

Author's Original Version / Preprint

Orin France  
Systems-Level Analyst

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1996-7555>

Website: <https://orinfrance.com>

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## **Show The Horse**

**Racing keeps asking fans and bettors to invest in the horse while too often failing to present the horse clearly on screen.**

### **What the Screen is For**

Thoroughbred racing says it wants more fans. It says it wants to hold casual viewers, grow handle, bring people into the game. Then it presents itself on television in a way that too often misses the most basic part of the job: showing people the horse clearly enough for the picture to matter.

Not the pageantry around the horse. Not the drone shot, the host shot, the interview, while the horse becomes movement in the background.

The horse.

In this sport, that is not some secondary visual element. It is the thing the whole pre-race presentation is supposed to serve.

Racing already knows visual judgment matters. That is why broadcasts make room for someone like Andie Biancone, who can look at a horse in person and tell the audience what she sees. But if the sport values that eye on the ground, the obvious question is why the viewer at home is so often denied the same chance.

Racing is already on television all day, so the problem is not exposure. The problem is what the screen gets used for before the race. Too much pre-race coverage is built around atmosphere when it ought to get built around visibility, and in racing, those are not the same thing. Visibility is information. It helps people bet. It also helps people care. Those are connected more than the sport likes to admit.

Horseplayers have been making parts of this argument for years. They know the paddock matters, the post parade matters, and the walk to the gate matters. But the conversation usually

stops there, and stays at the surface level of recognition. It never quite gets to the mechanics of why the racetrack feed keeps coming up short, even when the cameras are already there, and the shots are available.

That part looks different from the control room.

### **The Shot Racing Keeps Missing**

What becomes clear pretty fast is that racing does not mainly suffer from a lack of equipment. It suffers from a habit. The useful shot is often already sitting on the monitor wall. A horse turns into the walking ring. A field bends onto the course. They circle behind the gate. They make a turn that gives you a clean horizontal side look. And the racetrack feed keeps treating those views as incidental, when in fact they are often the most useful pictures the audience could have.

### **Track-Level Proof**

At Oaklawn, the horses come out and make that turn near the bugler. That turn is not just local scene-setting. It is the shot. If you handle it properly, it gives you a real horizontal side look at the horse while still leaving room for the place to feel like itself. What you should not do is treat the turn as background color and cut away before the horses have actually been presented.

Gulfstream has another version of the same thing when horses move from the dirt to the infield and head onto the turf or synthetic. They go across in single file, and the feed usually stays there long enough for you to see every horse from the side before they load. Then, especially on bigger days, the production starts acting as if the better shot must be somewhere else because there are more cameras in the building. So it jumps to the drone or the prettier angle and gives away the best look it had. Oaklawn gives you a similar opportunity on sprints that start in the chute, with the horses approaching the gate in single file. The camera usually stays with them long enough for you to see each starter walk through the frame.

Saratoga belongs in the discussion, too. The outside paddock gives television time and space to show every horse, not just one at a time in an isolated close-up, but horses in relation to one another, moving through the frame the way a viewer actually wants to take them in. Then, once riders are up, the path out of the paddock gives you another obvious chance. The horses make that left-hand turn onto the long straight toward the track, and that bend gives you a natural horizontal pan. There is enough time to let a field come through that turn before cutting to the prettier head-on shot down the path. Instead, New York often jumps too quickly to the handsome shot and leaves the more useful one behind.

### **When the Feed Gets in the Way**

That is where the whole thing starts to get expensive in ways racing never quite acknowledges. A horse catches your eye. Then the camera goes too wide, too tight on the wrong thing, or overhead or head-on, or the graphics block part of the picture. Now you've lost the saddle towel, lost the comparison with the others, and maybe even lost track of which horse you were trying to follow

in the first place. That is not some tiny cosmetic complaint. It is the feed getting in the way of a bet.

Sometimes the problem is not the first camera decision. Sometimes the trouble starts after a decent shot has already been found. That is where graphics become part of the problem. Some racetrack feeds crowd the lower part of the screen and one side of the screen with so much information that the horse is half-lost unless the camera operator and technical director are compensating for it in real time. The shot has to be built for the screen people actually have at home, not for some bare monitor in the studio. Since management is unlikely to spend money rebuilding a graphics package to satisfy this complaint, the practical answer is to learn how to present around it better.

Tampa Bay is useful because it shows both the problem and the answer. There are several places in a Tampa feed where you can get what you need if somebody will simply trust the shot. Horses circling before the start. Horses coming onto the turf course. Horses making the bend near the gate. Horses turning in behind the gate before loading. Those are all opportunities to let the field move across the frame so people can see the whole body and compare one horse to another. The feed does not need to fall in love with one horse and stay there. It needs to hold a shot that is wide enough to show one horse in the foreground and another circling in the background, tight enough to keep the numbers visible, and calm enough to let the viewer think for a second.

### **Who the Feed Is Really For**

There is also a deeper problem underneath the technical one. Racing now has more people in the broadcast booth who know the sport from the inside. That's generally a good thing. But there is still a difference between knowing racing from the inside and first coming to racing as a fan who loved watching horses. People who grow up in the sport can absorb its visual habits without ever quite questioning them. People who learn television inside those habits may never stop to ask whether the way the feed gets presented is actually the best way to show the sport to someone outside it.

Part of the reason racing has been slow to take television seriously is that the sport did not build itself around television in the first place. For a long time, management could count on regulars showing up and wagering by habit. Even now, the racetrack feed gets repackaged by FanDuel Network into something more polished, which hides the weakness at the source. In that setup, the track production can continue to feel like a utility rather than arguably the product's most important layer. That may help explain why so many tracks still present the horse on screen as if the picture barely matters.

