

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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Scew Ball (Stewball)

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Come gentlemen sportsmen I pray listen all,
I will sing you a song in praise of Scew Ball(1),
And how he came over you shall understand,
It was by Squire Merwin the pearl of our land.

And of his late actions that I've heard before,
He was lately challeng'd by one Sir Ralph Gore,
For five hundred guineas on the plains of Kildare,
To run with Miss Sportly, that charming grey mare.

Scew Ball he then hearing the wager was laid,
Unto his kind master said, don't be afraid,
For if on my side you thousands lay would,
I will rig in your castle a fine mass of gold.

The day being come, and the cattle(2) walk'd forth,
The people came flocking from East, North, and South(3),
For to view all the sporters, as I do declare,
And venture their money all on the grey mare.

Squire Mirwin then smiling unto them did say,
Come gentlemen all that's got money to lay,
And you that have hundreds, come I'll lay you all,
For I will venture thousands on famous Scew Ball.

The day being come, and the cattle walk'd out,
Squire Mirwin he order'd his rider to mount,
And all the spectators for to clear the way,
The time being come, not one moment delay.

These cattle were mounted, and away they did fly,
Scew ball like an arrow past Miss Sportly by,
The people went up for to see them go round,
They said in their hearts that they ne'er touch'd the ground.

But as they were running, in the midst of the sport,
Squire Mirwin to his rider(4) began this discourse,
O loving kind rider come tell unto me,
How far is Miss Sportly this moment from me?

O loving kind master you bear a great stile,
The grey mare's behind me a long English mile,

If the saddle maintains, I'll warrant you there,
You ne'er will be beat on the plains of Kildare(5).

But as they were running by the distance chair,
The gentlemen cry'd out, Scew Ball never fear,
Altho' in this country thou was ne'er seen before,
Thou has beaten Miss Sportly, and broke Sir Ralph Gore.

From a broadside in the Madden Collection, now in the University Library in Cambridge; reprinted in "Later English Broadside Ballads", ed. Holloway & Black, 1975. Believed to be eighteenth or early nineteenth century because, although undated, it does not show the font and style changes which were typical of the early nineteenth century printing of broadsides. The ballad is Irish, although this version is from a London printing, sold at 42, Long Lane.

1. Scew Ball - skewbald (c.f. piebald)
2. cattle - horses
3. presumably should be "South and North" for the rhyme.
4. "rider" appears to mean "mount" in this stanza.
5. The races on the plain of Kildare were a great gathering-place for people from all over Ireland.

Note from STEWBALL 3:

The facts are that sometime around 1790 a race took place on the curragh of Kildare (near Dublin) between a skewbald horse owned by Sir Arthur Marvel and "Miss Portly", a gray mare owned by Sir Ralph Gore. The race seemed to take the balladmakers' fancies, and must have been widely sung; an early printed version appeared in an American song book dated 1829. MJ

If MJ's notes are correct, it is interesting that this version gets the winner's name wrong! One also wonders about the name of the grey mare. "Miss Sportly" seems more likely than "Miss Portly", but one never knows. DAD

DT #349
Laws Q22
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