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Oxford Word of the Month – November: Melbourne Cup field

noun: 1. a very large and open field of applicants for a job, contract, etc. 2. a pool of highly-qualified competitors.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

The Melbourne Cup is Australia's most famous horse race, run annually on the first Tuesday in November at the Flemington Racecourse in Melbourne. The large amount of prize money, massive crowds, and long history of the event have made it a special part of the Australian sporting and cultural landscape—it is quite literally *the race that stops a nation*.

Since 1861 the Melbourne Cup has been a handicap race run over two miles (now 3,200m) for horses aged three years and over. The handicap nature of the race sees horses allocated particular weights based on the combined weight of the horse and jockey, the age of the horse, and its previous performance. The allocation of weights aims at evening out the field of entrants so that, theoretically, any horse can win the race.

The first evidence for the term **Melbourne Cup field** is descriptive, meaning 'the field of horses participating in the Melbourne Cup'. This literal sense is found in records soon after the inaugural event:

I cannot have the little horse in a **Melbourne Cup field**, seeing that a numerous company is not to his liking. Were there but a dozen at the post we should see the little horse in the first flight at the finish; but as the probability is that there will be nearer forty starters than twelve, I feel compelled to overlook the pretensions of the good little son of Boiardo. (Melbourne *Australasian*, 10 October 1868)

This report also points to the large field of entrants in the race, although in recent times the number is nearer twenty than forty.

The first evidence for the transferred meaning of **Melbourne Cup field** from equine to human competitors is found in the 1930s:

The number of candidates who have announced their intention to nominate for the Coburg Council has been described as a '**Melbourne Cup field**'. The total so far is 27. (Melbourne *Argus*, 27 July 1938)

Here the writer highlights the large number of nominees for the council election with no reference to the quality of the candidates. This sense of **Melbourne Cup field**, ‘a very large and open field of applicants’, is often found in a political context, sometimes with the implication that many applicants are keen to get their snouts in the trough:

Any vacancy that occurs for a Federal seat of Parliament will always attract a **Melbourne Cup field** of candidates. But is the field full of moderate handicappers with not too many entries from weight-for-age performers? (Chipp and Larkin, *Chipp*, 1987)

While the transferred use of **Melbourne Cup field** usually refers to the large number of applicants for a position, there is also recent evidence for a more positive meaning, ‘a pool of highly-qualified competitors’:

The contract to renew the NSW Government’s telecommunications systems was won against a ‘**Melbourne Cup field**’ of Australian and overseas bidders ... Telecom did not even run second. (*Canberra Times*, 25 July 1990)

‘A large number of applicants’ remains the central meaning of the transferred use of **Melbourne Cup field**.

Both senses of **Melbourne Cup field** are included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* (2016).

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