That matters because many fans do not come into racing through figures, pace theory, or trainer patterns. They come in through sight. They like a grey horse. They like a blaze. They like a horse that's on its toes without acting like a fool. They like the silks. They like how one of them walks. They like something they can't fully explain except by saying that horse looks good to me.

Racing can get a little snooty about that kind of judgment, as if it doesn't count because it does not arrive wearing a set of numbers. It counts just fine. It's how plenty of people enter the game.

That kind of attachment may sound casual or unserious to people deeply involved in the sport. It's not. That's often how fandom starts, and sometimes how betting starts too. That's why the two-dollar bettor matters more than racing sometimes admits, and why the more serious horseplayer who wants to see sweat, stride, body, energy, and general condition is not really asking for something different. Both viewers need the same favor from the feed.

### **What Viewers Actually Need**

The side pan is still the key, but it has to be from the right side of the horse, where the viewer can actually see the animal instead of staring past the pony. And it has to hold the horse in frame. A side view is not useful just because the horse happens to pass through it. The camera has to stay with the horse cleanly enough for the viewer to read the animal and not just catch a shoulder coming in or a hind end leaving. It is a moving animal, so yes, it takes attention. It is also entirely doable.

And it is more than possible in a post-parade. Two cameras at a minimum should be used so that neither camera has to keep searching for the next horse. The next horse ought to already be in frame somewhere. If a horse has to leave the parade early, whether for mental comfort or for some other reason, the technical director should already be bringing in another camera so the horse is shown correctly. This is not some futuristic wish list. It is a practical way to produce the thing.

### **Big Days and Better Examples**

Big race days often make the problem worse because the production starts mistaking scale for improvement. The Kentucky Derby telecast is the easy example. Television wants the stories, the families, the emotion, the top contenders, the atmosphere of a national event. Fine. Some of that belongs. But a twenty-horse race still has twenty horses in it, and the stories do not replace the field. They do not help a viewer who wants to see the outsiders, compare body language, or latch onto a horse that catches the eye. The post parade often gets handled the same way, with a handheld shot working up the offside of the horse. Even when that angle gets the horse on screen, it still does not give a clean enough look, and the fan in the stands is left looking across the pony and then back to the little monitor or the big screen for the view he thought he was coming to see live. On big days, especially, the sport starts acting as if the horse is there to support the telecast instead of the telecast being there to serve the race.

Keeneland is still the best example of how this can be done from the time horses enter the paddock until the post parade ends. The coverage is steadier, the sequence is cleaner, and the horse stays at the center of the presentation. After that, once the warm-up begins, Keeneland can miss chances the same way other tracks do. But the pre-race attention to detail is so much better that it almost covers for what comes later. Part of the reason may be simple. Keeneland is not

only a racetrack. It's also a sales company. Presenting the horse is second nature there. Showing the horse well is not a television trick or an extra feature. It's part of the place's institutional language.

The California tracks deserve mention here too. Santa Anita, Del Mar, and Los Alamitos also tend to run tighter post parades and have camera people who show horses better than most places do. Keeneland still stands out because the care begins earlier and carries through more cleanly from the paddock to the post parade.

### **Presentation Starts Before the Gate**

This is not only a television complaint. It is also a paddock-judge complaint, a racing-office complaint, a horseperson complaint. If one horse comes out on time and another is lagging, and another is misbehaving, and the outrider is already moving the first group along, the feed has to start improvising around a loose post parade. Then you get what you often see: the production lingers too long on one horse, scrambles to find the next, cuts away too early, and never gives the viewer a clean look at the whole field in sequence. The studio cannot fix a post parade that is already broken on the ground.

Saratoga shows the next step in that problem. The long gaps between horses coming out stretch the field into fragments. Once that happens, the production starts reacting instead of presenting. I understand why a director starts looking for ways to avoid getting caught behind. That instinct is real. But it is also why the parade itself has to be tighter. Loose upstream staging leads to bad choices downstream.

The interviews could stand some rethinking as well. Racing television has improved over the years in how it talks to the people around the sport. However, it still falls into the habit of making every interview a full-screen interruption. If you want to talk to an owner, trainer, jockey, groom, hotwalker, whoever, do it. Expand the cast of voices. That part is good. But do not act as if the camera has to abandon the horse for a human being to speak. Split the shot. Widen the frame. Let the horse remain part of the feed while the person talks. The horse only gives you a small window. The human can talk for another thirty seconds.

### **The Horse as the Product**

Sometimes a horse just looks good. Anybody who has been around racing long enough knows that sentence means something even if it does not fit neatly into a chart or database. Now, of course, it's not the whole game. A horse can look terrific and still lose for any number of reasons. But visual judgment is part of racing, whether the sport wants to admit it or not, and racetracks should build their production with that in mind.

This is the mistake racing keeps making. The pre-race show is not just a decoration around the wagering product. It's part of the wagering product, and part of how fans are made too. Somebody notices a blaze, a compact body, a way of moving, the dapples, the ears, the swagger,

or the fact that one horse is dragging the groom for half a stride and then settles. Something catches the eye. That moment is not outside the business. It is the business.

I am not arguing for joyless, stripped-down coverage. Use the bugler shot. Use the drone. Use the overhead. Use the pretty picture once the useful work has been done. But stop cutting away from the horse before the horse has been shown properly. Stop treating the clean horizontal side pan like an incidental shot when it is actually the most important shot on the screen.

Racing has larger problems than television. Nobody needs to pretend otherwise. But this part is sitting right in front of the sport, and it is fixable. Keep the post parade tight. Favor the side-on view. Learn to frame and pace the coverage around the graphics you already have. Show every horse, not just the obvious ones. Stop producing the pre-race as if the horse were an accessory to the show.

The horse is the show.