

Indie Derby Documentary Offers Insight, Entertainment, Enlightenment to All—From Newbie to Veteran

By Karen Svea Johnson

Of the tens of thousands of Thoroughbreds born each year, no more than 20 will make it to the gate for the Kentucky Derby. Being part of this ultimate event is the goal of every Thoroughbred breeder, owner, and trainer—and fans of the sport dream of making it to Churchill Downs on the first Saturday in May, too.

But like any goal worth achieving, the path to the objective is long, arduous, unpredictable. And getting a horse to the gate in the world's most prestigious race defies all odds. Euphoria and heartbreak abound. But a race tracker is prepared for anything.

Now, a documentary film directed by the Hennegan Brothers, *The First Saturday in May*, chronicles the journey of a diverse cast of six hard-working trainers as they work toward a spot on the 2006 Kentucky Derby trail.

Shooting more than 500 hours of footage from Hot Springs, Arkansas, to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, the Hennegans traveled more than 150,000 miles during a 16-month period to document every major horse race on the road to the 2006 Kentucky Derby.

Churchill Downs Incorporated has partnered with Truly Indie and filmmakers John and Brad Hennegan to distribute the brothers' award-winning documentary to U.S. theatres for a week-long national run in 18 major markets, starting Thursday, April 18. A special one-night Louisville, Kentucky, premiere is scheduled for Sunday, April 13, at The Louisville Palace Theatre.

"Brad and I truly appreciate the sponsorship from Churchill Downs Incorporated to help make the distribution of *The First Saturday in May* to a national audience possible," John Hennegan said. "Our goal was to make horse racing cool again by telling the stories of the hard-working, dedicated and resilient individuals who dedicate their lives to the horses they love. As lifelong horse racing fans, the documentation of this

film was a true passion of ours. This new partnership with Churchill Downs ensures that our incredible journey will continue."

"Those of us fortunate to have screened this film know how *The First Saturday in May* embodies the spirit, passion and tradition of the Kentucky Derby," said Churchill Downs Incorporated Vice President Dave Tompkins. "We believe this fantastic behind-the-scenes look at the world's most famous horse race has the potential to draw new fans to the sport and grow the popularity of the Kentucky Derby."

Judges at film festivals and horseracing insiders share that excitement. The independently produced film, written by the Hennegan Brothers and Mark Krewatch, won Best Documentary honors at the Savannah Film Festival. It won the Special Jury Award at the Austin Film Festival, and was an official selection of the prestigious Tribeca Film Festival in 2007.

Sports Illustrated magazine calls the film "engrossing,"

and gives it three stars out of a possible four. A reviewer for the Washington Post describes the film as "riveting ... compelling, expertly paced." Steven Crist, chairman and publisher of the *Daily Racing Form*, writes, "The best horse racing movie of this or many other years."

Now you've just gotta see it, right?

If you are not lucky enough to be in one of the 18 markets where

the film opens in mid-April, and if *The First Saturday in May* does not make it to your town in the expanded release on April 25, you are not out of luck!

After the initial theatrical release, the film will be available for purchase at its associated website: www.thefirstsaturdayinmay.com. That site also offers a Director's Blog that contains the filmmakers' ruminations, along with interesting links to information about independent filmmaking, horseracing, and the challenges of getting a labor of love to screens ... and paid for.

Sounds like the only thing almost as tough as getting a horse to the Derby is getting an independently-produced film into theatres ...



John and Brad Hennegan (photo by Maggie Rife, courtesy of Hennegan Brothers)