

## Talk With a Bookmaker.

Ike Thompson, one of the most widely-known bookmakers in the United States, was in a discursive humor during the ride out to the track the other afternoon. He is a man of fifty three. He has been watching the running horses for about forty years. For about thirty years of that time he has been connected with the speculative end of the thoroughbred game.

'The game is easier for the public and harder for the bookmakers than it used to be,' he said. 'I should say that about three fourths of the money taken in by the bookmakers nowadays is educated money. That is to say, it is money shoved along by men who know, or think they know, what they are doing; money that's invested on the strength of information, good or bad, or on the public or private form of the horses.'

'This did not use to be the case. The great majority of the racetrack bettors of ten or fifteen years ago were chance players who didn't know or pretend to know much about the animals they bet on. There were regulars, from players, then, of course, but the regulars are numbered by the thousands.'

'Most of the 8,000 or 10,000 men who will subject themselves to the discomfort and actual misery of visiting a racetrack on such cold, rainy days as we had in April and May belong to the class of regulars. They know, or imagine they know, the bad track form of the horses as well as the good track form, and they can't bear to miss a chance to bet on their ideas, no matter what the state of the weather. Now, many of these regulars are men who engage in some other business aside from betting on the racetracks; yet there is an astonishing number of chaps who don't do anything else the year round but bet on the horses.'

'The dope charts have served to educate racegoers almost to a point where it is pretty near an even break nowadays between the layers and the talent. You won't find one racetrack visitor out of a hundred putting his money down on a horse at this stage of the game without having previously doped his horse out on the charts. That's what makes the path of the bookmaker of this day a good deal more rocky and uncertain than it used to be.'

'Public form is a pretty good thing. After all, it is far and away the best line on the horses. It beats private trials and so-called cinch information and the hunch system of playing them all to smithereens in the long run. The majority of the bettors are fully aware of this fact, too. That they are aware of it is shown by the fact that touting is all but a dead game around the metropolitan tracks.'

'The player's go to the form of the horses, and the conservative, level-headed ones among them get the money. If all the racetrack bettors were just one-half as conservative as a select clique of bettors with whom I am acquainted, the bookmakers wouldn't last long. They'd be put out of business.'

'For example, George Smith (Pittsburg Phil) is one of the most conservative racetrack gamblers in the game despite the very general public impression to the contrary. He is a plunger it is true, but he is conservative in his plunges; that is to say, he doesn't plunge indiscriminately and wildly but only when he thinks he has found the spot. Then he goes to the limit. He falls down at times but when he does he rarely has to reproach himself with having done any foolish betting. He plays the races that he likes, and only those. I don't suppose Smith ever bet on all the races on a day's card in his life.'

'That's where the average bettor at a racetrack makes his mistake. He goes in to skin the card. Now, there have been instances in which lucky men have beat all the races on a day's card, but such instances are powerfully few and far between. Nine-tenths of the men who visit the racetrack occasionally bet on every race on the bill of fare. It doesn't make any difference to them whether the race is a maiden two-year-old affair with eighteen starters, or a match race between two horses of virtually the same ability, they'll string their money along for the sake of getting action one way or the other. I hope they'll always continue to do this. The occasional practice of playing the entire menu, no matter whether the races are hard or easy, is one of the best factors in our percentage.'

'There is rarely or never day at the tracks in this neighborhood when there is not at least one race that stands out above the others for safety. I mean a race in

which one of the horses entered clearly outclasses all of the others booked to compete with him. Now, if the occasional visitors to the tracks, instead of sloughing their money off in a vain attempt to pick the winners of all six races, would pick out this one race, the main contender in which towers above the others on public form and invest all of the money they've brought along with them, and that they would otherwise slice up into six different bets, on the chances of the good horse in a soft spot, they'd be handling the boys on the stools some bumps that would drive many of them out of the game. But, no, they won't or they can't do this, and they probably never will do it.'

'They want to have a financial interest in one of every flock that traipses to the post. I know two cool headed chaps who've been playing but one race on the day's card for about five years. They single out the race in which the good horse is entered with a lot of musts, and they play that horse. They've been way to the good ever since they began that kind of play. Before they began it they, like most of the rest, were in the habit of going against the whole card, with the result that they had to do some tall digging for money to keep in the game.'

'They win perhaps four bets out of five by picking out the good race on the day's card and playing it for their limit. I long ago learned not to take their money. Their self possessed system made them too good for the well being of my sheets.'

'Wise to the horse game as George Smith is—and I consider him the most remarkable horse player in this or any other country, a man of almost phenomenal sagacity in his line—there's not a doubt in life that he'd go broke in less than one season if he ran amuck and attempted to play all the races every day, or even half of them.'

'Smith has been known to sit up in the stand for days at a time, chewing gum, and making nary a bet. To look at him at such times you'd imagine that he had no interest in the game whatever, and that he was only waiting for somebody. The reason why he wasn't betting at these times was because he didn't like the programmes. The spot wasn't there for him to find. He learned how to wait at the very outset of his racing career, and that's the secret of his success.'

'But when, after one of these prolonged periods of inactivity, the money that we recognized as Smith money would begin to sail our way, we long ago learned to rub. None of the other noted plungers, past or present, ever had Smith's capacity for just looking at races. That's the reason why he's about the only big one of his class left. Unless he changes his tactics I don't think they'll ever get Smith.'

'There are other kinds of conservatism that cause men of cool temperaments to win out on the race track. For instance, I've got in mind a man who was driving a horse car not many years back. He had a habit of stopping his car in front of a certain poolroom along his route and of rushing in and putting down small bets on the horses.'

