

Racing Maxims and Methods of Pittsburg Phil -- by Edward Cole (1908)

CHAPTER 3 -- The Reason for Speculation

The betting ring after all is the center around which racing as a speculation revolves. If there were no betting there would be no racing, at least as we know it today. I do not propose to enter into a discussion of the ethics of the question when I am going to treat it as a business. Such it has been to me for some years and to many other men.

Sufficient knowledge to tell when to bet, or not to bet, or when to bet heavily, is of paramount importance to every man on the track. This is based upon his knowledge of the horses, their owners, their jockeys and everything connected with them. You may know a horse or a jockey are at their best. If you have not this knowledge you will lose many a foolish bet.

The basis of all betting is the amount of profit to be obtained on an investment. That is, every bettor should have such a definite conclusion as to the probable result of the race, that he can form for himself the market value of all horses in a race, and make a schedule of the prices as they should be in his opinion. I regard that as one of the reasons why I have been successful. To explain: There is a field of six or eight horses. I figure and handicap those that have a winning chance. I then fix the odds that appear to me to be legitimate quotations. Possibly one of these horses is quoted at eight to five, another at three to one and so on down the list. When the bookmakers put up their quotations, it has happened that my prices and the ring prices differ. In one particular case the horse that I had quoted at three to one was a favorite at seven or eight to five when the betting opened. That called for a revision of my own figures, and I handicapped the horses again to see if the error was the bookmaker's or mine. I considered each horse with regard to the particular race, the weight it carried, the distance and all other conditions, the jockeys and the stable connection. Sometimes it developed that there was a quiet report of the one particular horse being "wrong." Such a report always sent me to the paddock where I inspected the horse myself, and if satisfied that it was in good condition I would return to the ring where I and my agents watched the doings of certain men whom I considered it necessary to observe at that particular time on account of their friendly connections with stables. If my agents reported that liberties were not being taken by the men who would do such a thing if everything was not legitimate, I could generally figure whether my quotation or the ring quotation was right. If I could get a bookmaker to bet me three to one or more against a horse winning that should, in my opinion, be no better than eight to five it was a good investment in my judgment. Upon occasions of that kind I have made my largest wagers, and I may say without egotism that my deductions were correct, so far as the scale of prices was concerned, seven times out of ten. Of course, I was wrong sometimes; no man is infallible.

Take the reverse of the race of which I have just spoken. In the first instance I made my largest wagers, but where the horse I fancy is at a price a shade less than I think it should be, I make the most modest bet. I always financed my money to the best advantage, investing much heavier

when I believed I was getting a better price than I had quoted in my own mind against a certain horse. Few men knew how hard I worked during the racing season, and it was in the betting ring that my hardest work was done. It was no easy matter to watch every move of the market just as the big financiers do in Wall Street; but I had to do it. To get all the data that I wanted before betting on a race I frequently employed a half dozen men at one time. I have supplemented their labors by an acquaintance with the runners and commissioners who ply between the paddock and the ring; I knew by sight every betting commissioner on the race tracks, whom he represented, and how heavily he bet. This knowledge was possessed by the men who worked for me. They were always on the watch for some clue to the purposes of persons who might have an important influence on the race. As a result of this there was a never ending fight of stratagem and ruse during the day. If I had watched them, I knew they watched me. Many a time, for instance, I have seen a commissioner come into the ring and bet possibly five hundred dollars on a certain horse with a certain bookmaker, after which he would bet \$100 or so with other men. Immediately the whisper would go about the ring that "so and so's commissioner was betting on such and such a horse." The unthinking and uninformed usually took that as sufficient reason for following the lead. It is here that the fine work began. My man would stand at the book where the commissioner bet his \$500 and watch the effect of that wager. He would be able to tell in a few minutes. Many a time the same bookmaker has accepted the money, say at three to one, and immediately laid the top price in the ring against the same horse. That would satisfy me. It was a bet for effect. There was collusion between the bookmaker and the commissioner, which would have to be thrown out of the betting calculation altogether. It was intended to trap the unsuspecting public and I regret to say that it frequently succeeded. Nine times out of ten such horses do not finish in the money. But such things do not happen frequently, in fact in these days of racing they are of rare occurrence.

