

ODDS AGAINST: THE PUNTER'S LOT IS NOT A HAPPY ONE

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I

As all who knew Barry Andrews will recollect, inside Barry was a frustrated jockey, or, to be more precise, one and a half frustrated jockeys. How he envied those mid nineteenth century owners who piloted their own horses to victory at their local race-meeting. Yet Barry's real frustration with the Australian turf was deeper than his inability to ride winners; it was more to do with his failure even to pick them. Barry was the ultimate unsuccessful punter, the consummate friend of the bookmaker. Those of us who attended the early Sporting Traditions Conference *divertissements* at the track will recall a particular visit to Moonee Valley where invariably - indeed by the last race one might say inevitably - Barry's selections failed to prosper. Having Barry support them was the curse of the knacker's yard: hot favourites cooled off, best bets were bested, and to follow the prophets proved profitless. Finally Barry drew place money on the last and surprised Valley patrons witnessed a bearded punter being applauded by a mob of sports historians as he collected \$1.20, still 80 cents less than he had laid out.<sup>1</sup> What will be suggested here is that Barry's experiences epitomised those of the battling Australian punter who basically has little chance of making racing pay.

II

Without gambling there would be no racing but with gambling comes the danger of corruption. This is particularly the case in Australian racing which has thrived on handicaps rather than on weight for age events. Initially set up to give all manner of horses an equal chance in an era when there was a shortage of quality thoroughbreds in the Colonies, handicaps became enshrined in Australian racing. They were popular with punters who preferred the better 'odds available when winners were less predictable, though naturally the punters felt that they knew

heavy odds-on favourite. The stewards investigated an allegation by the owner of the second horse that to perform so well Red Lock must have been doped but they gave the all clear. Next week Erbie, again disguised as Red Lock, won by twenty lengths at Kadina, another South Australian country track. The man behind these coups was never apprehended though Charlie Prince, the trainer involved, served five months imprisonment.<sup>5</sup>

Another method of fooling the handicapper, and of course the punter, is to use drugs, both stimulants and stoppers. Rumours of doping in post Second World War racing forced the Australian Jockey Club to introduce the routine swabbing of winners in 1947 and to establish its own testing laboratories. The first disqualification of a Sydney winner came on 8 May 1948 when a swab, from Frontal Attack was shown to contain caffeine. Within a few months a significant number of positive swabs were detected, Although doubts were cast on the shortcomings of the analysis procedures, it was clear that there was a drug problem in Australian racing.<sup>6</sup> The story since then has been one of a technological race between the emergence of new drugs and the development of the means to detect them. The most recent to come to light has been etorphine, commonly called elephant juice; ten thousand times more potent than morphine, its use on Hollywood Girl at Ascot in January 1987 made a mockery of the form book.<sup>7</sup> Generally it has only been winners which have been tested, but it is far easier to slow down a horse than speed it up. Presumably this was the intention of the untraced nobbler who dosed Melbourne Cup favourite Big Philou with danthron, a strong purgative, prior to the big race in 1969.<sup>8</sup> Until all horses are tested the punter cannot be assured that his selection has not been 'got at' and he may be left feeling that he is the real dope in Australian racing.

The easiest way to ensure that a horse will not win is to make sure that the jockey does not let it. Australian hoops, like jockeys of other nations, have never had a reputation for honesty; as Barry would appreciate, one definition of jockey is 'to trick or cheat'.<sup>9</sup> Rumours that jockeys have fixed races are commonplace as epitomised by the oft-told story of the country

which horse would be first at the post;<sup>2</sup> they were popular with bookmakers who appreciated the profits from the wider betting markets which they stimulated; and they were popular with sociologists as they supported the Australian cultural notions of egalitarianism and the cutting down of tall poppies. However, when allotted weights are determined by prior performances there is a temptation for horses not to be run on their merits.

The most obvious - though in reality the least obvious - method of changing form is by the ring-in, the substitution of one horse for a lookalike with different racing capabilities. The most recent case to come to light was the Fine Cotton affair in Queensland in which Bold Personality, a horse no longer eligible for novice races replaced one which, by virtue of its moderate performance, was so qualified. With bets of over two million dollars Australia-wide at stake, the horse masquerading as Fine Cotton scraped home in the Commerce Novice Handicap by a short half head, the smallest winning margin which can be declared. The relief of its backers was short-lived: the Eagle Farm stewards had had their suspicions aroused by the orgy of betting and, when the winner failed to match Fine Cotton's identification card, it was promptly disqualified.<sup>3</sup>

