

Betting on Horse Races, Then and Now

Following the Sport in New York Is Difficult, and the Odds Are Shorter Than in Old Days, but the System Is Little Changed—Advantages of Pari-Mutuel Method

BETTING on horse races is forbidden. In Kentucky and Maryland one may back one's choice by the pari-mutuel route, but not so in any other State. Elsewhere the sport of kings and the king of sports has been legislated out of existence.

That is to say, it has been legislated theoretically out of existence. Actually it has only been handicapped, to use a racecourse term. Actually the only consequence of prohibitive laws has been much the same as the prohibitive law against beer: it has resulted in a poorer product.

Betting at Jamaica, when the races were in progress there, and at the Empire City track later, has not been so different in method from the days of twenty-five years ago in New York, when betting was in its heyday. Presumably it will be so at Saratoga. The chief difference is that the bettor makes his own slip, the bookmaker declining to take the chance of recording a wager. Further, the present system requires a sublime credulity and an implicit faith in human nature.

In the old days the bettor did not make the slip, but neither did he receive any record of the wager. The bookmaker, who sat on a high stool, and held a slate on which were written the names of all the entries and the odds he offered against them for each position, entered in ink on a pad in front of him the badge number of the bettor, the amount of the wager and the odds.

Let us suppose that a man nowadays, a man not identified with racing, nor a follower of the "ponies," and therefore not acquainted with the sub rosa bookmakers hereabouts, fares forth to one of the tracks around New York with the intention of backing his judgment or his luck. In the betting shed he sees groups of men standing about the posts. They look like idlers. They have no slates, no pads, none of the paraphernalia of gambling. But if he approaches one of these men and offers to confide to his care a bank roll of \$50 or \$100, more or less, it will be accepted with alacrity. The stranger has opened an account. He is now in a way to bet all or any part, provided it is \$2 or more, on the horse of his choice. In return for his money he receives some blank slips of paper.

No bets will be accepted in the betting shed. The law is specific and extremely verbose about accepting wagers in a stated place, and the "bookies" interpret that liberally to mean under cover anywhere. The bet must be placed in the open.

When accepting the bank roll, the bookmaker indicates a spot where he or one of the men idling with him can be found later. Just before the race begins the stranger finds one or more of the group at the appointed spot, and himself writes a slip, which he confides to the layer of odds.

If the bet is large enough to be of consequence, if the bettor wins, and is a stranger, he must wait in most cases until the next day to collect. He must then journey again to the track, find the man to whom he gave his slip, and ask for his money. As a rule, this patience and perseverance is rewarded. He collects.

But the consequence of this underhanded method of playing the races is that the man who plays gets much worse odds. The odds are, in the slang of the track, "greedy." They are "short."

The reason is not altogether to the bookmaker's discredit. In an elder day, when the whole field of starters was chalked on a slate or blackboard, and the bettor could see the odds against all the horses, the chances were that all the entries would get a play. Nowadays, when the word goes through the paddock or the

lawn that certain horses are being backed practically all the betting concentrates on them. In a race with a dozen starters, for instance, not more than half a dozen will receive any play; only half will be backed to win or get the "place" or "show," and the consequence is that the restriction of the field, so far as the wagers are concerned, makes for a restriction of the betting odds.

Loud have been the wails of the players about the stinginess of the layers at racetracks around New York. Comparison has been made to their extreme disadvantage with the generosity of the odds paid by the pari-mutuels at Latonia and Churchill Downs. But an examination of the conditions brings forth some excuse for the bookmaker here.

The volume of betting is greatly decreased by the circumstances here, and this is another reason for less favorable odds. He who makes a wager violates the law, even though all possible technical precautions may be taken, and that acts as a deterrent. And many there be who would violate the law without compunction, when reasonably assured about the technical precautions, if the bookmakers were willing to take chances on any and all comers. But occasionally there have been men who could not, if they would, foist their bank rolls on any one of these enigmatic idlers about the posts in the betting shed. They have been known to try in vain to open an "account."

