

Black Horseracing Film Poised to Finish First Producers Unveil Plans for ‘PHOTO FINISH: The Race of the Century’

California, Los Angeles, Apr 25, 2021 ([Issuewire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - Finishing first is a time-honored horseracing tradition. Leon Nichols, Calvin Davis, and affiliates of the Project to Preserve African-American Turf History intends to do just that by securing additional backing for “PHOTO FINISH: The Race of the Century.” PPAATH’s work has been profiled extensively by “L.A. Times,” “Washington Post,” NBC Sports, and others.

The nonprofit’s founder and co-founder, Nichols and Davis, are working on their script alongside producer James Walton—their film poised to be the first in U.S. filmmaking history led by a Black production team and the first to capture the contributions made (and conflicts faced) by Black jockeys beginning in the late 19th Century. As their story traces the life of Isaac Burns Murphy, a legendary jockey and the first-ever inductee into the National Museum of Racing Hall of Fame, it illuminates and bridges persistent racial divides.

African American jockeys held places of prominence across the Kentucky Derby’s first 27 years, said Chris Goodlett, Dir. of Curatorial & Educational Affairs at the Kentucky Derby Museum. By the 20th Century, he noted on video, institutional racism and segregation took hold: “The very first Kentucky Derby, 1875, 13 of the 15 jockeys were African American. (Blacks) went on to win 15 of the first 28 runnings.” Their accomplishments are celebrated like never before in the museum’s 2021 “Black Heritage in Racing” exhibit.

In June 1890, amid intense racial and political unrest, Murphy was the central figure in a frenzied and electrifying “black vs. white” race held at Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, N.Y. Aiming for the big prize, Murphy led Hall of Fame thoroughbred Salvator down the track on a quest to trample injustice while taking home \$10,000. With “white” and “colored” signs popping up in response to Jim Crow laws, all eyes were on Murphy and his rival, Ed “Snapper” Garrison. One sealed America’s fate for generations to come in a photo-finish race that was dubbed “the greatest in the history of thoroughbred racing” by the then-priced-at-just-pennies “N.Y. Times.”

The PPAATH team’s top pick to play Murphy, a jockey-turned-horse-owner-and-trainer with matinee idol looks, is Pharrell Williams. As for Murphy’s rival, Garrison? Benedict Cumberbatch. By Murphy’s own calculations, he won 628 of his 1,412 starts. That 44% win rate remains unequaled. Murphy continues to be revered for his horseracing expertise and uncompromising integrity. He was inducted into the NMR Hall of Fame in 1955. Yet, what led the PPAATH team to want to create a feature-length film about him?

“The 1938 screenplay ‘Kentucky’ was made into a technicolor film starring Loretta Young, Richard Greene, and Walter Brennan,” said Walton. “That Romeo-and-Juliet story, as directed by David Butler, was set against a backdrop of Kentucky horseracing culture and a family feud that dated back to the Civil War.” On a budget of \$700,000, it became a 20th Century Fox box-office smash. Nichols added that existing films all celebrate White jockeys: “Black jockeys, trainers and owners led the way in introducing Americans to horseracing. Sadly, those men were literally chased out of the profession once its popularity and economics began to soar.” Comparables include:

- “Seabiscuit” (2003) - Box office gross: \$143.8 Million USD
- “Racing Stripes” (2005) - Box office gross: \$90 Million USD

- “Secretariat” (2010) - Box office gross: \$60.3 Million USD

“There’s a lot to unpack here,” said Walton. “In 1890, Jim Crow legislation struck a severe blow to horseracing and forced out the clear majority: Black jockeys. One after another, their obituaries then piled up. High-profile Blacks’ ability to do what they loved was snatched away as mobs of emboldened Whites pushed for segregated tracks. Soup Perkins, who’d won the Kentucky Derby at age 15, drank himself to death by age 31. Tommy Britton committed suicide by swallowing acid. Albert Isom publicly shot himself in the head.”

“The discrimination they faced in everyday life they also faced on the racetrack—confronted with an ideology that tore apart our nation and an entire industry,” said Nichols. “‘PHOTO FINISH: The Race of the Century’ celebrates one man’s ability to beat the odds. Before Jordon, Ali, and Owens, there was Isaac Burns Murphy. He was a hero in the eyes of Blacks and unsympathetic Whites knew that. He achieved millionaire status and acclaim at a time when others feared for their safety. Yet, here we are today, in 2021 ... still fearful.”

PPAATH is seeking backers and tax incentives in various U.S. filmmaking hub zones so it can develop a series of films that showcase Black jockeys and pay homage to courageous acts which have gone unrecognized for more than a century. Get involved at PPAATH.org.

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