Cynics might suggest that nothing is surprising in Queensland. However, ring-ins have not been confined to the sunshine state. Sixteen years ago in Victoria Rick Renzella netted \$33,000 and two years in jail for substituting crack sprinter, Regal Vista, for Royal School in the Muntham Handicap at Casterton.<sup>4</sup> Half a century before this Erbie, a good sprint performer, won a race at Kilmore in Victoria when disguised as Chrybean. Although the horse and its connections were disqualified for life, the instigator of the scheme escaped detection and determined to continue the equine plagiarism. This time Erbie crossed into South Australia, to Murray Bridge, where he took the place of Red Lock, a nag worth more at the boiling down works than on the course. Opening at twenty-five to one the price fell rapidly as the commissioners for the ringers put on their money and trackside punters followed their lead. Eventually the books were stopped and Red Lock bolted in as an

meeting in which the five riders had arranged who should win. Unfortunately the designated victor struggled round the course so badly that, coming down the home straight, it lagged a poor fifth, a position which led to the next day's alliterative headline: Freak Accident as Four Jockeys Fall off in Final Furlong.

Yet, to use one of those cliches so detested by Barry, there is no smoke without fire. Not all stories of jockey corruption are apocryphal. Back in 1860 Flying Buck, winner of the first Australian Champion Sweepstakes, failed to replicate this form when favourite for the Victorian Jockey Club Derby. Shortly afterwards his jockey, young Thomas Coyne, devalued himself by swearing an affidavit that he had been ordered not to win by owner-trainer William Yuille. Although Coyne later retracted his statement, claiming that bookmakers had forced him to make it, the issue was never resolved satisfactorily.<sup>10</sup> Moving into the twentieth century we find the New South Wales riders, Andy Knox and Fred Shean, guilty of offering Noel "Digger" McGrowdie 600 to pull his mount Abbeville in the 1944 Newcastle Cameron Handicap.<sup>11</sup> Some other jockeys needed no such sponsored incentive. Following a two year Australian Jockey Club disqualification for pulling a horse in a race at Wyong in 1954, Pat Sullivan quit racing and, in a series of newspaper articles, poured out a confession in which he admitted that, during seven years of riding at provincial meetings, he pulled, doped or used sinkers or batteries on 314 of his 1043 mounts. All this was on his own initiative to assist his gambling ventures.<sup>12</sup> He was small-fry, but pen portraits in *Sport Magazine* in the late 1950s and early 1960s show that leading jockeys were also involved and received substantial suspensions for improper riding practices and other turf offences. These included George Podmore, put out for twelve months when he won on Huamight in the Spring Handicap at Randwick after the horse had finished last the previous week at Canterbury; George Moore, given a three year suspension for owning a racehorse contrary to the rules of racing and for giving false and misleading evidence to an A.J.C. inquiry; and Athol Mulley who received two years, not his first nor his last suspension, for pulling Tiberius at Canterbury.<sup>13</sup>

Although a few jockeys would rather earn a dollar crookedly than ten honestly, most become corrupt for one of two reasons. First, despite the imposition of artificial weights which limits jockeyship to those blessed with natural lightness, there are always too many riders chasing too few rides. On the Saturday on which this section was drafted the typical field at Rosehill was twelve, and thirteen at both Flemington and Cheltenham, far less than the number of registered metropolitan riders in each state. In racing there is a permanent excess supply of labour. Yet this does not explain why leading jockeys committed offences, for they could be sure of obtaining mounts: skill and experience were always in high demand. Their corruption, and that of many lesser riders, stemmed from the uncertain future of a career in racing.

Riding racehorses is a dangerous occupation. There was a serious accident in the first Melbourne Cup which left Morrison, rider of fallen Dispatch, with a fractured arm and Haynes, whose mount Twilight fell over the unfortunate Dispatch, with a broken collar bone.<sup>14</sup> Injuries can put jockeys out of the racing saddle for weeks or even months at a time. Moreover accidents can cost them more than money, as the spectre of death is a constant riding companion. When in November last young Mark Johnston, an apprentice jockey, died of head injuries after a fall at Ballarat, he was the eighth rider to be killed in Victorian racing in a decade.<sup>15</sup> Nationally, between 1929 and 1962, 84 jockeys died from race falls or from injuries sustained on the training track? Such deaths were not confined to those learning their trade: the honour roll of riders killed in action includes several from the top ranks. On Adelaide Cup Day in 1938 a double tragedy left Ray Wilson and Stan Kite dead after a smash in a minor event; they had topped the winning jockeys' lists in Melbourne and Adelaide respectively.<sup>17</sup> All jockeys can empathise with Banjo Paterson's epitaph for steeplechase rider Tom Corrigan who rode in a sport in which

any slip means sudden death - with wife and child to keep it needs  
some pluck to draw the whip and flog him at the leap.<sup>18</sup>

In such a situation there is a strong temptation to make as much money as possible in the short run and thus if a loss can be

worth more than a win the result is rarely in doubt: except to the poor punter.