The advantage of this particular incident to me was that it eliminated a possible contender, and in a four- or five-horse race that had an important effect. It even helped me at times in beating the race on the Dutch book system. Knowing that one horse out of four, say, was not good, I would bet on all the others, thus in some cases winning twenty-five cents for every dollar invested. In other words, I bought their dollar notes for seventy-five cents each. I recall one instance, some years ago, of the value of close observation in the betting ring. This occurred when "Mike" Dwyer was the heaviest bettor on the turf. I will not give the names of the other persons concerned for the reason that some of them are now men highly respected, and who have lived down anything that they might have done in days gone by.

The race I allude to was run at a track in the vicinity of New York City, and it was practically a two horse affair, one of the horses being owned by the Dwyer Brothers, then partners in the best stable of horses that was ever trained. To hide the identity of those concerned in the affair more thoroughly I will designate the horses as "A" and "B." I may say that the incident was about the most cowardly piece of highway robbery that ever occurred in this or any other country. The race looked such a certainty for the Dwyer horse, which I will designate "A", that when the betting

opened it was a one to four shot. Few cared to speculate at those odds, consequently the business in the ring was light. I never dreamed of making a bet that day and had dismissed the race from my mind, when as I strolled toward the paddock to look over the horses entered in the following race, I met Charley Dwyer, who was then quite a youngster. We exchanged greetings and I said that it was a walk over for his father's horse. The boy replied that his father was of the same opinion and had just given an order that \$30,000 be bet on the horse at any old price. I do not know what prompted me to go back to the betting ring. Possibly it was curiosity to notice the effect of a \$30,000 commission on a horse already held at one to four. To my surprise there was little or no change noticeable in the odds. The commission had evidently not yet been placed and began to watch more closely. The horses were called to the post, and still there was no change - one to four was obtainable all over the ring, while the contender showed signs of support from some quarters. In those days, and in these days too, for that matter, a thirty thousand dollar-commission would or will drive a one to four shot to at least one to seven. There was therefore "a nigger in the woodpile." My mind worked quickly - that commission was being held out. The man, or men holding it out, would do so only with the knowledge that the jockey riding the favorite was in their conspiracy. I may say right here in justice to one of the most reputable men on the turf that this jockey was not "Jimmy" McLaughlin.

As soon as i reached this conclusion, I bet several thousand dollars on the horse designated "B." The race was run and Mr. Dwyer's horse was beaten. His thirty thousand dollars had gone into the hands of some unscrupulous men and a jockey. I never said a word to him and it is possible that he never knew the truth of the affair. A funny part of this whole transaction is that other men, who had caught the drift of things, have since accused me of being implicated in the plot, because my wagers had been heaviest. But the facts are as I have related. My betting was due solely to my close observation of the ring's proceedings.

In contrast to the foregoing, I can say that oftentimes I have been influenced by a certain person betting one hundred dollars on a certain horse, although hundreds of thousands of dollars of so called wise money may have gone on others in the same race. That one hundred dollars to me represented the confidence of a conservative owner or trainer, and was wagered only after a shrewd mind had drawn a careful conclusion. Hence it is not always the heaviest commission that counts, any more than it is the flashiest horse or the flashiest stable.

Financing your capital is one of the secrets of success on the track. You must learn to know the value of your horse. There have been times when I have bet twenty thousand dollars and at other times I hesitated about betting one hundred dollars, although the figures might show that the two horses were equally probable winners. "it all depends," and upon that little sentence hangs a world of worry and work in a maelstrom of excited humanity, the betting ring. If the ring is active with smart money coming from every quarter, and the price offered is genuine, then fail in line with a good wager if the horse being bet upon is a true performer.

