

# *Performance; Driven by Emotion*

By

Kerry M Thomas

The logo features the letters 'THT' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, centered within a large, light gray oval. Below the letters is a white five-pointed star. In the foreground, two white horses are depicted in profile, facing right, partially overlapping the bottom of the oval.

THT

Note: The following is an opinion essay written to serve in part as the introduction piece to our 13<sup>th</sup> annual Kentucky Derby “Patterns of Motion” herd dynamic analysis of the horses contending for the 149<sup>th</sup> Derby on May 6<sup>th</sup> 2023. Because this original opinion piece at its core paints with a broader brush and has, in my opinion, relevancy for the equestrian industry beyond racing, with elements that touch upon all disciplines, I wanted to offer it as a standalone written work. The full Derby Analysis for 2023 can be found archived in Big Race Analysis and while you are visiting, be sure and explore our unique herd dynamic profiling services for Thoroughbred Racing & Breeding / Sport & Pleasure Horses / Equine PTSD & Trauma Assessment.

*“Few things gnaws away at the integrity of an industry more than the greed that is spawned within it.”*

*Kerry M Thomas*

Since the inaugural race in 1875, first ran at 1½ miles on land provided by John and Henry Churchill, the *Run for The Roses* has represented many things to many people. What the visionary racing enthusiast Meriwether Lewis Clark Jr. would think if he were here to enjoy the 149<sup>th</sup> running, I can only speculate, though I surmise that he would smile with joy. The passion that he brought back from Epsom in Surrey and the inspiration from the French Jockey Club, formed in 1863, that in part manifested as the Louisville Jockey Club, seems a contiguous journey carried forth by the spirit of the horse. I would dare say passion, that strong and resilient emotion, is ever bound within the fabric of meaning whenever anyone reflects thoughtfully on the Kentucky Derby.

My personal history with the Kentucky Derby is much shorter in time but no less resolute in the excitement that it instills. I tend to wax poetic and liken the feeling I have for the horses who breathe life into so many of us if not each day, for that one special day, as being akin to those involved at the inception. Where it may be the 149<sup>th</sup> run for the roses, it is our 13<sup>th</sup> year of having the privilege to study the intricate nature of the horse athletes competing and the honor of your support in purchasing the results of those efforts. We thank you for that.

The study of horses and what is to me the magical world of herd dynamics I have dedicated a large portion of my life to. Yet still, the enigmatic beauty found within them continues to drive me forward as if I have only taken the first steps into a world where unimaginable discovery awaits. The beauty of the physical horse is majesty to behold, but that which endears is woven within the fabric of our affection; to see the horse is awe inspiring, to feel the horse, intimately moving. The study of the athletes competing on the first Saturday of May can take on many forms, for me it is the study of performance art, an appreciation of an artistry that is driven by emotion.

Ever fascinated to know who they are as unique individuals; the profiles of these athletes are the product of intense film study of their past performances. Focusing on the singular nature of the horse, I consider where they finished in any given race secondary to considering how they navigated and responded in it/to it. To understand a herd of horses in motion first asks for an understanding of the movements of those horses independently. Appreciating individual motion is recognizing singular tendency to changing environments. Unique character traits, tendencies, and sensory efficiency combine to comprise the foundation of their herd dynamic profile.

Before any horses' competitiveness can be assessed, their ability to navigate the environment must be considered. Breaking down the race into solitary patterns of motion, sensory efficiency, and the way emotional energy is distributed during performance related stresses brings clarity to natural hierarchy. In a race atmosphere, especially one with an abundance of protracted stimuli such as the Kentucky Derby, the resulting order at the wire does not always reflect the true nature of the athletes. But just as so many streams eventually gather to make a river, herd dynamics innately seek their order and I for one always follow Mother Nature's current.

We look at the probability of success of each horse separately and then compare them physically and mentally to determine the performance hierarchal tiers. Exposed to unparalleled circumstances relative to the demands of the engagement, everything leading up to the moments before post time is an experience

all its own. Some horses are impervious to it, some horses are not. How they process environmental stresses is a key ingredient and can play a significant role in how their prospects play out.

There are many intricate pieces of the herd dynamic puzzle to consider, distinctive character traits must be juxtaposed with what is required of them to compete as athletes. Competition against their peers is the secondary consideration, the real question is, are they mental athlete enough to optimize the physical talent they have? During the evaluation process for any would-be horse athlete there are subtle indicators that tell a larger story; sensory efficiency principle among them. The aptitude for psychologically clearing space to move through cleanly, fluently and without pace disruption, is essential for versatility. Being tactical amid herd motion allows the horse to effectively stay clear of or get away from situational chaos as it happens. For a horse to have an opportunity to be successful in a race against equals, they must not be an impediment to themselves. Whether betting, buying, training or even breeding, we must answer the questions; what is the likelihood of this horse getting in their own way? Is this a horse that will need to physically outrun itself to be successful? Can this horse handle the emotional demands of becoming the athlete hoped for? Few things scream underachiever more than talent devoid of the ability to realize its full potential.

