



# Florida Thoroughbred

*Charlene R. Johnson*

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From the preface:

"In 1774, naturalist William Bartram described the area just north of Ocala as covered with 'squadrons of beautiful, fleet Seminole horses on the great Alachua Savannah.' But over a hundred years later, early Florida breeders would be scoffed at for their attempts to raise horses in Florida."

Early thoroughbred breeders (mainly the bluegrass hardboots of Kentucky) warned that thoroughbred horses couldn't survive the Florida heat and swampland. "Stick to raising alligators," they mocked. Today the thoroughbred industry is a major business in the state (ranking third in terms of revenue), and racehorses that are born, raised, and trained in Florida gallop to worldwide acclaim. Long-awaited by people in the industry, this book by award-winning turf writer Charlene R. Johnson is the only complete history of racing and breeding in the state.

Long known as a winter racing mecca, the Hialeah Race Track opened the "palm tree circuit" in 1925 with a dusty track, an infield of burned weeds, and no unloading facilities for the tired horses who arrived by train from New York. The first string to race at Hialeah unloaded in downtown Miami and walked ten miles to the track while grooms wielded baseball bats to protect the horses from snakes.

The success--and quirky personality--of Needles, the first Florida thoroughbred to win the Kentucky Derby, in 1956 (coming from second-to-last position on the backstretch), accelerated the state's breeding program. Johnson documents the business from the early era in Tallahassee in the 1800s to its unprecedented growth in Marion County, where limestone deposits in the rolling green countryside provide the perfect nutrients for healthy bones and cartilage in livestock.

Interviews with first- and second-generation horse people contribute to this record--including Fred Hooper, winner of more breeder's awards and racing honors than anyone in the United States, and Frank David ("Buddy") Yates, Needles' gallop boy in the fifties and the son of Needles' trainer, Roy Yates. Among more than a hundred photographs in the book are shots of the famous captive flamingoes at Hialeah, Rough 'n Tumble's swimming pool at Ocala Stud, Needles exhibiting his characteristic displeasure during morning exercise, Carryback, the second Florida thoroughbred to win the Kentucky Derby, and Affirmed, the first to win the Triple Crown. Appendixes provide information on tracks, earnings, winners, breeder awards, and more.

Charlene R. Johnson is a freelance turf writer and has been involved in all facets of the thoroughbred industry for the past twenty years, from breeding to racing, galloping on the track, to walking hots. She belongs to the Florida and National Turf Writers' Associations and has published articles in *The Thoroughbred Times*, *The Blood Horse*, *Spur Magazine*, and *Chronicle of the Horse*, winning three national awards for her writing. She served as editor of *The Florida Horse* and as staff writer for the *The Horsemen's Journal*, wrote a weekly column for the *Daily Racing Form*, and was the main correspondent for the *Florida Thoroughbred Times*. She currently is working on a historical novel based in Florida.

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