There is one individual highly important to every man who bets on horses, and that is a "clocker." But he must be an expert and he must be honest or he will ruin you. I notice that much

has been printed recently of early morning trials at the various tracks, but I would not place too much dependence on these reports where one man pretends to have "clocked" say fifty horses in one morning. To have recognized them, and to have got their time accurately as he is pretending, is an absurdity. Better pass that kind of information over to somebody else if you cannot get the services of a good man who will go to a track with a definite purpose of finding out how the best horses are coming along, and then report honestly. The "clocker" is something like the scout in the army. He is on the battlefield hours before the main body arrives. He learns when a horse is doing good work, when a horse is getting too much work, when he is sulking, and that all helps. It has frequently been as much to my advantage to know when a horse is track sore as it is to know when he is rounding to form. Possibly a horse, which has gone off, becomes a favorite in a race. That gives me what is called a good "lay." That is an opportunity for me to bet that he does not win. My acquaintance with bookmakers enabled me to do this by having them bet my money for me against the public. With this knowledge also I have whipsawed a race if there were but two contenders. Knowing one was wrong I laid against him and bet on the other, beating it both ways. A game of hide and seek goes on in the betting ring. I have told the story of the five hundred dollar bet made to get the public to follow a horse that was not meant to win. I have made five hundred dollar bets in a ring on horses that I knew could not win, but my motive was to get the better of the market.

The bookmakers are not in the business for their health, and as soon as they learn that certain persons fancy a certain horse and are betting upon it, they shorten the odds upon that horse. It happens that sometimes I have been compelled to use strategy to obtain fair odds upon what I considered to be a possible winner. I have bet five hundred dollars, or more, at times on horses that I verily believed did not have a chance, simply to have the rumor get about that "Pittsburgh Phil" was betting on such and such a horse. It has sometimes had the effect I wanted. The price of the horse I knew could not win would shorten and the price of the horse I really fancied would lengthen. Then it was that my commissioners would get busy on the dark horse, betting possibly six or seven thousand dollars. I may have lost a thousand dollars or so on the strategy bet but the odds on the other more than made up for that. When the pool rooms were running in great numbers, it was possible to get a good bet down in the city and I have frequently played the institution in the city against the other at the race track. For instance, I would bet a thousand or more dollars at the track on some horse for a place. My betting would reduce the odds on one horse and raise the price on the other. In the city my commissioners would get into action and in a few minutes the telephone and personal interviews would enable them to wager a large amount of money at a fair price on the horse I believed would win.

You cannot be a successful horse player if you are going to get the worst of the price all the time. It has taken a whole lot of maneuvering for me to keep even with the several hundred shrewd bookmakers. I know they have trailed me and my men everywhere on the track and off. They wanted to know everything that I did and was going to do. That never made me mad because it was business on their part just as it was business for me to mislead the spies. I rarely have been able to keep the same set of betting commissioners for any length of time, with the exception of

Walter Keyes and my nephew "Jimmy" McGill. A few bets and my commissioners were pointed out and watched. Some of the men I have used were most interesting. I have taken them from almost every walk of life. It has happened many a time that a bookmaker in looking over his sheet after a race has found wagers of "fifties and hundreds," cash bets, and has wondered when a rural looking stranger has come to take down the winning. I have heard the bookmakers say to the cashier, looking at a long whiskered winner, "I wonder who that man is." To which the cashier replied, "He is a stranger to me." If that same bookmaker and cashier could have seen that rural looking stranger later hand over to me the winnings, they would have regarded it as important knowledge. But I never told them and sometimes I never told my dearest friend, Walter Keyes, or my nephew. I have had strangers work for me for weeks before somebody discovered the trick after which the man's usefulness was destroyed.

To conclude this chapter, the financing of your money is the high road to success. Learn when to put down a heavy wager by picking out an almost sure winner. In a race where three or four horses have a chance to win the odds are much against you, and the wager should be small or pass the race up.

I have lost as many as twenty-seven straight bets and got even and become a winner on the next two races. The average bettor should always cut his wagers when running in a losing streak and press them when luck favors him. Doubling bets when losing is ruination to any person. The time to double is when you have the bookmakers' money in hand. If a bookmaker gets you hooked, try to wiggle off with as little loss as possible, but if you get a bookmaker hooked set in your money, and if your judgment is good and you go at him cold blooded, betting on what appears to be certainties, you have a grand chance to win a small fortune.