper in 1942

Again:

massive spacing

turf racing

patient development culture

rare accomplishment

Japan spreads its Triple Crown even farther:

- Satsuki Sho: April 19
- Tokyo Yushun: May 31
- Kikuka Sho: October 25

That creates:

- roughly six weeks between the first and second legs
- roughly twenty-one weeks between the second and third legs

Japan has produced eight Triple Crown winners, most recently Contrail in 2020. That's more modern Triple Crown winners than Britain or Ireland, but still only a small handful across decades.

And even there, spacing does not eliminate campaign management, specialization, participation decisions, fatigue, or attrition.

The point is not that these systems are identical to America's.

They are not.

Different surfaces.

Different climates.

Different breeding priorities.

Different campaign philosophies.

Different commercial structures.

But that is exactly why the comparison matters.

Even with:

- more spacing
- turf surfaces
- developmental patience
- longer campaigns
- more recovery time

Triple Crown winners remain rare.

Spacing alone does not manufacture greatness.

## **What Actually Changed**

What changed over time was not the difficulty of the Triple Crown itself.

What changed was the economic and developmental environment surrounding modern racehorses.

Years ago, many major ownership operations came from deeply rooted racing families with inherited standing, embedded knowledge, breeding infrastructure, and generational participation in the sport. Racing was certainly still business, but many of those operations approached horse development with different pressures and timelines.

The culture itself rewarded patience.

A talented horse still climbed through maiden races, allowance conditions, and developmental stages because that was considered proper horsemanship. Trainers who moved too aggressively risked criticism from owners, other horsemen, and the broader culture of the sport itself.

Today, the incentives are entirely different.

A colt can become commercially valuable after one major Grade 1 victory. A Derby contender is no longer simply a racehorse. He is a future stallion prospect whose economic value can change overnight.

That changes campaign behavior.

If a trainer and owner believe they possess a horse talented enough to compete at the highest level after only a few starts, there is less incentive to spend time proving the horse can beat easier conditions first. Modern campaigns increasingly revolve around maximizing opportunity windows before physical setbacks, distance limitations, developmental ceilings, or market realities intervene.

That reality makes many people uncomfortable because it sounds clinical.

But it is real.

And it directly affects how horses arrive at Churchill Downs.

## **“Lightly Raced” Does Not Mean “Lightly Trained”**

People hear the phrase “lightly raced” and automatically interpret it as “unprepared.”

But lightly raced does not necessarily mean lightly trained.

Those are two completely different things.

Many modern horses accumulate extensive physical foundation before ever making a career start:

- timed workouts
- gate schooling
- stamina conditioning
- gallop schedules
- recovery protocols
- resistance training
- mental development

Those horses may lack racing experience, but they are often physically fit and highly conditioned.

The 2026 Derby trail offered important examples.

Chad Brown’s Emerging Market entered the Kentucky Derby with only two career starts. To outsiders, that immediately became proof that modern racing had become reckless.

But Brown explained that the abbreviated campaign was not originally intentional. Physical setbacks delayed the colt's debut while training and development continued behind the scenes.

The horse was not sitting idle.

The same applied to Brown's Oaks winner, Always a Runner, whose development was delayed before ultimately winning the Kentucky Oaks in only her third career start.

Those horses were not artificially dragged into elite competition by irresponsible trainers.

Their ability brought them there.

And even Emerging Market's Derby defeat cannot simply be categorized as "lightly raced horse exposed." Post-race discussion suggested the colt likely lost a front shoe during the Derby itself. Historically and practically, losing a shoe during a race like the Derby is not a meaningless event. It changes traction, comfort, balance, and efficiency.

But public analysis prefers simple conclusions.

If a lightly raced horse loses, inexperience becomes the automatic explanation. If a seasoned horse loses, nobody says the horse had "too many starts."

The analysis becomes selective.

## **The Derby Itself Creates Compression**

The public conversation now treats the Preakness as the source of modern pressure.

But much of the pressure already exists long before horses arrive in Baltimore.

The Derby points system itself compresses campaigns.

Late-season prep races carry enormous qualifying importance. Horses must run in designated races, often within relatively tight windows, to accumulate enough points to qualify for Churchill Downs.

That creates:

- travel pressure
- timing pressure
- spacing pressure
- developmental pressure
- ownership pressure

Connections frequently make difficult decisions simply to secure a Derby position before the gate closes.

And because the Kentucky Derby happens once each year, trainers and owners naturally prioritize getting there above everything else.

That changes behavior.

Equipment changes happen earlier.

Campaigns get accelerated.

Spacing becomes tighter.

Training schedules become more aggressive.

Chief Wallabee represented that reality clearly.

