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Rise and fall of Lexington's sire line

by Rommy Faversham

No bell will toll. No pronouncements offered.

But, at some point, perhaps, in the next few years - if not indeed already - the legendary male line of Lexington will reach unconditional extinction, as the last of its painfully obscure male representatives takes his final breath.

This once greatest of all American sire lines did not end with a bang but the most prolonged of whimpers, amassing well over a century of decay and failure.

The male line of Lexington was initiated by the importation of his aging paternal great-great grandsire, *Diomed. Winner of the inaugural running of the Epsom Derby in 1780, the enigmatic Diomed was ultimately deemed a failure at stud in England and dispatched to Virginia in 1798.

In his definitive text, *Racing in America 1665-1865*, esteemed Turf historian John Hervey wrote, "the success of [Diomed's American] get was so immediate, so sweeping, as to blot out all precedent. He was in no long time regarded as the greatest progenitor yet seen".

In explaining this revolutionary shift in Thoroughbred bloodlines, Hervey noted, "the Diomedes exceeded in size and power any previous American family". Described as a strong

15.3 hands, Diomed often produced offspring even larger than himself.

Diomed's best son, Sir Archy (1805) has been described as America's first great runner and remains the oldest member of Racing's Hall of Fame. Sir Archy's phenomenal career at stud would ultimately earn him the soubriquet of "Godolphin Arabian of America", which sought to epitomize his influence as well as underscore the saturation of his blood in subsequent generations. Hervey wrote, "nothing has been known in America to equal the manner in which the Archys dominated both turf and stud for over half a century, beginning with the debut of his first crop of foals in 1814 and culminating with the last of the sixteen seasons of premiership of his inbred great-grandson Lexington in 1878".

Sir Archy's Virginia-bred son, Timoleon (1813) was another champion of his day, winning 13 in a row at one point. At stud, he produced Racing Hall of Famer Boston (1833), sire of the incomparable Lexington.

On account of lost or insufficient documentation, Timoleon's tail-female line has never been able to be traced back to one of the original foundation mares of England. As a result, Timoleon, his prodigal grandson Lexington, not to mention most of the ensuing American breed would become effectively barred from the English Stud Book by the seemingly draconian Jersey Act of 1913.

By the mid-19th century, the American Thoroughbred's entire breeding fabric was saturated with Diomed and Sir Archy blood, their dominant male line becoming only stronger through the practice of close inbreeding, usually considered poison for most sirelines. Boston was inbred 3X3 to Diomed. His premiere son, Lexington, was 4X3 to Sir Archy with a total of three strains to Diomed.

Breeders were simply returning their mares to the same male strains that seemed to perpetually issue the most winners. Hervey noted that, even in the North, the direct descendants of Diomed enjoyed overwhelming success - in one measure, taking

52 of the 60 four-mile heats run over the fabled Union Course on Long Island between 1821 and 1849.

Lexington (1850), then, featured a most appropriate pedigree to become the most famous American racehorse and stallion of the 19th century. Hervey called him a “triumph of breeding” and specifically commented on his unique five crosses of the key colonial matriarch, Kitty Fisher, Boston’s 6th dam.

Lexington’s epic duels in New Orleans with Lecompte (another 1850 son of Boston) in 1854 and ‘55 generated more attention than any previous sporting event in the U.S. This included the greatly heralded North-South rivalry between distaff champion Fashion and Boston during the early 1840s.

By the spring of 1855, Lexington, like his sire before him, was quickly going blind, making retirement from racing compulsory. Shipped to Kentucky, he stood his first two seasons at the farm of W.F. Harper, at Midway, Woodford County. In the summer of 1856, Lexington was purchased for \$15,000 by R.A. Alexander and moved to his nearby, and soon to be legendary, Woodburn Farm.



LEXINGTON

At stud, Lexington soon became the most dominant individual stallion in American history, a description which still stands.

Hervey wrote, “Lexington is at once the most illustrious, the most historically significant, and, in his influence as a progenitor, the most potent and far-reaching of American thoroughbreds”.

Breeding and racing records credit Lexington with (only) a total of 47 stakes winners; more a reflection of underdeveloped stakes schedules and the turbulent times through which he lived than anything else. The Civil War (1861-65) raged while Lexington was in his prime as a sire and, in the carnage, scores of his foals and in-foal broodmares were lost, confiscated or killed.

