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Doubtless Henry VIII had his very own views as regards what constituted the 'sport of kings'; nevertheless it is horse racing that typically carries this appellation. Yet to suggest that racing was the privilege of an elite is wrong: it was the sport of all, a common interest of peer and peasant, of lord and labourer. Indeed, though William IV himself had no great zeal for the turf- he was "bored to death at Ascot" — he acknowledged its worth as a social institution:

Horse racing emerged naturally out of an environment in which horses played a crucial role: as well as providing a means of transport, they were also standing symbols, their quality an overt show of the owner's wealth. Possession unavoidably engendered contention, which in turn led on to the organisation of races, at first only matches between 2 horses but later formalized races with numerous entrants. Some races would also serve an economic function in letting owners show off their horses before offering them for sale. Many race meetings in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were not only for thoroughbred racehorses. At all but the major fixtures there might be events for half-bred horses, hunters, and, occasionally, even ponies.

One reason for this range of competitors was the transport situation: so long as horses needed to be walked to meetings they tended to race only hereabouts, thus restricting the number of entrants at any specific gathering. The use of heats was another device to obtain a full day's racing from a limited supply of horses. The winner of an event was the first entrant to win 2 heats; this can frequently need 4 or perhaps more races. One more reason for the variability of horses participating was that most race meetings at this time were primarily social events, and not only for the privileged leisure classes. They were a high point of the social calendar for the bulk of the local people who, starved of arranged public entertainment, came determined to enjoy their meeting. If it was feasible to participate at more than spectator level, then they wished to do so; hence farmers raced, and often rode, their half breeds and others their thoroughbred hunters and racing stock. What greater ambition could there be than to ride one's own steed to victory at one's local meeting?

Races before 1840 weren't gate-money events. Spectators paid no entry fee: everybody was able to watch and to look at was free. Unless watchers wished to view from the grandstand (not that there always was one), they paid zilch to see the races.

This has led one sports historian to debate that racing was arranged only for [horse betting](#) purposes, for if entrance cash wasn't charged then clearly racing had no requirement of spectators. It is true that racing could occur without an audience, but if the bunch had not been part and parcel of the local conferences, then certainly they would be more than the yearly or semi- annual events that they were. At Newmarket, where racing was exclusive to the upper classes and the masses were actively discouraged from attending, meetings were much more frequent. Here, and at a few other select meetings, betting may have been the fulcrum of the game, but elsewhere racing was intimately connected with local holidays: travelling shows, gaming booths, beer tents, cock fights, boxing and wrestling matches, open—air dancing, and, for a privileged few, balls and dinner parties, all contributed to a full day out.

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