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At the Starting Gate

When I am struggling to come up with a topic for this column like I was this month, I usually look at the previous month's article (to make sure I don't copy it again) and the article from the same month in the previous year; hoping for a topic that was relevant the previous year. My September 2018 article opened with, "To be honest with you, I had a hard time coming up with something to write about for this issue." I was successful in discovering a pattern: that the September issue is a common time for writer's block! The best way for me to get rolling in these cases is to start writing what's on my mind and hope I can tie it back to cattle eventually. That method worked out well for this month.

I spent an August weekend in Des Moines with friends at the Prairie Meadows racetrack. It was a fun way to wrap up the summer before heading into the chaos that is fall sale and show season. With everyone on the trip working in purebred cattle marketing, we resigned ourselves to the fact that we won't be able to get together again until Denver. If you invite someone in our line of work to a social event on a fall weekend, don't expect them to show up unless it's your sale day!

Horse racing is affectionately known as "The Sport of Kings", but I'm not sure that moniker really fits. Some of you tune in for the Kentucky Derby or other big races and see the high-class party atmosphere, but you may not realize that everyday horse racing is a blue-collar profession. The barns at Prairie Meadows are full of horsemen trying to make their living winning races. While we all tried to find the next longshot winner, the conversation at the table turned to cattle. One of the guys at the table made the observation, "You know, this sport deals with a lot of the same things that we do in the cattle business." What followed was a lengthy discussion about some of

the similarities in horse racing and the beef cattle business. I've outlined some of the biggest commonalities in the rest of this article.

Breeding and Genetics: Breeding racehorses is a combination of art, livestock breeding and luck. What makes the Thoroughbred breeding industry much more challenging, is that all matings must be natural service in order to be eligible for registration. Imagine if we had that restriction in the registered beef business! Most of the Thoroughbred breeding in the US is based around Lexington, Kentucky. However, many state Thoroughbred organizations offer special races and incentive programs for horses bred and raced in their state. We watched several races which were open only to Iowa-bred horses while at Prairie Meadows, and they even host a special day of racing to celebrate the Iowa-breds at the end of the season. Similar to our livelihood, it's important to find a niche for your breeding program where you can fit and be successful.

Conformation: I'm not an expert in racehorse phenotype, but one of my friends has some knowledge of what one should look like. He certainly had a "look" or type that he was studying for when the horses paraded out onto the track before each race. It didn't necessarily help him cash any winning tickets. I think as cattlemen we have a better grasp on what type of animal will be a winner in our herds than the horseplayer at the track.

Statistics and Data: Open up a race program and you will find more data than you know what to do with on each race. There are statistics on jockey and trainer performance, as well as recaps of recent past races for every horse in the race. To a novice, it can be a numerical overload, but it can also be helpful to find the winning horse and place the right wager. Much akin to our own

performance data, EPDs and selection indexes, the information in a racing program can be beneficial if you know how to use it!

Betting Style: Everyone at the track has their own methodology to picking a winner. Some watch the horses in the paddock, while others study the stats in the program. Some play by gut feeling or color of the horse. Regardless, the destination is the same for everyone: to win some money! Study all the different cattle operations out there and you'll see a similar trend. No two cattlemen go about things exactly the same, even with the same end goal in mind.

Compassion: The crowds are not very big at Prairie Meadows, except for the 10 minutes before and during a race. The spectator numbers grow then because all the people who work in the stables make their way over to watch their horses run their race. Grooms, trainers, and other staff all gather near the finish line to cheer on their horses. You can tell that they care deeply for the animals they are responsible for. As soon as every race ended, they bounced into action to cool their horse down and get them back to the barn for post-race care. What may just be "the #5 horse" to the racegoer is a special athlete with a name and a unique personality to the people who care for them, just like we view some of our cow herds.

Horse racing has always been one of my favorite sports. After the trip to Prairie Meadows and the discussion of how similar it is to our beloved industry, I think I've developed an even deeper appreciation for their business. Midwestern horsemen and cattlemen are a lot more alike than we might think, with both groups made up of dedicated, hard-working people trying to make a living in the industry they love. You also have to be a pretty good gambler to make it in either business!