



Horseman's Heraldry

Racing Silks Have Colorful Past

By Robert Bolson

Whether it's the familiar yellow chevrons of Lane's End Farm, the conspicuous green and blue bull's eye of W.T. Young's Overbrook Farm, the simple interlinked double "D" design of Darby Dan, or the unmistakable devil's red and blue colors of Calumet, racing silks are as stylish, distinctive, and universally recognizable as Tiffany's Blue Box.

The colorful shirts and caps worn by jockeys are the most visible component of their "uniform" and include a sophisticated language of emblems, patterns, signs, and personal symbols.

They represent a fascinating who's who of horse racing and its rich history — a colorful, calculated, and often complex horsemen's heraldry of famous farms, legendary families, tradition, and sometimes nothing more than an owner's whim and whimsy. In fact, you can't officially race without a set.

James Archambeault

Fittingly, one of the world's pre-eminent silks makers is located in the heart of the Thoroughbred breeding industry: Silks Unlimited, on West Second Street in downtown Lexington.

Despite the name, the majority of those eye-catching "silks" are rarely silk at all, according to Patricia Headley Green, former owner of Hardboot Farm near Lexington and current owner of Silks Unlimited. In fact, until 1860 racing "silks" were predominately velvet.



Joy B. Gilbert

"People don't really appreciate how difficult it is to create a custom set of silks."

— Silks Unlimited owner
Patricia Green

The three most widely used fabrics at Silks Unlimited are traditional (100% nylon satin), lightweight (100% nylon; wind-breaker weight) and aerodynamic (a Lycra stretch material). Although no official industry records are kept, nylon is believed to be the most popular with horsemen because of its durability. Aerodynamic racing silks were introduced to the racing world as recently as 1988.

Silks Unlimited creates more than 500 sets of customized silks annually and in the past nine years has served over 5,000 clients from around the world. It's where legendary names such as Overbrook, Claiborne, Mill Ridge, Lane's End, Spendthrift, and Calumet go for their silks.

Green purchased Silks Unlimited in 1992 after running into friend and then-owner and founder Alice Craig, who was moving to Florida and selling the business.

"After I sold Hardboot Farm, my children said 'Mother...please find something to do!' " said Green.

"I didn't give it another moment's thought until about two weeks later when I was sitting around the house, bored, and I began to consider buying the shop, but I thought to myself, 'I've been around this house all my life...and I don't sew a stitch...but

maybe I could do that.'"

Today Green still hasn't taken up sewing. She leaves that to her talented staff of nine local seamstresses (up from four in 1992). In turn, she and niece Linda Green handle the day-to-day office responsibilities. Silks Unlimited is also the official silks maker for the National Museum of Racing in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and makes Keeneland's saddlecloths.



Barbara D. Livingston

It requires two and a half yards of fabric to create a single set of silks, and some customers purchase as many as a dozen sets at a time. The busiest times of year are just before the Breeders' Cup and the Kentucky Derby, according to Green.

"People don't really appreciate how difficult it is to create a custom set of silks," notes Green. "The biggest challenge is consistently matching an owner's colors from dye lot to dye lot of fabric. Owners are very particular about their chosen colors. The most difficult color to match up is often kelly green."

While Green may not be hands on with the sewing, she takes an active role with the quality control. "I take the fabric home and test all new material, including washing and microwaving sample cloth to test for shrinkage and fading."

Green and her staff also watch horse racing with an extra-keen eye, attempting to identify their garments as worn by the various jockeys. "We identify our silks by our trademark white snaps," said Green.

While jockeys may come in different sizes of small, racing silks do not. Each set created at Silks Unlimited is cut from the same pattern in order to stay at a specific weight requirement.

"That's why you see some jockeys wearing rubber bands around their cuffs...to get that truly 'custom' fit," says Green.

Green points out the silks must also be made large enough to fit over a jockey's safety vest, which became mandatory equipment in 1994.

Turnaround for a set of silks is about two and a half weeks, and the price varies depending upon the fabric and the complexity of the design. In general, prices range from about \$100 for a simple set to \$300 or more for intricate designs.

