

How The Game Has Changed (Part II)

By Barry Meadow

For those who played the horses in the 1940's or 1950's, the game has changed considerably, and not necessarily for the better (or better). Takeouts are up, handle is down (on an adjusted basis), and life has gotten much easier for your competition thanks to the wide availability of televised racing and Internet information. And yet, there are some silver linings...

Rebates, begun in the 1990's, have continued to keep players in the game—and for some, a very profitable game. While rates have dropped a bit as tracks have raised their rates for their signals, rebates remain the key element in many players' wagering strategies: make bets that come close to break-even, then use the rebates to reach profitability. And these days, several places offer rebates even for low-volume players.

Although tournament handicapping began in the 1970's, it's only in recent years that these events have expanded to the point where they've become the primary focus of many players. These folks enter numerous online or onsite tournaments that offer cash rewards and qualifying spots for the National Handicapping Championship. And the NHC, which started with a \$200,000 total purse in 1999, now offers a total prize of \$1.8 million.

Innovative bets such as super high 5's and pick 5's, both with carryover possibilities, have given players more opportunities to win significant money on a single bet. Most of them require only 50-cent or \$1 minimums, making them far easier to hit than \$2 pick 6's, which have been around since the 1970's. Jackpot bets, while usually poor investments, become player-friendly on mandatory-payout days.

Superfectas with 10-cent minimums, and other low-minimum bets, have enabled players to join the quest for big payoffs even if they have small bankrolls, and have enabled larger players to cover exponentially more possibilities with their plays. Dodging the tax man is a side benefit here.

The amount of information available these days is astonishing compared with the bad old days, when the Daily Racing Form didn't even print fractional times in the past performances, and trying to find information on out-of-town races was a dubious quest. The Beyer numbers didn't appear in the Form until 1992.

The first computerized database of racing and breeding information was started by Bloodstock Research Information Services (now called BRIS with a website of *brisnet.com*) in 1971, but it wasn't until the late 1980's that founder Dick Broadbent tilted the service towards horseplayers. *Brisnet.com* has become one of the most respected companies specializing in handicapping information, offering dozens of daily computerized reports ranging from Ultimate PP's to ALL-Ways Data Files.

Of course, the Form and BRIS are not the only players in the world of computer handicapping. TrackMaster is a major presence. So are Jim Cramer's Handicappers Data Warehouse, Ken Massa's HTR, and TimeFormUS. And Dick Mitchell's All-In-One program, and the various programs developed by Howard Sartin. Type in "computerized horse-race handicapping information" into Google, and you too can enjoy slogging through nearly half a million hits.

The information age now includes onsite morning workout reports from a number of tracks, detailed trainer stats in dozens of categories, pace numbers, track bias notes, amount of ground covered by each horse...well, you get the idea. There isn't much that you can't find somewhere, if you're willing to do the research and have the cash to pay for that information—though much of the info costs zero. For instance, free videos of every stakes race nationwide are available at *equibase.com/yearbook*, and a number of free databases can be found at *horseracingdatasets.com*.

No longer do you have to fight the traffic to get to the track, pay the parking, make the long walk to the entrance, and pay the admission fee. Nor do you need to visit smoky off-track betting parlors or distant simulcast centers. When I lived in a small town in central California in the early 2000's, I had to drive two hours round trip to put in a pick 6 ticket. Later came the convenience of phone and internet betting, which we take for granted just about everywhere today. What with Internet toteboards and last-minute, no-standing-in-line betting capabilities, betting from home—on a dozen tracks, instead of the one available back in the old days--is far more convenient than playing at the track.

And you can watch the races live on TVG or HRTV or RTN, none of which existed twenty years ago; the merger earlier this year between TVG and HRTV has eliminated overlapping and has led to more races being shown.

And if you're out buying groceries or attending your daughter's school play, you can use mobile apps to make your bets—although please, not while your kid's on stage.

No longer is betting a lonely hobby, as a number of horse websites offer back-and-forth discussions of everything from how best to use pace ratings to which jockey is the most overrated to whether the Triple Crown schedule should be changed.

Want to improve your game? There's plenty of free stuff on the Internet, ranging from the Horse Player NOW weekly classes to a number of how-to-handicap YouTube videos. Several handicapping websites offer free daily reports as well.

Although a number of player-advocate groups have tried to gain traction over the years, the only successful one has been the Horseplayers Association of North America, formed in 2008. Led by JCapper developer Jeff Platt, it's a grass-roots organization that helped negotiate the first low-takeout players pick 5, rates racetracks on playability based on factors ranging from field sizes to takeout rates to the size of the mutuel pools, and has led boycotts of tracks that raised their takeouts. The group even offers a free monthly newsletter (*horseplayerassociation.org*).

It may be easier than ever to play the horses. But it may be harder than ever to play the game profitably.

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