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# **THE CURSES OF THE TRIPLE CROWN**

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## The Curses of the Triple Crown

Smarty Jones' failed attempt to win the Triple Crown brought back all the curse talk to racing. Numerous curse theories were trotted out to explain why the Triple Crown had not been won since Affirmed in 1978.

The leading theory propounded this year was the Philadelphia curse (Philadelphia's answer to the curse of the Bambino).<sup>1</sup> No Philadelphia sports franchise has won a championship since the Philadelphia 76er's won the NBA championship in 1983. Smarty Jones was either going to break the curse by winning the Triple Crown or fall victim to the curse.<sup>2</sup>

A subsidiary on the Philadelphia curse is the Curse of William Penn. For years, no building in Philadelphia was allowed to be higher than the statue of William Penn at the top of Philadelphia's City Hall. In 1984, the city authorized One Liberty Place, a high rise tower that at 945 feet high was nearly 400 feet higher than William Penn. Since this dissing of William Penn, there have been no championships in Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup>

Other have found a curse in the Triple Crown itself.<sup>4</sup> They have found that there appears to be a curse of unknown origin which now afflicts the Triple Crown. This curse blocks not only the unworthy but also the worthy horses from winning the Belmont. There is additionally a subspecies of the Triple Crown curse affecting only the Belmont. Vic Ziegel of the Daily News called it the curse of the Belmonterino.<sup>5</sup> Mickey Herskowitz of the Houston Chronicle just called it the curse of the third jewel.<sup>6</sup> The point is there's something about the Belmont - whether it's New York City, the sandy track, the pressure, the long stretch, the extra quarter mile - that contributes to losses by Triple Crown hopefuls.

There are additional curse theories that have found their way into the media. There is, of course, the venerable Sports Illustrated curse. Once Smarty appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated, he had no chance to win the Triple Crown. Rob Longley, of

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Mihoces, "Still-Loved Smarty Jones Victim Of Philly Curse," USA Today, June 7, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For some Unknown Reason, Philadelphia middleweight champion Bernard Hopkins Seems immune from this curse. One suspects that had Smarty Jones won the Belmont, those who are true believers in a Philadelphia curse would ascribe his victory to the fact that Smarty actually resides in the suburb of Bensalem where Philadelphia Park is located.

<sup>3</sup> See generally, Pat Forde, "Philadelphia Is Becoming The City Of Smarty Love," Louisville Courier Journal, May 24, 2004 Pg. 1-E. See also Garth Woolsey, "Penn Poisons Philly," Toronto Star, April 22, 2004 Pg. E 06

<sup>4</sup> William C. Rhoden, "Smarty Jones Is A Great Horse But He's Not America's Horse," New York Times, May 16, 2004 Sports Desk; Pg. 7; Sandy Grady, "Smarty Jones' Burden: Hype, Hope, History," USA Today June 3, 2004

<sup>5</sup> Vic Ziegel, "Smarty's Already On The Fast Track To Trained Eye He Looks Like Big Cheese," New York Daily News, June 2, 2004, Pg. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Mickey Herskowitz, "Bets Bring Joy, Pain To Prudent Investors," Houston Chronicle, May 29, 2004, Sports Pg. 2.

the Toronto Sun, has attributed the curse to himself.<sup>7</sup> Ever since he started covering racing with Cigar in 1996, the big horses have fallen short of winning the crowning events. The Trenton Times has decided it's just part of the curse of the Bambino.<sup>8</sup> Probably the most interesting and original curse theory has been the curse of the Joneses.<sup>9</sup> Smarty was doomed because all the sporting Joneses have had their problems in recent months. Roy Jones got knocked out. Marian Jones has been in trouble over her possible entanglements with Balco. The Atlanta Braves with Chipper and Andruw Jones are going nowhere this year. Parnelli Jones' son P.J. Jones finished 28th in the Indianapolis 500. It's been a bad time to be a Jones in sports. Smarty didn't have a chance.

The reality may be that what appears to be a curse may simply be statistical randomness. That won't stop the curse champions. They'll find a curse for anything associated with the Triple Crown or the city of Brotherly Love.

For me, my head tells me there is no curse. My heart tells me there is a curse. It's the curse of the "Sidewalks of New York." In the 1970's, the decade of champions, the Belmont horses including Secretariat, Seattle Slew and Affirmed went to the post to the strains of "The Sidewalks of New York." In 1997, NYRA changed the theme song. Since 1997, it's been "New York, New York." Not coincidentally, since 1997, six horse have come to the Belmont trying to capture the Triple Crown. All six have come back losers. Maybe it's the revenge of Mamie O'Rourke. Perhaps she's tripping up the Triple Crown contenders fantastically on the sidewalks of Elmont. But since NYRA made the switch away from Sidewalks, the big horses don't win the Belmont.

The triple Crown is supposed to be all about tradition. Certainly, the lyrics of the Sidewalks of New York are antiquated<sup>10</sup>, but they're certainly not any worse than "My Old Kentucky Home" and "Maryland My Maryland."<sup>11</sup> If we care about tradition and the Triple Crown, it's time to restore the "Sidewalks of New York" to its proper spot as the official song of the Belmont. Only then will the curses surrounding the Triple Crown be ended. Bring back Mamie O'Rourke!

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<sup>7</sup> Rob Longley, "Blame Me, Not Smarty," Toronto Sun, June 7, 2004

<sup>8</sup> Barry Federovitch, "Curse Of Bambino Hits Smarty Jones," Trenton Times, June 7, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Gallo, "A Fairy-Tale Horse Runs For The Triple Crown, And All The Railbirds Cheer," Denver Westword, June 3, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/lyrics/sidewalk.htm>

Even the lyrics of the modernized Mel Torme version are dated.

<sup>11</sup> "Maryland My Maryland" lyrics are at:

<http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/mdmanual/01glance/html/symbols/lyrics.html> This must be the only song that rhymes dust, rust, trust, thrust, and just in consecutive lines. "My Old Kentucky Home's" lyrics are at: <http://www.ket.org/underground/resources/oldkyhome.htm> Even before the era of political correctness, Stephan Foster's original lyrics could not properly be used.