

Thank you, Lord Derby!

By Prakash Gosavi

“What’s in a name?,” famously asked Shakespeare. Those who agree with the bard of Avon quickly point out that a rose by any other name would still smell the same.

Rose? Maybe. But the Derby with any other name would not sound right, right?

Just imagine that next Sunday (Feb 5), you are planning to go to the Mahalaxmi racecourse to attend the greatest racing event of 2012, and it's not called the McDowell Signature Premier Indian Derby, but McDowell Signature Premier Indian Bunsbury instead--how would you feel? But mind you, that’s precisely what it would have been called if Lord Derby of England had given a wrong call on a coin that was tossed up in the air to decide the name for this race.

The story dates back to more than two centuries and a quarter. In the second half of the 18th century England, two friends—Lord Derby and Sir Charles Bunbury—took very active interest in horse racing. In 1779, they decided to frame a race for three year old colts and fillies over a straight mile at the Epsom racetrack (the distance of the race was increased to its present trip of a mile and a half after the famous Tattenham Corner was introduced in 1784).

Once the terms and the prize money were chalked up, it became clear this would turn out to be the most coveted race in terms of the prestige attached to it, and each of the two friends desired the race to be named after himself. Finally, they decided to settle the matter with a toss of the coin. Lord Derby won the toss, and that’s the reason why, on Sunday, April 12, at the Mahalaxmi racetrack, you will be attending the Signature DERBY and not the Signature Bunsbury.

So if, like every race lover, the word ‘Derby’ invokes the imagery of splendor, grandeur and a unique mix of fashion, glamour and high life, and brings to your mind an indescribable emotion of larger-than-life experience of an exciting racing event, you know whom to thank for that imagery—thank Lord Derby for winning that toss 230 years ago!

Derby! The word has become generic today, and symbolizes the best race of every nation in the world. In England it’s Epsom Derby; in the U.S. it’s called the Kentucky Derby; in Japan it’s Japan Derby; and in India it’s the McDowell Indian Derby. The race is run only once every year and the winner is crowned as the champion horse of his or her age in the country.