Stipendiary stewards have been employed to act both as a deterrent to jockeys contemplating illegal tactics and as a detection agency should they go through with their plans. Yet even these trained specialists in race observation can still miss incidents and, to assist them, the filming of races was begun in Victoria in 1954, a surprisingly late technological development in a nation which pioneered the starting gate and quickly adopted the totalisator.<sup>19</sup> Punters can now be more confident that if jockeys infringe during the race they are likely to be detected. Whether the punishments meted out compensate the backers for the loss of their stakes is a point for conjecture.

### III

All punters are numerate; some are also literate. For this latter group, the development of the racing press has thrown the stable doors open a bit wider, though neither the punters nor the journalists are privy to all that is happening in an industry which rivals the stock exchange in its degree of insider trading. Nevertheless, even with their contacts and advisers, owners can make mistakes.

Many do it when purchasing their animals. Breeders swear by conformation and pedigree, yet many good-looking, well-bred race-horses have failed to earn their keep. The history of Australian racing is studded with high-priced failures. Two examples from the 1950s will suffice. Orcus, basking in the reflected glory of his half-brother Posedionis' racing deeds, cost Sir Henry Denison 3,050 guineas but never won a race; and Mr. Harry McCray paid 4,500 guineas for Anne-Tien-Et but she won stakes valued at only £420.<sup>20</sup> More generally the twenty top-priced yearlings in 1968 went for an average of £26,650 but their earnings averaged £2,175, less than a tenth of -what they had cost in the sale ring.<sup>21</sup>

Others do it when backing their animals. Etienne De Mestre, owner of the great Archer, winner of the first two Melbourne Cups, retired from the turf when he laid and lost the largest bet

recorded to that time in the Colonies. Navigator brought home the first part of the double when it won the Victorian Derby in 1882 but, unfortunately his other selection, Gudare, could not emulate Archer and managed only third place in the Melbourne Cup of that year.<sup>22</sup> And as Barry himself pointed out, -the spectacular betting of James Ryan contributed to his financial downfall as his other horses could not match their stablemates who won the A.J.C. Derby, the Epsom Handicap and the Australasian Champion Stakes.<sup>23</sup>

Owners at least should know whether or not their own horses will be trying. Yet misjudgements still occur. Back in 1896 Humphrey Oxenham wagered heavily on his horse Waterfall for the Victorian Racing Club's St. Leger but the race was won by an outsider, Cabin Boy, also the property of Oxenham but entered as a pacemaker for his prime selection.<sup>24</sup> A similar fate befell the Jack Holt trained Eurythmic which, when eight to one on, was beaten by stablemate Tangalooma despite the former carrying £700 of the trainer's bets.<sup>25</sup>

If the professionals get it wrong what chance has the Saturday arvo punter? There are far too many variables in the racing equation and the information of the average punter is highly deficient. For him to get a fair run for his money, the owner, the trainer and the jockey must all be wanting the horse to run on its merits: enough said. The last to know what is going on is the poor punter, even poorer once correct weight is declared. There is only one certain winner in turf transactions: Sol Green, a major Sydney bookmaker in the early twentieth century, maintained that he obtained his wealth through "mugs ...backing horses".<sup>26</sup> As Perce Galea, one of Australia's biggest and most flamboyant punters, remarked:

The small punter cannot hope to make the game pay. The odds against him are too great...But the stay-at-home punter who bets at starting-price is the most hopeless case of all. His is what i call real mug's money. He hasn't a chance in a million of turning a profit. He mighty as well tear his money up. He's just working for the S.P. bookie.<sup>27</sup>

What can the punter do? Those with initiative could follow Grafter Kingsley's lead and tunnel under the official weigh in

areas so as to tamper with the scales.<sup>28</sup> Or perhaps they could interfere with the broadcasts, as was done at Ascot in 1939, when a phantom race call by Harry Solomons underlay a nationwide betting coup which saw thousands of pounds being invested on Buoyancy well after he had past the winning post.<sup>29</sup> Most, however, simply have to accept that something may be rotten in the state of racing but hope that their part of the racing stables has been sufficiently cleansed.

