

In the days when Triple Crown winners were common

This goes back to my youth. To the very young me, glued to the television, having been told by my father that I may well be witnessing history in the making.

This goes back to shivers running up the spine and the shedding of a few emotional tears.

This Saturday (June 7), at Belmont Park in Elmont, NY, *California Chrome* — impressive victor in both the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness — will attempt to win the 146th Belmont Stakes and at once end horse racing's 36-year drought by becoming only the 12th horse in the industry's long and luminous history to capture the coveted Triple Crown.

The California-bred chestnut colt with the white streak on his face — markings known in horse circles as "chrome" — has looked impressive, if not unbeatable, in training this week.

But this is by no means a sure thing.

This is horse racing, where all is fickle and anything can (and often does) go awry.

And this is a Triple Crown bid: 22 horses have won the Crown's first two legs, only to come up short.

Forget that *Chrome* enters the race as the favourite. When you consider Triple Crown history, he remains a long shot. Oh, and the last time a Cali-bred horse won the Belmont was 1903.

The Belmont is a nasty bit of business, a rude reality, a dream crusher. It's an epic, unforgiving race at 2.4-kilometres, the longest of racing's three jewels.

And, of course, it's the final stop on a grueling schedule — three races in just five weeks, allowing precious little time for rejuvenation — that defeats most of these three-year-olds long before Triple Crown dreams can break out of the gate.

As if *California Chrome* needs added pressure: the entire industry needs him to succeed.

The recent decline in the sport's fortunes has been attributed to the Triple Crown drought and a lack of marketable, superstar talent.

Granted, assorted other factors are in play, and even if *Chrome* succeeds, the industry's pervasive problems will not suddenly vanish.

Still, it sure wouldn't hurt.


The sport's last major drought came to a stunning end (after 25 years) in 1973 with *Secretariat*, who'd won the Derby with a track-record time that still stands and the Preakness unchallenged.

And it was his bid for immortality that found the younger me glued to the TV watching one of the most jaw-dropping performances in sports history as the super horse

That's Life

Andy Juniper

Guest Contributor



pulled away from the field at the Belmont and won by an astonishing 31 lengths.

Did I mention the shivers up the spine, the emotional tears?

The 1970s saw two more Triple Crown winners: *Seattle Slew* in 1977 and *Affirmed* in 1978.

When it rains, it pours.

As a kid I didn't wish for a Triple Crown winner, I just came to expect one. Alas, all expectations died in the drought. Since *Affirmed*, 11 horses have entered the Belmont with a chance to win the Triple Crown.

None have succeeded.

Still, a guy can hope. That *California Chrome*'s Cinderella story didn't peak at the Preakness. And that come Saturday, there will be shivers running up the spine and the shedding of a few emotional tears.

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