

Preakness in the Raw

THE ONLY SURE THING AT THE 125TH PREAKNESS WAS THAT DEBAUCH AND DESPAIR WOULD FINISH NECK AND NECK.

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They come slouching through the door of the Club Charles near Penn Station on a soggy Saturday night, stinking of fear and alcohol vapor and broken hope. The mortgage money gone. Ready to drink their last 20 bucks before catching the Amtrak back to Philly and Jersey and Gotham.

Beneath the white-noise technopop throbbing from the jukebox like a dull headache, shards of disconsolate conversation drift. "Lost 800 dollars today," mutters one mope at the bar, gulping a final amber slosh of Maker's Mark from a trembling gimlet glass.

"Five hundred bucks I don't have," says another.

"Broke even, thank God."

"Who needs a drink?"

No one at the bar has the strength to answer.

Hunched over their cocktails in the universal posture of the desperate and ashamed, the out-of-towners want only to remain anonymous. To pick up their mud-splattered souvenir tote bags at the appointed hour and disappear down Charles Street toward the trains.

To go home. To forget again. Until next year.

For now, the very walls of Club Chaz mock them.

Looming behind them, inescapable, a blood-red mural rises 15 feet to the ceiling. Bathed in the milky refraction of the house footlights, soaring on golden wings, nostrils flared, is a painting of the mythical flying horse of Grecian lore.

Pegasus. Namesake of that morning's one-to-five **Preakness** favorite.

Fusaichi Pegasus. Winner of the Kentucky Derby. The most heralded Triple Crown contender since Spectacular Bid in 1979. Heir apparent to the title last won by Affirmed 22 years before. The only sure bet in the million-dollar, 125th **Preakness** Stakes in Baltimore at 5:28 that afternoon.

Pegasus. Beaten in the buttery mud of Pimlico like a three-legged carnival pony with a belly full of hook worm.

"The intriguing question about the **Preakness** is not whether Fusaichi Pegasus will win, but how he will win," proclaimed legendary stakes gambler Andrew "The King" Beyer in the Washington Post the day before the race, adding for good measure: "Red Bullet is worth betting against."

Not knowing any better, the amateur players wagered the Beyer line in droves.

Tax refunds, tuition loans and car payments littered the rain-sodden grounds of Pimlico in the form of 7-6-4 trifecta tickets -- Pegasus, Captain Steve and the underrated Bullet -- in that moment when fate lashed the big red horse to a 4-7-3 finish, with Pegasus sucking his mud and Impeachment bringing up the rear.

"I gotta get something to eat," gasps the mope at the bar, "before I pass out."

THE SIGNS of the coming apocalypse were everywhere that day, if you were paying attention. But few people were.

In the vast, open sewer encircled by the racing oval and known as the infield, the proceedings started early. Unbridled youth skidded in the slop, stripped to the waist, drinking their breakfast from six-hose beer bong in the annual rite of post-pubescence.

As the first of the day's races got underway, horses occasionally ran by, but no one seemed to notice.

By noon, the Port-o-Pots overflowed and cops started whacking people in the kidneys for peeing in public, ignoring far more vile breaches of criminal and Biblical codes occurring nearby.

Stoned out of their minds on laughing gas, reefer smoke and a seizure-inducing miracle drug dubbed "Green G," more than a few youthful pilgrims learned the awful truth about gravity. Others, distracted by 40-plus acres of naked breasts, were mowed down by flying cans of Budweiser, spilling the day's first blood.

Everywhere, barely legal youngsters humped and bumped and ground their butts to the heavy-metal thunder rolling off the 98 Rock sound stage.

"I'm TNT, I'm dyn-o-mite!" growled Aussie headbangers AC/DC, inducing several more young ladies to peel off their shirts for the adoring, groping, caterwauling mob. As steroidal males angled for a better view, jostling like bulls in a 4-H pen, the ominous musk of testosterone hung heavy in the damp air.

"I am truly enjoying my time here -- and, of course, all the half-naked women," testified Matt Myatt, 22, a beefy business major from Elon College in North Carolina, with a can

of beer in each hand for balance." I am gaining a great sense of fellowship with all my new friends and future colleagues. And I am so !#\$% drunk, I can barely stand up."

Prowling the crowd, cameras at the ready, professional lizards wound off frames of film that will fetch a tidy sum on such Internet sites as "Hooterhistorians" and "Publicnudity.com" that peddle moments of innocent fun at Mardi Gras and spring break and Woodstock to dial-up sex freaks.

"The Internet?! Ohhhh, my God!" slurred one perky 19-year-old freshman from Frederick Community College, moments after climbing down from an impromptu striptease atop a muddy cooler. "I didn't even think about that! My mother will kill me!"