In town the precautions are even more rigorous, for of course you can lay a bet on the races in town, provided you haven't the opportunity to go out to the track. In town you must have a face-to-face acquaintance with the bookmaker, or must have an introduction from a sterling man-to-man acquaintance. The

"books" are of two kinds. A few are said to be bold enough to maintain poolrooms, with direct wires, (telephone wires, for the most part, because the telegraph companies have suffered too severely at the hands of the law to relish these contracts,) over which the results of the races are flashed to a questioning and impatient clientele. Getting into these poolrooms is extremely difficult.

Most of the books in New York are handbooks. Let us consider the operation of an imaginary example: The layer of odds is in touch with employes in certain office buildings, janitors they may be, or elevator boys, or messengers, and for a percentage of the sums bet these men take custody of the amounts; wagered by the men in that building, and turn them over to the bookmaker with slips showing who placed the money and what horse is to "carry" it.

The players in this case know nothing of what odds are to be offered against the horses they choose. As a rule, the bookmakers accept as authentic the betting odds published the following morning in a newspaper which devotes especial attention to sports. But some of them have arbitrary rules limiting the size of the odds they will lay, such as 20 to 1. There was the case, not long since, of three men who had united in a group to play the races daily for small sums. Among the acquaintances of these men it was known as "the pikers' pool." There came a day when but \$3 remained in the bank. One dollar was bet on Gleipner, and was lost. Another was placed on Mountain Rose, and Mountain Rose also ran. The last dollar in the pikers' pool was placed on Crepuscule.

And Crepuscule won at 30 to 1!

But even while the three pikers were

congratulating themselves there came a sad disillusion. The handbook maker would pay but 20 to 1. It was "house rules." The layer of odds was adamant. The three pikers were compelled to accept a piker return on their bet.

These handbook makers do not depend solely upon their touts and compradors in office buildings. At certain hours they may be found at certain places, in barrooms—for barrooms are still open, despite the law, just as betting is still maintained, despite the law—or in office building foyers, or in hotel lobbies. Their "clients" know where the bookmakers can be found, and place their money personally with verbal instructions. In such cases the betting actually is oral. And after the races are done, the bookmaker posts himself at a certain spot, and pays off such of the players as have won and are known to him personally. But as a rule he distributes the next morning, among his office building touts, plain manila envelopes containing the money intended for those whose judgment or luck has prevailed against gargantuan chance.

How different the pari-mutuel system! Pari-mutuel betting is legalized, and has the merit of eliminating the bookmaker, who has long been recognized as the chief evil of the racetrack, just as the saloonkeeper has long been recognized as the chief evil of the liquor traffic. It has been said that this country had no drink problem, only a saloon problem. In the same way, it may be said that the racetracks have no gambling problem, only a "bookie" problem.

Under the pari-mutuel system the racing association deducts a certain percentage of all money wagered to pay the expenses of operating and auditing the accounts of the machines. These machines, to the number, say, of a hundred, are ranged about the betting shed. A few accept bets of \$50 to win, a few of \$50 for the place, a few of \$50 to show, (for third place.) There are machines in greater number to accept bets of \$10, \$5, and \$2.