His superintendent got next to this, and being a decent sort of man, willing enough to give the employees warning before firing them, he told the driver that he'd have to do either one thing or the other—drive a horse car or play the ponies.'

'The driver reckoned that he'd take the ponies. He is worth a million easily today. Now young fellows who hear of this needn't get the hetic flush and resign their jobs on account of it. There's probably not one man in ten thousand with the natural caution of this ex-driver of a car that I'm talking about.'

'He has owned a number of fair horses for several years past. He shoves one of these horses into a race in which the horse figures to win by a block. But he has never been known to bet on one of his horses so placed to win. The horse is made the favorite at 2 to 1, say 4 to 5 for the place. The owner goes to one of the line with which he does business and asks the layer what price he'll make for the horse that figures to win to show. If the layer makes a third price of 1 to 4 or 1 to 5, the owner will bet enough to win out a couple of thousand dollars on the horse to run third. Nine times out of ten the horse belonging under his own shed that he has figured out to win, and that he has only played to run third, has actually won. Yet he has never been known to express a grouch with himself for not having played the horse to win.'

'That's a kind of conservatism that fetches in the money. This man has invested every dollar of the million that he has made on the racetracks—outside of his occasional expenditures of a few thousands to keep his small stable of platers recruited up to the mark—in gilt edge securities, and for the past five years he hasn't made a bet on any man's horse except his own, and then only, as I say, on his own horse to butt into the money by running third.'

'I don't suppose there's any other game

on the list with reference to which there are so many erroneous ideas as the running of thoroughbreds. Most of the stories of crooked racing are the purest moonshine, spread about by disgruntled bettors and small bettors at that, who don't know what they're talking about, and care less.'

'For instance, when what is known as a good thing is pulled off, and some plunger is known to have made a hog killing on it, you'll always hear these malicious soreheads declaiming against the honesty of the race in which the killing has been made. Every time George Smith cracks a watermelon these wise persons go about talking about how they've found out that the thing was fixed, that all of the horses in the race were dead to the good thing, and all that sort of imbecile twaddle.'

'Now, if anybody has got a right to set up a wail over the pulling off of these good things by the plunger it ought to be the bookmaker, for he's the boy that is hardest hit; but you'll never hear a bookmaker, or at least a bookmaker of sense and experience, mouthing about crooked races for they understand how most of these things are pulled off.'

'For instance, an owner who hasn't been in luck, and who hasn't got much money, will go to George Smith, or any other big bettor, and say something like this:

'Look here, I've got a nag in my barn that worked a mile yesterday morning in 1:41.'

'Well,' says Smith, 'if Smith is the man tackled by the owner, "if that's the case your horse is good enough to win a race, but I'm from Missouri, and I want to see him to do it."

'Smith will then put his boy, Shaw, up on the horse the owner has tackled him about and try him out under his own eye. If the horse does as well as his owner has said the man with the reputation for plunging sees that the animal is shod into a race that is liable to suit him and bets on the horse, at the same time putting down a good bet for the owner. Now, that is a perfectly legitimate transaction. There is no room for even an imitation of a moan in connection with it. Yet every time a sleeper is successfully shoved through and the man with the money who has engineered it is known to have won a big pot of money on the outcome you'll hear the knocking chorus of the soreheads who've played the favorite off the boards to beat the good thing.'

'Systems? Systems are all right if you stick to them. But there's the rub—sticking to a system. There are some men who do it, but not many. Any old system of beating the horses is good—provided it founded upon common sense—so long as it is religiously adhered to. But only men of a certain breed are able to stick to a

system. Their greed gets the better of them. They want the whole works.'

'Any man of average intelligence, who knows something about racehorses, can win \$5 a day, year in and year out, on a capital say of \$1,000, by playing any one of the known systems, or even by playing his own selections—supposing him to have a good line on 'em—it he'll only stick to his little system. And that's a pretty good interest on the money at that. But the great majority of the system players go to pieces in the stretch.'

'They either jump from their system by playing horses that the're convinced are good things or their nerve deserts them. No man who doesn't possess an iron nerve and absolute self control has any business monkeying with a system; he has not any business on a race track at all, for the matter of that. Take for instance the system player who plays the favorites to win \$5 a day with a capital of \$1,000. His little game runs along on greased treads for months at a stretch, until he has forgotten all about such a thing as working for a living, and he begins to believe that the sun is bound to shine on both sides of the street for him twenty-four hours a day.'

'Then comes the almost infallible streak when the favorites are popped over nine or ten times in succession, so that to win out the favorite player he has got to shove in the bulk of his remaining capital to get his money back. Nineteen out of twenty of twenty of the players of the favorite system go all to pieces when they stack up against a nerve-testing ordeal like this, and, abandoning their system, which is bound to come out right as a trivet according to all experience and figures, they hop in wildly to recoup their losses by general outside play, on long shots as like as not, and thus they go broke.'

'To stick to a system and beat it, a man must possess the dogged resolution of that chap who walked nine miles through snow knee-deep to bite his grandmother. If even a fair percentage of racegoers possessed the nerve and determination to stick to any one of the systems elaborated at intervals, in the Sun, for instance, we handlers of the slates would be all to the bad by the wind-up of a racing season. Those systems read well on paper and they are, as a simple matter of fact, just as good in practice as they read, but the human material to take advantage of their wisdom is not available among race followers.'

'Most race followers remind me of a little nephew of mine that I once took for a sail in a catboat. We were about half a mile from the shore when the kid saw a billy-goat browsing on the shore.'

'I want a billygoat,' he said to me.

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A PLEASANT OUTING!