As if the lambs needed further assistance, vendors worked the footpaths offering trays of black-eyed Susans -- the official sacrament of **Preakness**, a mix of three fruit juices, equal parts vodka, rum and peach schnapps and a dollop of something that could only be antifreeze.

By 5 o'clock, those still standing were ripe for the reckoning. The greater part of the 98,304 souls in attendance stumbled to their slaughter at the betting cages like blind hogs. For the mud-dappled and debauched infield crowd, it was butchery, pure and simple.

Or perhaps the will of God.

He did, after all, send many warnings.

IN A RACE named after a 19th-century Kentucky thoroughbred that was gunned down after attacking a minor British nobleman on a stud farm, the horse considered the prohibitive favorite on Saturday was himself named for the son of Medusa -- the serpent-tressed Gorgon hag whose visage could turn men to stone.

As any scholar of Greek antiquity could have seen, the **Preakness** and Pegasus were a bad luck combo, a wicked double juju destined to break many hearts.

But the lessons of ancient history were lost on the dizzy scribblers in the Pimlico press box as they gazed from their lofty perch over the west side slums to the glimmer of the Inner Harbor.

They'll be cowering under their desks for weeks as a result, while the switchboards melt in Boston and Louisville and New Orleans and destitute society matrons call publishers screaming for their heads.

But the turf writers weren't the only ones to blame. Not by a long shot.

As adherents of eastern religions can tell you, karma is a big part of what makes the world go around. As you reap, so shall you sow. That which you inflict on the least of God's creatures will come back to haunt you, tenfold.

Three days before the big race, out at Barn Number Seven, stable hands -- still jittery from the drug raids in November that got 30 of their brothers tossed off the job -- broke the boredom of a Wednesday afternoon by bowling baby mice through the hay with a hydraulic power-washer.

Bent and broken, the little fur-balls were sluiced into the drain culverts by the score or trampled into the muck as workers labored to make the filthy, vermin-infested stables along Belvedere Avenue presentable for the soon-to-arrive, \$4 million wonder horse.

On Saturday, at the one-mile mark, something that looked a lot like karma would strike Pegasus coming out of the back turn. The mice would be avenged. God would be appeased. And the greedy, drunk and venal would pay a heavy price for the cruelties meted out by the stable hands on behalf of the Derby winner.

God's final warning came on the day of the race itself, a parade of government officials surging across the VIP bridge and into the high-security Corporate Village at the south end of the infield -- every Maryland pol from the governor on down to the burghers of the Port Authority.

An immense throbbing jinx, they crossed the track just beyond the finish line, at precisely the point where thousands of quick-buck dreams would die that day as Pegasus met his ignominy.

They promptly disappeared inside their tent complex to a \$162,000 banquet paid for by the taxpayers of Maryland and guarded against the prying eyes of the public and the press by a retinue of PR flacks and state troopers.

Cackling, whirling, pounding each other's backs, mixing with the well-fed swells from AT&T and Pepsi and Visa and the gas company, they came to do business.

"Sorry, I'm outta cigars!" guffawed Bruce Bereano, the former heavyweight champ of Annapolis lobbyists convicted of mail fraud and stripped of his law license for overbilling his clients, to one suburban pol out on the lawn. "I had a hundred of 'em when I got here this morning, but I gave 'em all away!"

God only knows what went on inside that tent. All that can safely be said is that everyone had their clothes on.

"GOOOOOOD MORNING, and welcome to the **Preakness!**" the security guard bellows through a bullhorn at the back entrance to Pimlico. "Glass, weapons and hard liquor are not permitted inside! Coolers must be able to be carried by one person!"

It is 9 a.m., **Preakness** morning.

In front, beside and behind the guard, a jeering, cheering herd pours through the Cyclone

gates, dragging cases and crates and Styrofoam caskets full of beer. Thousands of cubic gallons of beer. More beer, it seems, than could be produced by all the breweries in Milwaukee in a day.

"No weapons?!" one goateed knucklehead cracks. "What'm I gonna do with this shotgun?!"

A roar of drunken laughter rolls through the throng, followed by a few nervous glances. As most are well aware, they are standing in one of the most murderous cities in America -- 3,000-plus homicides over the past decade -- and there are no metal detectors at Pimlico.

And still they come.

Out on Northern Parkway, yellow school buses packed with race fans, already hammered, inch their way toward the track. Inside, tangled knots of passengers howl like convicts. The buses parole them onto Rogers Avenue, and they surge toward the gates.

It is at this precise moment that Missouri Congressman Dick Gephardt arrives.

An honorable Democrat who has never fondled an intern, he steps from a limousine into a spritz of rain, his impossibly beautiful family in tow. All are smartly attired in their best church clothes, every golden-blond hair in place.

