

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

### **CHAPTER 8 -- William Cowan on 'Pittsburgh Phil'**

William Cowan, one of the very few expert bookmakers of this country, tells many incidents in the life of "Pittsburgh Phil" which prove the latter's close observation of the surroundings of a race track, the actions of men and the unscrupulous ways some of them have of getting money at the expense of others.

"It was always a battle between 'Phil' and the bookmakers." said Cowan. "There was no time when he was interested in a race that he did not come pretty nearly knowing what was going on in every quarter of the ring. His scouts would report to him every minute, and he would weave the reports together until he came to a satisfactory conclusion of what to expect in the race.

"I made considerable money through 'Phil' by watching his work closely. My partners have said to me many a time that it was hard business to deal with 'Phil.' So it was, but being strictly a percentage bookmaker I could make money from him. Just as I could from anyone else. I used to tell 'Phil' that I gathered up a heap of money from the smaller players and then he would come along with a pushcart and take it away in a lump.

"But I always kept some of it, which was satisfying to me. For instance, if I could take \$10,000 off horses that I knew he was not going to bet on, I could afford to give him a good bet at a fair average price on the horse he wanted.

"I would try to figure out what he was doing at all times by his conversation, as he usually came to me first to get a line on the market. Many a time he has offered me a bet of \$500 on a horse which I knew was only a stall. I would say: 'Come on, dump in what you want to bet.' He would laugh and reply: 'Well, make it \$1000.' He threw that money away to make me believe he was not 'stalling,' as they say in turf vernacular. Twice he did that on me and the next time he came along offering me \$500. I suggested that he give me all the commission, believing that he was still 'stalling.' He asked me how much I would take on the horse and I replied \$1000 across the board and he dropped it in on me. I think the odds were six, two and even. He hooked me good. You see he had thrown \$1500 away in prior bets knowing that I knew he was only stalling. Then he came along with the right one and took me for \$9000. We had many a laugh about it afterwards.

"I remember one day at Brighton Beach he came up to me and bet \$400 straight, \$600 place and \$1000 third on Cincinnatus. I asked him if he wanted any more but he declined. There was a big crowd following him, as usual, all eager to listen to our conversation. For the benefit of the crowd he said: 'I don't think he has much chance to win but he may stagger into the money, that's the reason I bet the \$1000 on him to show, to save the straight and place money.' He knew that if he made me a big bet of \$1000 or \$2000 straight the bookmakers' runners would circulate it all over the ring in a minute and he would get no price. I believed he was sincere about the horse

and kept his winning and place price up at 12 to 1 straight and 5 to 1 place, cutting only the third quotations.

"As many of the smaller bookmakers took their prices from my slate, the odds were held at my figures all over the ring. Every now and then a bet of \$100 cash money would be handed to me and I was willing to take it relying on Phil's word that he thought Cincinnatus might struggle home in third place. How many of these hundred dollar bets were placed nobody will ever know, but there were scores of them, and they were bet by strangers. Toward the close of the betting there was a whole lot of \$100 bills for Cincinnatus. Every bookmaker was loaded up.

"It is little use relating the result of the race. If you remember, Cincinnatus won by something like a dozen lengths. Phil never told me how much he won, but it was a terrific bundle and he explained to me afterwards that his reason for not betting me more than \$400 straight, and \$600 place, was that I should keep the price up for his commissioners, who had orders to begin betting at a certain time. All those one hundred dollar bills that were bet on Cincinnatus in the late market belonged to Phil. Had he loaded me up with \$1000 across the board he would have taken a very short price for the remainder of his commission. As it was he averaged something like 10 to 1 for several thousands.

"Another instance of his knowledge of the ring and its connections is amusing. He was being 'torched,' as the saying goes, which means that one or more of his employees would give out advance information to two or three bookmakers. These commissioners would tip the bookmakers as to their instructions and their business would be to send out big sums to bet on the horse Phil was going to play, thereby getting the top price. For instance, they would possibly get 5 to 1 against a horse, through the advance information, and when Phil's commissioners would come around they would sell it to them at 3 to 1, for any horse Phil played would invariably drop several points in the market. Phil watched the market closely for awhile and finally discovered the leak. Then he set up a job and discovered all concerned. He called the commissioners to him, whom he suspected, and gave them instructions to bet an unlimited amount on a horse that was quoted at 6 to 1. 'I don't want you to stop betting until that horse is 3 to 1 all over the ring.'

"The order had no sooner been issued than, as anticipated by Phil, the committee met, meaning the commissioners and the bookmakers, and the latter at once sent out several thousand dollars to get 6 to 1. But, after Phil's commissioners had tipped off the bookmakers, Phil called his men in and told them to wait a minute or two before beginning operations. He did this to give the bookmakers who were doing business with the commissioners time to put in their money, which they did, and without a cent of Phil's money going into the ring the horse was knocked down to 4 to 1 in less time than it takes to tell it. This was convincing proof that these certain commissioners had been "torching" him. He was his own detective and he was the means of making three conniving bookmakers lose more money than they had made by subsidizing his commissioners.

"It is safe to say that never was there a man on the turf in any country who made such a study of it as 'Pittsburgh Phil.' He threw every angle and turn from the race horse down to the runner for a book. I have paid him more money than any twenty men who have done business with me. As I said before, I used to collect in bits and he would come along with a pushcart and take it away in a lump."