Despite these and other obstacles, Lexington annexed 14 consecutive sire titles, an unprecedented sixteen overall (1861-1874, 1876, 1878). His offspring captured an unequaled seven Triple Crown events as well as a phenomenal nine Travers Stakes. At the highest of class levels, the get of Lexington were quite often found beating each other. It was, indeed, the apex for the fortunes of the Diomed/Archy line.

By the the late 1870s, however, new lines recently imported from England were beginning to assert themselves.

Lexington’s many outstanding sons were distributed throughout the breeding landscape and while a number of them became worthy sires (see Table 1) none revealed the predominance of their male-line ancestors. For the first time in more than seventy-five years, there was bloodlines parity.

Table 1

THE LEXINGTON SIRELINE

LEXINGTON (47 SWs)

- |Aster (1 SW)
- |Asteroid (9 SWs)
- |Bayonet (1 SW)

|Baywood (2 SWs)
 |Censor (1 SW)
 |Chillicothe (1 SW)
 |Colton (0 SWs)
 | |Monday (5 SWs)
 | | |Peel (1 SW)
 | | |Shannon (1 SW)
 | | | |Bishop (1 SW)
 | | | | |Racine (2 SWs)
 | | | | |Senator McCarren (1 SW)
 | | |Joe Hooker (5 SWs)
 | | | |Surinam (1 SW)
 |Concord (1 SW)
 |Daniel Boone (4 SWs)
 |Donerail (1 SW)
 |Duke Of Magenta (4 SWs)
 |Fiddlesticks (1 SW)
 |Gilroy (1 SW)
 | |Grinstead (13 SWs)
 | | |Volante (3 SWs)
 | | |El Rayo (1 SW)
 | | |Gano (4 SWs)
 |Harry Bassett (1 SW)
 |Harry of the West (1 SW)
 |Hunter's Lexington (2 SWs)
 |Jack Malone (2 SWs)
 | |Eland (1 SW)
 |Judge Curtis (3 SWs)
 |Kentucky (8 SWs)
 |Kingfisher (7 SWs)
 | |Prince Royal (1 SW)
 |Lever (4 SWs)
 |Lightning (5 SWs)
 |Luther (0 SWs)
 | |Sharpcatcher (2 SWs)
 |Marion (1 SW)
 |Monarchist (3 SWs)
 |Norfolk (6 SWs)
 | |Prince of Norfolk (1 SW)
 | |Alta (1 SW)
 | |El Rio Rey (2 SWs)
 | |Flood (2 SWs)
 | |Emperor of Norfolk (5 SWs)
 | | |*Americus (4 SWs in GB & Ire.)
 | | | |Golden Rod (1 SW in Ire.)
 | | |Cruzados (0 SWs)
 | | | |Lantados (1 SW)
 | | | | |Rey el Rio (0 SW)
 | | | | | |Rey El Tierra (1 SW)
 | | | | | | |El Tesoro (0 SWs)
 | | | | | | | |Peerless (0 SWs)
 |*Optimist (0 SWs)
 | |Mars (2 SWs in Fr.)
 |Pat Malloy (7 SWs)
 | |Bob Miles (3 SWs)
 | | |Favor (1 SW)
 |Tom Bowling (3 SWs)
 |Tom Ochiltree (5 SWs)

|Uncas (10 SWs)
 |Uncle Vic (2 SWs)
 |Vauxhall (3 SWs)
 |Wanderer (2 SWs)
 |War Dance (7 SWs)
 | |Stampede (1 SW)
 | |Chance (1 SW)
 |Woodburn (1 SW)

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LEXINGTON sired	47 SWs
his sons sired a total of	110 SWs
his paternal grandsons sired a total of	41 SWs
his 3rd generation male line heirs sired a total of	19 SWs
his 4th generation male line heirs sired a total of	4 SWs
his 5th generation male line heirs sired a total of	3 SWs
his 6th generation male line heirs sired a total of	1 SW

Ironically, the single most important factor in the decline of the great male line of Diomed and Archy was not the inadequacies of Lexington's breeding sons, but the immense powers of his producing daughters. United with fresh male strains from abroad, Lexington mares often performed in breed-shaping fashion, supplying most of the leading stallions with a majority of their best offspring, both at the track and at stud (see Table 2).