"I, um ... well," the congressman blurts, beholding the feeding frenzy of Pimlico. "This is quite a scene. Obviously, I, uh, it's quite a scene."

Bodyguards form a human wall between the Gephardts and the filthy brutes in the cooler brigade, urging the statesman and his brood to the relative safety of the clubhouse entrance, where the security men form a defensive perimeter.

The herd moves along. Oblivious. Resplendent. Heading for the concrete tunnel under the track that leads to their Nirvana. A grand procession of pierced lips, eyebrows, tongues and nipples, body parts etched with skulls and runic spirals and shrieking eagles. Boxer shorts hanging out. Breasts plumped by Wonder Bras.

Like migratory animals, they will not stop until they reach their spawning grounds in the infield.

For 82 years, it has been thus -- ever since the 1918 **Preakness**, when race organizers threw open the oval to the public in a desperate bid to match the attendance figures for the Kentucky Derby. The two venues were locked in a bitter rivalry back then, and the Julep pageantry of the Derby was drawing away the crowds, the big-name horses, the press and, most importantly, the serious gamblers.

The infield mob -- with a nudge from the Maryland Jockey Club, which upped the purse

to \$30,000 -- changed all that, dragging the **Preakness** back from the brink of extinction through sheer beastly exuberance. Reporters could no more stay away than they could ignore the crash of a passenger train. And everyone else followed in due course.

Thus did Pimlico come to be known as "the People's Derby," the Sodom and Gomorrah of the thoroughbred circuit. Equal parts horse race, mating ritual and riot.

"Gooooood morning, and welcome to the **Preakness!**" the security guard drones. "Glass, weapons and hard liquor are not permitted inside!"

The senior Democrat from Missouri pans his disbelieving eyes across the fields of mud, the green tinderbox barns along Hayward Avenue, the dented sheet-aluminum grandstands.

Somehow, he manages to keep his jaw on its hinges.

PIMLICO -- twice scorched by fire, once used as an auto-racing venue, then a boot camp, then bulldozed, then rebuilt in 1954 out of what appears to be 10 million recycled beer cans -- today squats in an architectural class completely its own: Ghastly, Late-Period, Bauhaus Humongous. It combines all the worst design features of a Soviet power plant and the main terminal at Dulles International Airport.

If thoroughbred racing had any pride left -- if casino gambling and slot machines and state lotteries hadn't pushed the sport to the edge already -- Pimlico would have been turned over to the National Hot Rod Association long ago.

Churchill Downs, with its bright white tiers and twin spires, ringed in Kentucky greensward and rafts of roses, shimmers like a royal wedding cake on Derby Day. In New York, Belmont Park has its famous arches and sweeping, cantilevered wing overlooking the "truest" course in America -- one and a half miles of long, flat straight-aways and sweeping turns.

Meanwhile, in Baltimore, Pimlico sags on rusted I-beams like an abandoned blimp hangar, black and yellow paint curling from the rafters, ringed in bent fencing and barbed wire and cracked asphalt parking lots -- the lug nut in the Triple Crown.

"Tradition is a fine thing," the eminent racing writer Billy Reed of the Lexington Herald-Leader says over the phone one day from his home in Kentucky. "And I'm a great believer in tradition, but if tradition can't make some allowance for public safety, then maybe the **Preakness** should be held someplace else."

Reed has been saying such things since 1998, when a power outage left some 13,000 of the **Preakness'** serious race fans -- the cement contractors and vinyl-siding magnates who make the biggest bets and lose the most money -- sweating in their banana-yellow blazers in the darkened, nicotine-stained grandstands with no air conditioning.

Reed is, to be sure, a blasphemer.

But he is also right.

And Joe De Francis knows it.

The principal operator of Pimlico, De Francis has been piling up violation notices from the fire marshal for years. Now, he is vowing to spend \$20 million over the next five years to repair the old dump.

Yes, \$20 million, swear to God.

For three weeks before race day, the air at Pimlico fairly boiled with aerosol paint fumes, acetylene and the grit of pulverized rust as 100 weary laborers toiled almost around-the-clock to beat some semblance of dignity into the battleship superstructure of the grandstands.

When they were done, more than 500 gallons of paint and 11 new stairways had been added -- the most elaborate of which will deliver the moneyed monarchs of the posh Member's Club and Sports Palace safely to the ground from their upholstered aerie in the clouds should a major blaze erupt among the more common people in the clubhouse below.

"We now have the most fire-safe stairwells you'll find at any major thoroughbred track in the country," De Francis boasts on **Preakness** morning, plowing his hand back through that famed bituminous mane. "It's a lot safer than Churchill Downs, I'll tell you that."

From such minor victories, he assures, a grandeur worthy of Pimlico's historic weight will one day come.

