



*The Oak Tree founding board of directors gathers in the Santa Anita Directors' Room –
(standing) Louis Rowan, Clement Hirsch, B.J. Ridder, William Pascoe,
(seated) Harold Ramser, J.T. Jones, and Dr. Jack Robbins.*

Introduction

The oak tree (genus *Quercus*) holds a place in cultural anthropology as a symbol of strength, courage, wisdom – of life itself. Norse mythology considers the oak nothing less than the sacred tree of the supreme god Thor. Celtic priests, known as the Druids, placed the oak tree at the heart of their beliefs as the gateway between the physical and spiritual worlds. To the Basques of Northern Spain, the oak tree represents freedom. In the language of ancient Greeks, “oak” and “tree” are synonymous.

The official tree of the United States of America is the oak.

Prof. James Canton of the University of Essex in the United Kingdom spent two years visiting the 800-year-old Honeywood Oak on the Marks Hall Estate in the town of Coggeshall, fifty miles northeast of London. His book relating the experience, *The Oak Papers*, was published in 2021. In his introduction, Canton writes:

“Wherever oak trees grow around the globe, people have developed a connection to them. Throughout human history particular oaks have been favored – for their setting, for their age and size. Ancient oaks have always been special. People collect beneath their boughs. They may gather there as a place of significance within the landscape or merely as somewhere to shelter. Whereas we humans are creatures of movement, oaks are static beings. They do not shift. They are born and they die on the same patch of earth. It is this surefootedness that is so appealing.”

For more than four decades, the Thoroughbred racing community enjoyed the strength, wisdom, and surefooted stability of an oak tree grown not from the rich soil of Southern California, where oaks once blanketed the landscape, but from the imagination of a group of likeminded entrepreneurs who seized upon the idea that those benefitting from the sport should give back as much as they got, if not more.

The Oak Tree Racing Association was born in the midst of a Golden Age of Thoroughbred competition. Iconic equine athletes were at work far and wide. Northern Dancer, Buckpasser, Dr. Fager, Damascus and Majestic Prince provided the kind of theatre that ensured the sport consistent front page coverage, while the reign of Secretariat was right around the corner. In 1968, there were 147 racetracks in operation in North America, offering 5,553 racing programs from January through December. More than 43 million patrons attended those programs to wager \$3.8 billion, an all-time high. The equivalent amount in 2024 would round to \$33.6 billion.

In 1968, the state of California took over from New York as the national leader in prize money won by the people who owned the competing Thoroughbreds. Referred to generically as “horsemen,” while recognizing many of the most

successful stables belonged to women, these patrons of the sport were returned \$22 million on their considerable investments, a figure that would approach \$200 million into the 21st century when adjusted for inflation.

And yet, with all the rosy trends, the Thoroughbred racing business of the late 1960s held the same risks inherent in previous eras – when bans on betting were finally lifted in the early part of the century, when the world’s economy hit the skids in the 1930s, or when America emerged from the restrictions imposed by World War II. Through economic and political highs and lows, the one immutable truth always prevailed: in horse racing, there was no such thing as a sure thing.

The Oak Tree Racing Association was a risky proposition taken on by individuals who were accustomed to rolling the dice. They had fought in war, built businesses, and worked in the trenches of the racing game. To be sure, the quality of their lives would not have changed had the venture been a failure. But if their goals could be achieved – of a racing enterprise run “for horsemen by horsemen” – then it was an absolute sure thing the quality of life for the Thoroughbred racing community would benefit beyond their wildest dreams.

It made perfect sense those founders would embrace the symbolism of the oak tree, committing their efforts to strength, wisdom, and stability. The Oak Tree Racing Association emerged from of such a commitment, and this is the story of how those dreams came true.