It can be said of each Kentucky Derby field that there are “Derby horses” and there are “horses in the derby.” We have seen enough examples to know when the environment shapes up just right and the horse has the physical talent, given an opportunity a lesser herd dynamic can gain advantage enough to get the drop on those better equipped than they. Even so, there is far more consistency when an athlete is optimizing physical talent through their herd dynamic ability than there is when they are not. Where the “operating system” running the machine is pinioned with inefficiencies such as sensory lead change drag or delays within the interpretative ratio or both, the horse is not moving cleanly through the environment. Sensory lead changes, which are not entirely dissimilar to and indeed precede physical lead changes, are vital for optimal athletic efficiency. Being able to manage multiple stimuli through its seamless transfer from one sensory aspect to another, without sensory impeding equipment, can be of tremendous benefit when adapting on the hoof to stimulus that is itself, in motion. Equipment has its place, yet is only as useful as the depth of the emotional energy leak it is trying to patch or re-direct, or the tendency it is trying to delay. This is less an issue when alone or in circumstances that present the horse with minimal herd chaos to navigate, for they can “run-away” from themselves. Yet when you are having to outrun yourself to be successful, you are an athlete that is subject to the caprice of sudden changes in the environment and subordinate to the influence of stronger herd dynamic peers in competition. Equipage such as the common go-to, blinkers, may well assist the direction of emotional energy by funneling it into the forward aspect, but it can also make the horse “burn hotter” and be oblivious to or slow to recognize oblique stimuli. You have to weigh the ROI when using any sensory impeding equipment or betting horses that “need” it, as this can shift the horse into running with instead of competing against, the herd.

Competing or competitor, it is an important question? Differentiating between the herd dynamic performance tiers as we have them in this report is representative of the horses who are the most likely to influence their environment from those who are more likely to be subject to it. Many factors are involved in getting the measure of herd dynamic strength or weakness. In elite competitive environments if a natural tendency does not serve to strengthen it has the potential to weaken, and this must always be weighed against the projected demands. It cannot be understated that being herd dynamically balanced and sensory sound is among the most vitally important assets any equine athlete can carry into competition regardless of the discipline. A sensory sound horse is naturally equipped not only to realize physical talent but is able to manage the stresses that come with the demands of being an athlete. It makes little difference who you are in the morning if who you are at crunch time is a shadow of yourself. Sensory efficient horses distribute their emotional energy freely, fluently, and sustainably with lower risk of mental fatigue. They are but little

influenced by sudden changes and are adept at “reading the room” in anticipation of herd motion around them. These are all indicators of a high degree of emotional intelligence which are party to the oft elusive but highly prized, independent nature.

The sometimes-slight differences between upper tier horses can make a dramatic impact on outcome. Competitive nature, inherent in all horses, is augmented physically through manipulated breeding. But for this to be translated into “heart” or “grit,” which gives them competitive edge, the horse must be able to independently process stress, maintain the fluent distribution of emotional energy, and freely navigate situational chaos. To be competitive over an extended period with elevated emotional and physical intensity without the risk of mental fatigue, is a cornerstone of what it means to be an elite athlete. If you are a horse breeder not breeding for emotional intelligence, sensory soundness, i.e., independent nature, you are building a race car while leaving the driver to chance. Stress matters; how it is managed, how it is filtered. Herd dynamic stamping is as powerful a component as physical stamping is a desired one.

To understand the effect of accumulative stress over distance we cannot measure distance in the physical sense. Psychologically “distance” is a measurement in time; duration of experience is the time-in-motion the body is moving not the speed with which it moves. Competitive stresses are relative to the intensity levels of emotion which can come from ramping up to another gear of physical speed, maintaining protracted pace or adjusting to situational chaos. If emotional vitality is leaked at any of these points, it threatens to syphon away tactical energy and sets in motion the onset of mental fatigue. Horses that walk the emotional tightrope during competition benefit from a person in the saddle who guides them with feel and finesse while having a strong intent-of-purpose. Becoming an absorber of emotion and conductor of its direction allows horses with lower levels of independent nature to move more fluently through the environment in concert with you. Horses instinctively seek harmony within their environment, and contentment with their peers.

