

SPORTS

Kentucky Derby rides alongside strong luxury presence

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The Kentucky Derby, which is often referred to as "The Greatest Two Minutes in Sports," welcomes new luxury sponsors. Image credit: BMW

By KATIE TAMOLA

The most famous horse racing event in the world, the 148th Kentucky Derby, takes place this weekend and luxury is at the helm.

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From designer derby dresses to sponsorships from Swiss watchmaker Longines and German automaker BMW, luxury permeates the entire spring sporting event. The Kentucky Derby, which is often referred to as "The Greatest Two Minutes in Sports," lends itself well to a luxury presence as it is a celebratory, always fashionable event, with hints of glamour.

"Beyond the usual display of luxury in the form of formal wear and Southern Belle' hats, one only needs to look at the sponsors who are some leading luxury brands: Longines, Woodford Reserve, Vineyard Vines and others," said Matt Voda, CEO at marketing analytics platform [OptiMine Software](#), Minneapolis.

"Brands seeking to associate themselves with the luxury positioning of the Kentucky Derby will have many marketing avenues to make themselves known via TV advertising, on-premise sponsorship and signage, product placements and merchandise."

Saddle up

While the eponymous Kentucky Derby race itself is on May 7, such a renowned event calls for a weekend-long celebration.

Longines, the longtime official timekeeper of the Kentucky Derby, is holding activations throughout the weekend.

The Longines Kentucky Oaks race will be taking place on May 6 a competition for 3-year-old fillies, or female horses, which is held each year on the day before the Kentucky Derby. The event is a \$1.25 million Grade 1 stakes race and gifts the winning filly with a garland of lilies, a prize entitled "lilies for the fillies."



Longines has a history with equestrian sports. Image credit: Longines

The brand is also hosting a fashion contest on Kentucky Oaks day, inviting spectators to dress in their most wow-inducing hats and accessories noting that white hats are the top accessory, fascinators and colored headbands are acceptable. Pink is also the color of the day.

The Derby is also welcoming its first luxury automotive partner, BMW.

As part of the partnership, BMW will have a strong presence at Churchill Downs Racetrack in Louisville, Kentucky, with displays of the new 7 Series, the i7 and an M850i convertible. VIP and celebrity guests are also set to arrive via the recently updated X7.

On May 5, BMW also showed a strong presence at Taste of Derby, the annual gathering of 1,200 people featuring famous chefs. The event also raises money for hunger charities.

Hospitality group Marriott International has also curated a specific Kentucky Derby package for its Marriott Bonvoy Moments platform.



The Louisville Marriott Downtown. Image credit: Marriott

The package includes two made-to-order hats from Kentucky Derby featured milliner Jenny Pfanenstiel, retailed at more than \$3,000; two tickets for table seating in Millionaires Row for both the Kentucky Oaks and the Kentucky Derby which includes a chef's table buffet, all-inclusive beverages and premium open bar, access to live Mutuel tellers and VIP wristbands; a three-night stay at the Louisville Marriott Downtown.

Kentucky bourbon whiskey Woodford Reserve is also a presenting sponsor of the Kentucky Derby and has released a 2022 commemorative Derby bottle.

Private aviation firm Sentient Jet is also returning for its seventh year as a corporate partner of the Kentucky Derby, and partnering with American Thoroughbred racehorses Epicenter and Echo Zulu.

Consumers at home having their own celebrations may watch The Kentucky Derby on NBC and Peacock on May 7.

Remember the hat

Known as one of the most fashionable sporting events, spectators are expected to show up and show out in their finest Kentucky Derby dresses and hats.

Rent the Runway, which shuttered its physical stores in 2020 as the coronavirus curtailed its rental service, which heavily relies on its clients attending special events ([see story](#)) has an entire Derby [vertical](#) where consumers can

rent Derby looks, whether they are attending the big event in-person or hosting their own celebration.

The gap between sports and fashion is growing smaller, especially regarding coveted events like the Derby and Super Bowl.

Earlier this year, marketers aimed to capture consumers' attention ahead of the Super Bowl on Feb. 13.

BMW landed a coveted commercial spot during the game, while several fashion labels and retailers are celebrating the championship with sportswear-inspired capsule collections ([see story](#)).

As always, if it is an event that generates a great deal of attention, luxury will find its way in.

"The keyword here is audience': if few tuned into the event, luxury brands wouldn't invest in their association with the Derby," Mr. Voda said. "So, the event is a virtuous circle of wealth, audience interest and luxury brand sponsorship."

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