Since Lexington was already so closely inbred, mating his sons and paternal grandsons to his daughters was hardly a consideration for most breeders.

For 4-time leading sire Leamington, 16 of his 25 stakes winners were out of Lexington mares. Another 4-time leading stallion, Glenelg, sired 17 of his 29 SWs with daughters of "the Blind Hero of Woodburn".

For the male line descendants of Lexington, it became increasingly difficult to compete against the growing number of rivals who were gaining particular benefit from their unions with

Lexington mares.

This included the male line forebears to Fair Play, Domino and Ben Brush. During the early twentieth century, these three came to represent America's new triumvirate of sire line dominance. Fair Play's paternal grand sire, Spendthrift, was out of the Lexington mare Aerolite. Daughters of Lexington also figured prominently in the pedigrees of Ben Brush (Bay Flower) and Domino (both Hira and Lida).

Table 2

LEXINGTON'S MOST INFLUENTIAL DAUGHTERS

daughter (year foaled; family number)	racing / breeding distinctions
LIDA (1858; A18)	dam of Enquirer (undefeated 3 YO; influential sire); 2nd dam of Tecumseh (Preakness), Leo (Champagne S.)
BAY FLOWER (1859; #9-a)	premiere Midwest racemare; 2nd dam of BRAMBLE (Saratoga Cup/foundation stallion); ancestress of Hoop Jr., Peeping Tom (G1), etc.
MINNIE MINOR (1860; A4)	dam of Wanda (Monmouth Oaks, etc.); ancestress of Ky. Derby wnr. Clyde Van Dusen, Swaps, Iron Liege & Kauai King; Courtly Dee family
AEROLITE (1861; A3)	dam of 2 SWs inc. SPENDTHRIFT (Belmont S./foundation stallion); ancestress of Ky. Derby wnr. Chant & Pink Star
FANNY HOLTON (1862; A14)	dam of TEN BROECK (<u>Hall of Fame</u> ; champion at 4 & 5)
MAIDEN (1862; #4-r)	won Travers Stakes; dam of 3 SWs inc. PAROLE (<u>Hall of Fame</u>); ancestress of Nearco (foundation stallion), Skimming, etc.
ULRICA (1863; #11)	won Saratoga S.; dam of Ben Ali (Ky. Derby) & Memento (Spinaway S.) ancestress of Tanya (Belmont S.), Broomspun (Preakness S.), etc.
HIRA (1864; #2-a)	dam of 3 SWS inc. HIMYAR (premiere Midwest SW/foundation stallion)
LA POLKA (1865; #23-b)	mult. SW / dam of 2 SWs inc. Los Angeles (filly champion); 2nd dam of Gold Heels (champion)
LA HENDERSON (1865; #4-r)	dam of 4 SWs inc. Vanguard (Preakness S.), Ferida (Alabama S.); ancestress of Jean Bereaud (Belmont S.), Hillsdale, Habitat, etc.
SARONG (1867; A9)	dam of Aristides (inaugural Ky. Derby, Withers H., Jerome H.)
SALINA (1868; #12-b)	won Monmouth Oaks; dam of SALVATOR (<u>Hall of Fame</u> , chmpn. at 3 & 4)

MARY CLARK (1868;#4-r) won Sequel S.; dam of 3 SWs inc. Pure Rye (Ky. Oaks); ancestress of Artful (Hall of Fame), Education (chmpn.), Runaway Groom (G1), etc.

FLORENCE (1869;#24) dam of HINDOO (Hall of Fame/foundation stallion); 2nd dam of FIRENZE (Hall of Fame); ancestress of Ky. Derby wnr. Paul Jones & Carry Back

NEVADA (1869;#12-b) dam of LUKE BLACKBURN (Hall of Fame; champion at 3)

Hervey's text recalled the predictions by some at the time that "an enduring Lexington male line could not be established" and was actually "doomed from the start".