Understanding herd dynamics plays a vital role in the human to horse collaboration in all aspects of domesticated life, most especially when it comes to performance. When your expectations are that a herd-animal operate at elite levels isolated from inherent nature, developing the athlete sensitive to their herd dynamic is critical for them. There can be differences between what you are expecting the horse to be, and who they are. Identifying key elements in the way they are distributing emotional energy through both the Group and Individual Herd Dynamics, the efficacy of their sensory systems and how natural tendency influences movement are key components to tapping in to independent nature. The primary functions of Group Herd Dynamic (GHD) in competition and performance are keeping emotional energy from leaking through the Individual Herd Dynamic (IHD), maintaining mind-to-body fluency, providing environmental awareness, and acting as the foundation of versatility in situational chaos. The relationship between the horse and their environment is managed largely through the broad brush of GHD where the ability to focus on individual targets, elevate emotional intensity for grit-it-out battles or anything we consider competitive in nature, is primarily managed by IHD.

The rate and efficiency of sensory interpretations determine the rhythm of GHD processing and allow that energy to shift into IHD pace during times of elevated intensity. This means in short; a herd dynamically balanced athlete assimilates and adjusts to multiple stimulus around them without losing competitive focus and mental pace. Though their physical speed may be altered to adjust to changes, psychologically they are where they are going. Movement and speed are relative terms in the framework of competition.

I look at speed in two different ways; one being physical pace, the second and more influential when it comes to athletic ability, is psychological rhythm. By nature, patterns of behavior translate to patterns in motion, when there is disparity between these under competitive stresses over protracted time-in-motion,

the horse is not fluent. Instead of moving through space in a smooth and purposeful manner, they are moving in space, subordinate to the caprice of environment. One thing is for sure, any horse that lacks the aptitude of leadership amongst their peers, shall be quite happy to follow those that do. Your best hope then, is that they can outrun both themselves and their competition.

Of the many important factors that are involved in developing the athlete the relationship between the natural herd dynamic of the horse and the processes and tendencies of the humans in their charge, looms large. Identifying the natural patterns of motion is one thing, juxtaposing this against the influence of the human factor, an exercise in postulation of how nuance affects their performance capacity, is something else altogether. It is an intricate part of the evaluation process, a piece of the puzzle that can certainly affect the realized placement of the athletes in their final performance tiers. Things to consider; there are many. These performance tiers are predicated upon the purity of the horses within them, their unique herd dynamic characteristics evaluated based upon that purity. It is impossible to know or determine the impact of the human elements these athletes are surrounded by. Where it is unfair to assume there is anything less than full disclosure and transparency, it is yet naïve to fully entrust ethics and character to the governess of financial gain in any industry. Where money and humans mix, the risk of impaired ethics increases, and the horses and their industry are left to absorb the ripples.

I was recently asked about what it is that I learn from doing these evaluations from year to year? The answer to that is, quite a lot. If you want to continue to improve, learn and discover new innovations, you cannot live your life in fear of losing or of being wrong. If you are truly endeavoring to better yourself, it matters not the noise and ridicule you risk. If your “truth” needs validation from others, perhaps it really is not your truth at all. I can say with certainty that I have learned and discovered much, and will continue to learn and discover, from that which I was mistaken. Over the years you continue to chisel and hone, you “sharpen your pencil” and in the same line of thinking of tracking a horses’ growth patterns through their careers, the years of sale notes, breeding notes and racing profiles, serve as a foundation for growth and learning. To continue to get better, to desire to be the best at anything, demands that we be willing to improve upon ourselves. My driving passion has always been to delve deeply into what is for me, the magical world of herd dynamics. Endeavoring to extract the singularity of a horse from within the mystery of the herd, for a better view; a view from the hoof.

Personally, these 13 years of Kentucky Derby Analysis have never exclusively been about betting the ponies, but rather an effort to introduce the intricate magnificence of the horses themselves in a different light. Though I do not place a bet, I always want to bring “who” they are right off the TV screen and into your hearts. In service to and for the equine athletes, it is about presenting their intrinsically unique characters to the world. Regardless of discipline or breed, herd dynamics are about the horse first, the discipline we have chosen for them comes after. If we put the lens of focus on the horses and then pan-view from that perspective, we are better able to connect emotionally. I believe it is through that connection, respect, and understanding, that we can nurture and enrich the equestrian industry.

Here at THT Bloodstock we are a full-service company and we take great pride in the responsibility of providing *horse-first* services in not only racing, but across multiple platforms and disciplines all around the world. Herd Dynamic Profiling is for every horse, in every discipline, from anywhere; much more than a service option, it provides a window through which to appreciate the horses for all their unique splendor.

Explore our unique, multi-discipline service options at [thtbloodstock.com](http://thtbloodstock.com) and let us know how we can help you, achieve your goals.

“Horsemanship is advocacy for the horse, by the horse, through the horse. If we wish to improve upon the integrity of the equestrian industry, we must preserve the integrity of the horses within it and place them ahead of their performance.”

Thank You ~Kerry