Silks **A Heralded Past**

Hundreds of years ago, spectators, owners, and, more importantly, judges memorized each rider's "colours" in order to "read the race" from far across the countryside. It was a difficult task even under the best of conditions.

The tradition of wearing distinctive markings in competition traces back to when "battling to the finish" had a far more severe and permanent meaning.

Heraldry arose in the 12th century, around the time of the crusades. In deadly battle, a courageous knight adorned from head to toe in protective body armor could barely be recognized by a friend or foe. To identify them quickly, special markings were painted on the knight's shield and on the coat he wore over his armor. Thus, a "coat of arms" was born.

A son would inherit the unique markings of his father, carrying them into battle with pride. After a battle, a knight fortunate enough to survive returned to his castle or manor and hung the shield and helmet prominently on the wall until his next battle.

The knight's chosen markings were also used on his seal, which was carved in stone, painted on stained glass, and often placed on



Trent Hermann

The Claiborne Farm silks (above) are among the most recognizable in racing. Yellow chevrons distinguish the Lane's End silks (above left).

most objects of value, all of which helped to identify the owner. This was particularly significant and useful in an age when few people could read or write.

Today, after “battle” on the racetrack, racing silks are not displayed upon a wall but rather simply returned to the jockeys’ room at each respective track. Some remain there in “lost & found” limbo, never to be claimed.

Even with the growing number of racehorse owners, no international registry or regulator of racing silks exists. Requirements vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. New York has the reputation for being the most restrictive. The general rule of thumb is, as Sinatra knew, if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.

In New York, there are 38 acceptable jacket designs and 18 permissible sleeve designs, many of which incorporate braces, stars, checks, epaulets, diamonds, stripes, squares, triangles, balls, blocks, spots, hoops, and chevrons. New York’s complete rules and regulations governing the creation and registration of silks fill five pages.

In general, if the design isn’t already taken, obscene, or questionable — and meets all five pages of rules and regulations — you are that much closer to your dream of someday seeing your silks in the winner’s circle.

Silks

In 1947 there were 2,500 sets of silks registered in New York by The Jockey Club. Today, it has well over ten times that amount, approximately 28,000. Once a design has been approved, a nominal annual registration fee is required to maintain an exclusive right to race under that design. The only exceptions are the 3,500 “lifetime silks” grandfathered in before The Jockey Club discontinued permanent registration in 1964.



A typical jockeys’ room, like this one at Keeneland, abounds with a colorful collection of silks.

Bill Straus

As noted in Gayle C. Herbert’s *A History of Racing Silks*, the oldest set of colors in continuous use in American racing today are the scarlet racing silks of Mrs. John A. Morris. Formerly known as “the Barbarity colors,” they were adopted by Francis Morris in the 1860s when he raced the great mares Ruthless, Remorseless, and Relentless, known as “the Barbarity mares.”

As far back as 624 B.C., ancient Greeks also used colorful cloaks and headbands in their Olympiad to distinguish one bareback rider from the next.

(Binoculars would not be invented until the late 1800s.)

Whether you are considering using a black bumble bee, pineapples, a viking, or even a pink flamingo, one thing is certain: the sooner you run your design around the track the better — or someone else might beat you to it. 🐝

Noble Roots

Newmarket, England, is generally accepted as the official birth place of today’s individual racing silks. At a meeting of The Jockey Club in October, 1762, it was decided that:

“For the greater convenience of distinguishing the horses running, and also for the prevention of disputes arising from not knowing the colours of each rider the under-mentioned gentlemen have come to the resolution and agreement of having the colours annexed to following names worn by their respective riders: The Stewards therefore hope, in the name of The Jockey Club, that the named gentlemen will take care that the riders be provided with dresses accordingly.”

A total of nineteen noteworthy names of nobility were listed by The Jockey Club including seven Dukes, one Marquis, four Earls, one Viscount, one Lord, two Baronets, and three commoners.

Is it any wonder horse racing is considered “The Sport of Kings”?

The color “straw” chosen by His Grace the Duke of Devonshire is still used by the family today. It is considered the oldest known racing color still in existence. As you might imagine, primary colors were spoken for almost as soon as the first set was ever registered. Attempting to register a primary color today would be laughable and unthinkable.