Bill Mott and Junior Alvarado openly discussed the horse's talent while also acknowledging that blinkers were being added heading into the Derby. Alvarado's point was not that blinkers were ideal timing in a vacuum. It was that this was the Derby. The horse had ability, the race was now, and the connections had to make him competitively comfortable in that environment.

That matters.

Because equipment changes like blinkers are not cosmetic decisions. They are adaptations made because a horse may possess the raw ability necessary for the Derby while still requiring help mentally, tactically, or behaviorally navigating the experience itself.

The Derby environment is not normal racing.

Churchill Downs during Derby week becomes sensory overload:

- crowds
- noise
- media
- altered routines
- packed barns
- increased activity
- massive grandstands
- unusual visual stimulation

And lightly raced horses are often still learning how to process all of it.

Getting a horse to the Derby is not a linear process.

It is constant adaptation.

And that adaptation does not stop after the Derby, which is why the Preakness discussion cannot be reduced to "give them another week."

That is the same problem again:  
oversimplification.

## **Cherie DeVaux, Cracked Heels, Weather, And Why One Extra Week Solves Nothing**

The current Derby winner provides one of the clearest examples of why the public conversation keeps missing the point.

Before the Derby itself, public discussion already included references to Cherie DeVaux managing cracked heel issues with her horse heading into Churchill Downs.

That matters because cracked heels are not decorative information.

They affect training decisions every single day.

They affect:

- surface selection
- moisture exposure
- recovery timing
- training continuity
- inflammation management
- shoeing decisions
- maintenance schedules

Churchill Downs already experienced wet conditions Derby week. That means DeVaux was not merely preparing a horse for a race. She was managing a horse through weather, moisture, footing complications, and interrupted training while simultaneously trying to maintain enough fitness to win the Kentucky Derby.

That is horsemanship.

And once the horse wins the Derby, those underlying realities do not disappear because a calendar says “Preakness in two weeks.”

The horse still has to recover physically.

The horse still has to train.

The horse still has to maintain condition.

The horse still has to move forward.

A fit horse cannot simply stop doing meaningful work for two weeks and remain in identical condition. After a major effort, conditioning rhythm matters. Recovery rhythm matters. Physical continuity matters.

And now the trainer must make those decisions during springtime in the Mid-Atlantic and northeastern United States, where rain, moisture, sealed tracks, and interrupted training schedules are historically common realities.

National Weather Service climate data lists Baltimore's 1991–2020 May normal precipitation at 3.85 inches. The same dataset shows May 2025 produced 6.85 inches. Weather in that region during Preakness season is unpredictable by nature.

That means the same environmental variables DeVaux managed before the Derby still exist after the Derby.

So the real question is not:

“Could the horse physically run in the Preakness?”

The real question is:

“After carefully managing cracked heels through Churchill Downs, weather interruptions, altered training schedules, and Derby-level exertion, why would a trainer assume Baltimore two weeks later represented the correct next move?”

And even more importantly:

“Would one additional week realistically change those underlying realities?”

Maybe not.

Three weeks does not erase cracked heels.

Three weeks does not eliminate rain.

Three weeks does not guarantee uninterrupted training.

Three weeks does not remove the accumulated stress of the Derby campaign itself.

That is the part the public conversation keeps ignoring.

## **Sovereignty, Glue-On Shoes, And What Horsemen Actually Notice**

The same nuance appeared with Sovereignty.

Publicly, the decision to skip the Preakness centered around long-term management and targeting the Belmont Stakes instead.

But horsemen noticed something else.

Discussion later surfaced about Sovereignty racing in glue-on shoes during the Derby campaign. That detail matters enormously because glue-on shoes are generally not cosmetic decisions. They usually suggest a horse being carefully managed through hoof or structural challenges requiring specialized attention.

That does not automatically mean a horse is unsound.

But it absolutely means management decisions are being made carefully and deliberately.

And Bill Mott's own background matters because Mott understands shoeing and hoof management deeply. That context matters when evaluating campaign decisions.

The presence of glue-on shoes strongly suggested a horse being carefully managed through physical challenges, which complicates the simplistic narrative that one additional week would suddenly have made a Preakness return logical.

And Sovereignty later returned and won the Belmont Stakes.

That matters too.

Because it demonstrates that skipping the Preakness was not necessarily evidence that the horse could not continue competing successfully. It was evidence that the campaign itself required management choices based on the realities surrounding that specific horse.

Again:  
horses do not exist in a vacuum.

## **Journalism And The Business Reality Nobody Wants To Discuss Openly**

Journalism represents the other side of the same argument.

Journalism lost the Derby after entering with enormous hype and commercial expectations attached to him. The Preakness then became both a sporting opportunity and a business necessity.

That distinction matters.

A Classic victory permanently changes a stallion résumé.

A Classic victory changes breeding value.

A Classic victory changes perception.

A Classic victory changes marketability.

Running back in two weeks was not merely about "tradition."

