

## Wild Parties and Flamboyant Hats: The Kentucky Derby Infield

by Joseph Patrick Pascale

The Kentucky Derby is known as “The Fastest Two Minutes in Sports” due to the speed at which the horses bolt down the 1¼ mile track, but the wild parties in the Kentucky Derby Infield last a whole lot longer than that. Comparable to Mardi Gras, thousands of people flock to the Infield at Churchill Downs annually for one of the world’s largest, most extravagant parties. It’s a raucous scene of merrymaking, drinking, betting, and big hats.

Tickets to the infield never sell out because there’s no limit on how many people can be admitted. In 2011, over 80,000 tickets were sold to the infield. The infield offers a terrible view of the race – if you want to watch the Run for the Roses, you’re better off buying tickets for actual seats in the bleachers, or if you’ve got the coin, the best seats are at the Millionaires Row Sky Terrace. But people don’t come to the infield to watch the race: they come to party. You’ve got to be prepared to soak in the wild atmosphere and not be scared off by the massive lines to get food, place bets, or even use the toilets. People aren’t allowed to BYOB, but pop-up tents, chairs, music players, and food are all permitted for tailgating.

As you would expect at any exorbitant party, the drinks are flowing. According to the Kentucky state distiller’s association, 95% of the world’s bourbon is produced in Kentucky, but contrary to what some purists might say about mixing bourbon, the drink of choice at the Kentucky Derby Infield is the mint julep. According to derby officials, 120,000 mint juleps were sold at the event in 2012, which took 10,000 bottles of mint julep cocktail, 60,000 pounds of ice and 1,000 pounds of mint to make. They serve a ready-made cocktail, but connoisseurs argue about how to create the perfect balance of bourbon, simple syrup, and mint over crushed ice for a gourmet mint julep.

But let’s not forget the hats. That’s right, the event has become synonymous with the widest brimmed and most ornate hats around. The founder of the Kentucky Derby, Col. Meriwether Lewis Clark Jr., envisioned the event as one of high society, so naturally the ladies showed up wearing their biggest, swankiest hats. This is a tradition that has only become more lavish with age. The attendees in 2013 sported hats with flowers and feathers bursting up into the heavens, and brims that made a satellite dish look like a saucer.

Mother Nature didn’t seem to cooperate for the 2013 Infield extravaganza, as the event was almost washed out by rain. However, the partygoers wouldn’t let a little storm get in the way: they used the slick, muddy terrain to set up impromptu slip-and-slides, as well as mud-wrestling pits. The scene is always wild as people have too much to drink, clothes come off, and port-a-potties don’t stay private.

This year will mark the 140<sup>th</sup> race's anniversary. The 2014 Kentucky Derby will be held on Saturday, May 3<sup>rd</sup> at Churchill Downs. You can already purchase your tickets to the Kentucky Derby Infield at <http://www.churchilldowns.com/>.