AS THE 5:28 P.M. post time approaches, there is voltage in the air.

Pegasus, Red Bullet, Impeachment, Snuck In, Captain Steve and the three speed horses -- Hugh Hefner, High Yield and Hal's Hope -- stride across the track to the saddling area. In the grandstands, the anxious crowd rises from its seats as if the College of Cardinals had just convened.

There are four things that even young children learn the first time they visit a stable. A horse can kick the bejesus out of you. They can bite your nose off. They're as big as a Volvo station wagon. And their entire brain would fit in a Maxwell House coffee can.

Pegasus suddenly wheels and prepares to teach these lessons to a by-stander, a race functionary who edges a little too close to his hindquarters.

"Ooooh!" the crowd gushes.

They are hungry for action after the long day's revelry.

"I'm a reasonable, responsible adult the rest of the year," Ron Martin just finished saying, as he adjusted his **Preakness** costume of black shorts and shirt embroidered with dozens of black-eyed Susans that took his wife a year to make. "But by **Preakness** Day, I'm ready to jump out of my skin!"

He's 52. The editor of a small newspaper in Burlington County, N.J. A solid American. A horse fan. He's come to the **Preakness** every year since '88.

"I've been to a few tracks across the country," he says. "The Derby is a lot of snotty people. The New York tracks, let's face it, most of the fans there are from New York. They got what you call an 'at-tee-tood.'

"Been to Santa Anita out west. Been to Monmouth Park in Jersey. Pimlico, that's my idea of heaven. Man, it's a melting pot. All kinds of people, good people from all walks of life, all races, all backgrounds. Just out to have fun. That's Pimlico!"

Dotty Early, a 50-year-old health insurance manager from Middletown, Pa., couldn't agree more. Even out among the unwashed in the infield, where she dared to venture a few years back, she has seen some glimmer of humanity found only at the old firetrap in Baltimore.

"It's the only place I've ever been where you can watch people get drunker and drunker and drunker -- stupid drunk -- but never get rude," she giggles from beneath a straw hat piled high with black-eyed Susans. "There aren't many places like that on earth."

Out back, by the rear clubhouse door, Shawn Vanlandingham praises the Christian charity of the Pimlico crowd. He's 40, a gospel songwriter from northeast Baltimore, scraping to raise two kids on a carpenter's wages.

His son, Michael, 11, is playing show tunes on a portable electric piano, collecting tips in a white plastic bucket.

"People been great to us all day," Vanlandingham says with a wide smile. "My boy is doing a beautiful thing, and we're having a beautiful time, and people here like that. We made a little over \$300 in seven hours. We're blessed.

"I only wish it was **Preakness** every day."

Upstairs, on the dimly lighted second level of the three-tiered grandstands, the cavernous betting terminal has cleared for the first time all day.

Even the serious meat-eaters, the big, blocky guys with the cell phones who have had their eyes pinned to the TV monitors since morning -- watching their money ebb and flow at tracks like Lone Star Park and Arlington, Belmont and Freehold -- are taking the

time to watch one race in the flesh.

The **Preakness** is about to begin.

The railings and windows are jammed.

"Hold 'em high, keep 'em dry, don't forget the porter when you walk by," harps the bootblack in the men's room as the last rush before race time recedes back out the door.

Vince Favazza, a contractor from Monkton -- "big buildings, commercial stuff" -- yells over his shoulder as he races across the floor with a cocktail in his hand, heading for his \$1,300 VIP table: "Can't talk! Gotta go! Lost 460 bucks so far! Time of my life!"

Somehow, he makes it to the escalator without spilling a drop, falling in line behind a corn-silk blonde in a lace-up bodice that can barely contain her charms. Seconds to go before race time, his luck is improving.

"And they're off!"

In the owners' seats, out on the lemon-yellow porch one level above the track, where you can almost smell the horses sweat as they go by, the normally sedate and regal occupants erupt.

"Come on Red! Come on Red! Come on Red!"

"Fusaichi! Where is he?!"

"Come on Red, you can do it, baby!"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, my God!"

"Come on Red! Fly, baby, fly!"

"He's too far back!"

"Pegasus? Dear God, no!"

"No! Please, no! Don't do this to me!"

"He's not gonna make it!"

"Come on Red! Come on Red! Come on Red!"

In one minute and 56.04 seconds, it's over.

God exacts the wages of sin.

Out at the medical tents on the infield, the semi-official body count is final within the hour.

One garden-variety alcohol poisoning; one fractured hand; five "Green G" seizures; nine trauma cases -- casualties of a mid-day volley of beer cans that broke several noses and unsprung one eyeball; 15 sprains, contusions and lacerations. No deaths. No births.

"A slow day at Pimlico," declared nurse Carla Stemmer. "Piece of cake."

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