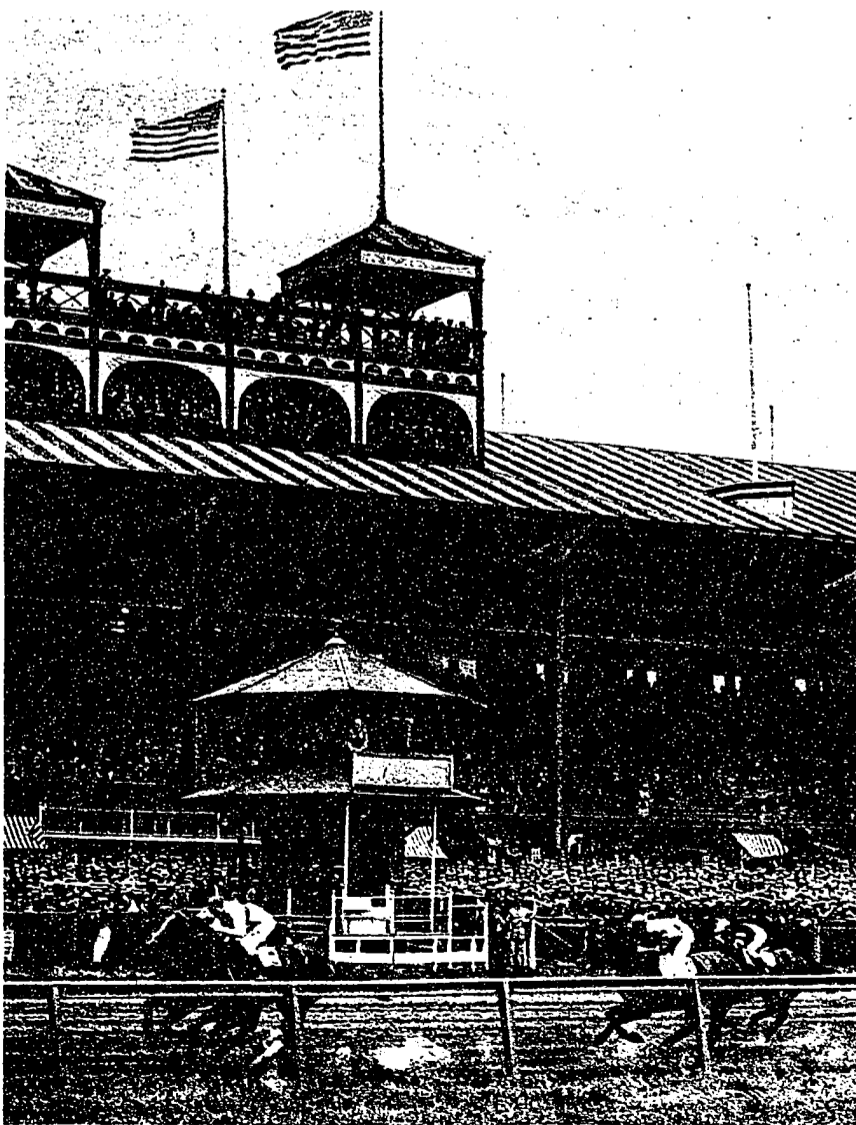
Nothing less than \$2 can be placed on the pari-mutuel machines. That amount, or any multiple of it, may be placed on any horse. The bettor selects a machine accepting bets for the position he wishes to play, and receives printed slips for each bet. If, for instance, he wishes to play \$6, he receives three slips. The same holds true on machines of larger denomination.

By an automatic device these machines register on blackboards the total amount bet on each horse at any moment. A prospective bettor may walk along the line and at a glance tell how the betting is going on any "pony" for any position. He can get an accurate estimate of the horses which rank high in public favor.

After the race is run, and the racing association's percentage for expenses has been deducted, the winning horses pay according to the amounts wagered. If, for instance, there remains \$10,000 bet on the winner, while \$50,000 has been bet on other entries to win, the winner pays five to one, and the odds are posted on a bulletin board in front of the grandstand.

The pari-mutuel system is the joy of the race fan. It pays by far the best odds, and manipulation is eliminated. There is no bookmaker to demand the lion's share of the money, however the race may go. All the money paid in, except for the racing association's expenses, goes to the winners. It is the system in effect at Churchill Downs and Latonia in Kentucky, at Pimlico and Havre de Grace in Maryland.

But everybody concedes that betting on the races in New York nowadays has no more punch to it than 2.75 beer.



Times Wide World Photos.
A Close Finish at the Empire City Racetrack. When G. D. Widener's Lanius Beat De Frank by a Head. Spur Is Third.