It was also a strategic commercial decision because waiting for the Belmont risked another defeat to Sovereignty without first securing the Grade 1 Classic victory needed on the résumé.

That is modern racing reality.

Journalism then returned again in the Belmont after two hard efforts.  
Then later returned in the Haskell.

The public tends to analyze those races independently, as though each performance exists in isolation.

Horsemen do not think that way.

Campaigns accumulate.  
Fatigue accumulates.  
Stress accumulates.  
Wear accumulates.

Sometimes horses continue performing while quietly emptying underneath the surface.

That does not make the connections villains.

It means campaigns involve business pressures, stallion pressures, competitive pressures, timing pressures, and commercial realities influencing decisions.

And those pressures differ across ownership structures.

Godolphin does not operate under the same urgency as smaller ownership groups seeking to maximize stallion value quickly.

The Phipps family historically approaches racing through long-term breeding and legacy perspectives.

Other ownership groups may aggressively pursue Grade 1 opportunities because the economics surrounding the horse demand it.

Those are not moral distinctions.

They are structural distinctions.

And they shape campaigns differently.

## **Fresh Horses Still Lose**

One of the strangest assumptions inside the modern Preakness debate is the belief that fresher horses should automatically gain a decisive advantage.

The record is more complicated than that.

## **Derby winners have returned and won the Preakness.**

California Chrome won the Kentucky Derby in 2014, returned two weeks later, and won the Preakness over Ride On Curlin and Social Inclusion. Social Inclusion matters here because he had skipped the Derby and was widely discussed as a major fresh threat to California Chrome. He still finished behind the Derby winner.

I'll Have Another did the same in 2012. He won the Kentucky Derby, returned in two weeks, and won the Preakness, defeating Bodemeister again after Bodemeister had also run a demanding race in the Derby.

That matters because the Derby-to-Preakness turnaround is not theoretical. Horses have done it.

## **Horses exiting difficult Derby efforts have still defeated fresher competition.**

Afleet Alex finished third in the 2005 Kentucky Derby, came back two weeks later, and won the Preakness after nearly falling when Scrappy T veered into his path. That was not a soft trip. That was a hard race after a Derby effort, and he still won.

Lookin At Lucky is another useful example. He had a troubled Kentucky Derby in 2010, finished sixth, returned two weeks later, and won the Preakness. First Dude, who had not run in the Derby, finished second.

That matters because the issue is not only Derby winners returning. Horses can exit difficult Derby efforts, come back quickly, and still defeat horses that did not go through the Derby.

## **Fresh horses targeting Baltimore specifically have still failed.**

Social Inclusion is the clean example. He skipped the 2014 Kentucky Derby, came into the Preakness as a serious fresh threat, and still finished third behind California Chrome, who had just won the Derby, and Ride On Curlin, who had also run in the Derby.

That is exactly the point.

Freshness did not guarantee superiority.

Targeting Baltimore did not guarantee victory.

Skipping the Derby did not automatically create an advantage.

## **Seize the Grey adds a timing wrinkle.**

Seize the Grey did not run in the 2024 Kentucky Derby, so he is not a Derby-to-Preakness example.

But he did run on Derby day, winning the Pat Day Mile, then returned two weeks later and won the Preakness.

That matters as a timing wrinkle. It shows that a horse can run a major race on Derby day, return in two weeks, and win in Baltimore. The Pat Day Mile is not the Derby. It is shorter, different, and less demanding than the Derby. But the calendar argument still has to account for the fact that two-week timing alone does not explain everything.

The larger point is simple.

Derby winners have come back and won.

Derby horses beaten in difficult efforts have come back and won.

Fresh horses waiting for Baltimore have failed.

Fresh horses waiting for Baltimore have also won.

Horses who ran on Derby day outside the Derby have come back and won.

The calendar does not explain all of that.

The horse explains it.

The campaign explains it.

The management explains it.

The incentives explain it.

The race shape explains it.

The structure was never intended to equalize conditions.

It was intended to expose greatness.

## **If Racing Wants Reform, It Should Target The Right Pressure Point**

If the industry genuinely wants to reduce campaign compression, there are better conversations to have.

For example:

why not distribute more meaningful Derby points during the two-year-old season?

Elite juvenile races already identify many future Derby contenders anyway.

Earlier qualification opportunities might reduce the desperation surrounding late-season prep races and allow talented horses more flexibility in campaign timing.

That would address actual qualification pressure without fundamentally softening the Triple Crown itself.

Because the Triple Crown is supposed to remain difficult.

Not impossible.  
Not unfair.  
But difficult.

That difficulty is precisely what gives the accomplishment meaning.

The Triple Crown is one of the last American sporting structures that still openly asks whether greatness can survive pressure without accommodation.

That question is the test.

And horse racing should be careful before it redesigns the test away.

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