While most of Lexington's sons and paternal grandsons struggled and failed at stud throughout the Midwest and East, it was the young, untamed state of California that provided the celebrated, but now, vulnerable line with its last haven of glory. Horsemen Theodore Winters and Elias "Lucky" Baldwin brought Norfolk, Monday and Grinstead out West where their descendants enjoyed one last exhibition of local dominance. By one count, 9 of the first 14 recorded winners of the California Derby, run between 1873 and 1897, descended in tail-male to Lexington. Some of California's best runners during this period traveled East to capture national honors. This included Racing Hall of Famer Emperor of Norfolk (1885) and his full brother juvenile champion El Rio Rey (1887), as well as distaff champions Sinaloa II (1887, by Grinstead) and Yo Tambien (1889, by Joe Hooker).

The primary difference of way in which the blood of Lexington was utilized in California, as compared to farms in the East, was the unassumed practice of close inbreeding to Lexington - considered ill-advised by most Eastern breeders. Whether by desire or necessity, this approach reaped many of the last good fruits from this once potent ancestral line.

By the turn of the century, however, the line of Lexington had not one effective representative at stud in the U.S. The last tail-male scion of Lexington to win a major American event was Hindus (by Volante) when he captured the 1900 Preakness

Stakes. Since that contest, the once mighty line would issue, in total, a paltry half dozen North American blacktype winners, all of moderate or minor importance.

Interestingly, the last classic moment for the line of Lexington did not take place in the U.S. but at The Curragh in Ireland where Golden Maid (Eng.), a granddaughter of the influential *Americus captured the 1917 Irish Oaks. Americus would later be recognized, primarily, as the sire of Americus Girl, ancestress to the ultra-fleet clan of Mahmoud, Royal Charger and Nasrullah.

After 75 years of pure domination and another 25 annums of influence, the Diomed/Lexington sireline neared complete extinction. By the time racing became banned in California in 1909, there seemed nothing left to resuscitate, much less a reason for doing so.

How strange it is, then, that this once mightiest of all tail lines will have persisted by a mere inconsequential thread for a longer duration of time than all of its heyday.

Table 3 charts the success, or lack thereof, of the Cruzados branch of the Lexington sireline, a truly interminable experiment in breeding futility.

 Table 3

THE MALE LINE OF CRUZADOS

Cruzados (1899)	9 foals	0 winners	0 SWs
Lantados (1918)	60 foals	29 winners	1 SW
Rey el Rio (1933)	66 foals	9 winners	0 SWs
Rey el Tierra (1945)	44 foals	7 winners	1 SW
El Tesoro (1961)	55 foals	0 winners	0 SWs
Peerless (1977)	8 foals	0 winners	0 SWs

Cruzados (1899), an early century speedball, was sired by Emperor of Norfolk and bred by Lucky Baldwin. A vestige of his male line was taken to David Frame's Raceland Ranch in

South Dakota where it survived for a half dozen generations, but, as evidenced by Table 3, in a relatively dormant state.

It is hard to imagine ever finding an uninterrupted male line spanning an entire century that has enjoyed so little success. The only two stakes winners were 1929 Miami Juvenile Stakes winner, El Relicario (by Lantados) and El Fasto (by Rey el Tierra) who took the \$1,500 Great Falls' State Fair Handicap in 1962 - the last blacktype event ever won by a descendant in direct male line to Diomed or Lexington. The line's last recorded victory occurred on September 16th, 1969 at Fairmount Park in Illinois, the race worth \$1,800. The winner was a son of Rey el Tierra ironically named Never O'er.

But it *was* over. Rey el Tierra's unraced son, El Tesoro, got 55 foals sans a single winner. In turn, El Tesoro's unraced son Peerless sired eight offspring, not one who even started.

Peerless' last son, Conquering Elk was foaled in 1987. His extended pedigree would seem to represent the epitome of contemporary thoroughbred obscurity (see <http://www.pedigreequery.com/conquering+elk>). Peerless' last daughter, Secured Note (1989), is believed to be the last ever male-line descendent of Lexington. Barring some unknown circumstance, the legendary sireline of Lexington will officially terminate with the death of Conquering Elk whose current whereabouts are not clear.

As pedigree scholars continue to debate the ultimate value of the Thoroughbred's Y chromosome and its abiding trace in direct male line, one thing is clear. Sirelines provide simple standardized pathways in the navigation of equine ancestries. No pathway, not even the male lines of Phalaris, has ever manifested as potent an influence on the American racehorse as the tail-male line of Lexington. As such, its rise and fall seems worthy of contemplation.

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More of his work is available at <http://www.equicross.com>