

Jimmy Winkfield

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Places: Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky;
Charles Town, West Virginia; Chicago,
Illinois; South Carolina; Russia; Poland;
France

Birth: April 12, 1882 **Death:** March 23, 1974

Professions: Jockey,



Childhood and Family

James "Jimmy" Winkfield was born in Chilesburg, an African American community east of Lexington, Kentucky. He was the youngest of seventeen children. His father, George, served in the Union army after enlisting at Camp Nelson, in Nicholasville, Kentucky, in 1865.

After the death of both of his parents, Winkfield moved to Lexington and lived with a sister near the Kentucky Association track. Winkfield recalled riding horses bareback starting when he was only seven years old. In 1896, he was working as a carriage driver and on his days off, he went with friends to the race track at Latonia.¹

Career Beginnings

In the spring of 1897, the track offered him a job as an exercise rider. He rode Jockey Joe in his first race at the Hawthorne Race Course in Chicago, Illinois. Winkfield's was so focused on winning that when he saw space between other horses, he pushed Jockey Joe through and bumped other horses out of the way. The judges suspended him a year for his reckless riding. Though he did not win, his first race revealed natural talent.

Owners W. H. and Bud May had watched Winkfield and decided to put him on Avenstock for the September 13, 1899 race at Harlem track at Chicago. When the starting gate opened, Winkfield charged out and never looked back. He had won his first race! Winkfield signed a three-year contract and established a reputation as a successful jockey.²

The Kentucky Derby and More

Winkfield rode in his first Kentucky Derby in 1900 and placed third. In 1901, not only did he win the Kentucky Derby aboard His Eminence, he also won other high-profile races:

-Latonia Derby

- Tennessee Derby
- Clark Handicap

The next year, Winkfield again won the Kentucky Derby aboard Alan-a-Dale. He rode in the Kentucky Derby one last time in 1903 and placed second. He never rode in the Derby or in any major race in the United States again, due to racism and legal challenges.³

Career Abroad

Like many of his contemporaries, Winkfield found a second career abroad. In 1904, he won the Warsaw Derby, and his European career took off.

His victories in Russia included:

- The Russian Oaks (five times)
- The Russian Derby (four times)
- The Czar's Prize, aka as the Emperor's Purse (three times)

Winkfield enjoyed his fame and fortune while in Russia. To describe his life during this time, Winkfield said: "I was at the top of the tree."⁴

The Russian Revolution

Political uprising in Russia disrupted Winkfield's career. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Winkfield moved to Odessa, a city on the Black Sea. There, horse racing continued despite economic and societal instability. By the winter of 1919, revolution came to Odessa. Winkfield and others traveled a dangerous and difficult journey on horseback to Warsaw, Poland.⁵

Life in France

In 1920, Winkfield moved to France to resume his career. Much like his time in Russia, Winkfield's career in France was successful.

Winkfield's victories in France included:

- The Prix du Président de la République
- The Grand Prix de Deauville
- The Prix Eugène-Adam

In 1930, at age 48, Winkfield quit riding and switched to training. By this time, his son Robert James was a jockey. Winkfield trained him, his own horses, and other owners' horses as well.⁶

Wartime Return to the United States

Political unrest disrupted Winkfield's career again. In 1941, the Nazis invaded France. Nazi soldiers occupied his home and took over his stables. Winkfield and his family all returned together to the United States in April of 1941. He worked as a groom and assistant trainer in Illinois, South Carolina, and West Virginia.⁷

Discrimination and Return to France

In 1961, the National Turf Writers' Association invited Winkfield to a pre-Derby banquet at the Brown Hotel in Louisville. When he arrived with his daughter, they were not permitted to enter through the front door. Instead they were told to enter through the back, due to their race. Winkfield and his daughter stood their ground and were permitted to enter the front door. This incident reminded Winkfield of the prejudice and maltreatment he had previously endured in the United States, and he soon after returned to France.⁸

Enduring Legacy

Winkfield married three times and was the father of five children. He passed away at the age of 92 at his home in France. In 2004, the National Museum of Racing Hall of Fame inducted him. The Aqueduct Race Track in Queens, New York inaugurated The Jimmy Winkfield Stakes in 2017 to honor this accomplished horseman.⁹

Sources

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Footnotes

¹Terrell, "Around the World in 80 Years: Jimmy Winkfield."

²Drape, Black Maestro.

³Mooney Katherine C., Race Horse Men, 226 and "Jockey War At Chicago."

⁴Terrell.

⁵Hotaling, Ed, Wink

⁶Terrell.

⁷Drape, Joe, Black Maestro, 245

⁸Drape, Joe, Black Maestro, 1

⁹National Museum of Racing Hall of Fame