

Disaster at the Derby

January 1995

Horse racing in England is not just a sport but a facet in the jewel of British culture. To see and be seen among society's elite at Royal Ascot is the essence of being English. And the racing event of the year is the Derby.

For 130 years, the Derby has started in the same way. Unlike our individual gates which align the horses and start them at the same time, the British have used a heavy string attached to two poles on either side of the track. With horses then bunched and milling about (and not even all pointed in the same direction), the starter pulls a lever which raises the string – *and they're off!*

Well, almost. In the last Derby, after nearly a century and a half of successful starts, things went terribly awry. Some of the horses were too close to the string and it caught them around the neck. A false start was declared but several of the horses had already run a fair distance before being corralled.

After a chaotic regrouping of the mounts, the race was restarted – *only to have the same thing happen again*. This time, however, most of the jockeys either didn't see or ignored the red flag and they ran the entire grueling course. Due to the months of preparation and precision-tuning of the horses, the race simply couldn't be rerun and conflicts wouldn't allow rescheduling. For the first time in history, and in national disgrace, the Derby was canceled.

Of course, the papers were full of post-trauma analysis of what led to the disaster. The conclusion was that rigid British traditionalism was mostly to blame. You see, to the British tradition is everything. Though there were more modern and efficient ways of starting horse races, the British thought "We've always done it this way. Why change it?" In hindsight, a minor procedural change would have saved the country great embarrassment.

Just because something "works" doesn't mean that it is the best way currently available. Certain methods are adopted because, at the time, they may be the most expedient and efficient ways to accomplish a goal.

Traditions are good and change merely for the sake of change is not virtuous. But when traditions outlive their usefulness and things have developed to such a point that the old ways are not necessarily the best ways, it is wise to reevaluate and make adjustments.