#### IV

Racing folklore is replete with stories of the punters who made it, of gamblers who cleaned up. Men such as Jimmy Ah Poon, a Chinese gardener, who turned his savings of £50 into £35,000 by selectively following Poseidon throughout 1906. Another successful backer was full-time punter Fred Angles who, according to Bill Waterhouse, one of his victim's, 'slaughtered the book-makers during the last twenty years of his life including winning £200,000 following the champion stayer Carioca. Then there was the betting coup engineered in the United States by the Australian bookmakers Joe Matthews and Bill McDonald with the assistance of their racing manager Rufe Naylor, himself a lavish punter, and their trainer Mick Polson. Whilst the American racing fraternity concentrated its attention on Winooka, at the time Australia's fastest horse, they plunged on its stablemate Trevallian, which they had entered in a minor race. Trevallian won, and so did the Aussie betters, reputedly taking over £300,000 out of the American ring.<sup>30</sup>

Successes such as these, especially when inflated by track-side gossip, keep the average punter returning. Forgotten are the betting disasters such as Ajax's 1939 loss in a three horse race when forty to one on. Forgotten too are the corrupt jockeys, the doping scandals and the ring-ins. Hope springs eternal that this time could be the big one.

Yet in the long run the punter always loses. During the Great Depression of the interwar years Phar Lap boosted working-class morale and incomes with his or rather, thanks to the gelder's knife, its winning streak, albeit often at very short

odds. However, after forty successive placings, including thirty-five victories, big Red finally succumbed to the handicapper and, carrying ten stone ten pounds, finished out of a place in the 1931 Melbourne Cup. One battler's reaction summed it up: "Stuff the Melbourne Cup, stuff the V.R.C. and, perhaps ungraciously, stuff Phar Lap". Only one out of three again: the odds are always against the punter.

#### Notes and References:

1. Wearing his philologist's hat, Barry assured me that 'mob' was certainly the correct collective noun.
2. Barry would have been pedantic on this point. For some reason 'first past the post' has become common parlance, but, as many punters can verify, bookmakers do not accept this version.
3. D. Scott, 'Warned Off', *Your sport*, 1 (June 1985), pp.17-32.
4. P. Opas, *The Great Ring-In* (Boronia, 1982), p.7.
5. J. Carslake, 'The Most Brazen Ring-In of All', *Sport Magazine* (October 1959), pp.46-48.
6. J. Pollard, *The Pictorial History of Australian Horse Racing* (Sydney, 1981), pp.254-6; 'Has Swabbing Been Worthwhile?', *Sports Magazine* (April 1955), p.33.
7. *Adelaide Advertiser* (February 18 1987).
8. D. Hickie, *Gentlemen of the Australian Turf* (Sydney, 1986), p.389. Unlike most losing punters, those who supported Big Philou could at least claim that they got a run for their money!
9. *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* (Sydney, 1980), p.786. Strangely in his essay on the language of Australian sport, Barry did not discuss the Australian term for jockeys. Eric Partridge *A Dictionary of Slang* (London, 1984 ed.) believes that it originated in the 1920s as a pun on the racecourse ring, but punters rather than punsters possibly developed it using the imagery of racing colours.
10. A. Lemon, *The History of Australian Thoroughbred Racing: The Beginnings to the First Melbourne Cup* (Melbourne, 1987), p.245.

11. 'Glamor Jockey Became a Cabbie', *Australian Sport and Surfing* (March 1964), p.22.
12. K. Roberts, 'All-Electric Rogues', *Sport Magazine* (March 1962), pp.6-9, 56-7. Sinkers are lead-lined aluminium horseshoes designed to slow down a horse; on the other hand batteries linked to a whip can have a galvanising effect on an animal.
13. *Sport Magazine* (April 1957), p.17; (November 1958), p.39; (June 1961), p.32.
14. Lemon, *op. cit.*, p.26.
15. *Adelaide Advertiser* (November 21 1987). Johnston had previously been badly hurt in a race crash at Bairnsdale in September 1986 when he suffered severe head injuries and remained unconscious for two weeks.
16. R. Graham, 'They Flirt With Death', *Sport Magazine* (January 1963), 40-1, 54-5.
17. *Ibid.*, p.40.
18. A.B. Paterson, 'Tommy Corrigan', *Bulletin* (August 18 1894).
19. 'Science Comes to Racing', *Sport Magazine* (March 1955), pp.22-4.
20. 'How to Buy A Melbourne Cup Winner', *Sport Magazine* (April 1961), p.28.
21. L. Young, 'Big Australian Racing Boom', *Bulletin* (April 21 1975), p.27.
22. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol.4, p.43.
23. *Ibid.*, vol.6, p.79.
24. Hickie, *op.cit.*, p. 54.
25. M. Cavanough, *The Wizard of Mordiallac* (Melbourne 1962), p.34).
26. Hickie, *op.cit.*, p.95.
27. *Ibid.*, p.378.
28. *Ibid.*, pp.46-8.
29. *Ibid.*, pp.124-8.
30. *Ibid.*, pp.116, 240.