

Luck

By Barry Meadow

Recently I spent a few days in a hotel in a heavily Asian area of Flushing in Queens, New York. My hotel had no fourth floor, although it offered both a third floor and a fifth floor. Many Chinese consider 4 to be an unlucky number, because the words “four” and “death” are similar in the Chinese language—just as many Americans consider 13 to be unlucky, which is why some hotels and office buildings display twelfth and fourteenth floors, but no thirteenth,

Now you might say these are simply silly superstitions. But millions of people take their superstitions very seriously—including some percentage of horseplayers.

How many players do you know who wear a shirt because one time they had a big day wearing that shirt? Or who take the same route to the track because that’s the route they used when they hit a big pick 6? Or who write their selections with some allegedly lucky pen?

They may not be rational beliefs—no double-blind study is likely to discover a causal relationship between tapping your wrist three times before you call in a bet and your likelihood of success—but superstitions seem pervasive all over the gambling world, from poker rooms to sportsbooks. The theory is that by sticking to some routine, or some belief, you have a measure of control over what, by definition, is an uncontrollable event.

Luck and uncertainty are at the heart of horse-race betting. You’ve heard there’s no such thing as a sure thing. Even the horse with the best speed figures, the top trainer, the only early speed, and the sharpest form runs out from time to time. They say there are a million ways to lose a race, but only one way to win it. And understanding that luck is a factor in every race—no matter how diligently you’ve studied the past performances—is an important key to keeping the equanimity that will serve you well in a sport where inches either way could mean thousands of dollars won or lost.

You're going to get some good luck, and you're going to get some bad luck. Let's say, for argument's sake, that 10% of the time you have good luck, 10% you have bad luck, and 80% you have average luck. That means if you bet 1,000 races over the course of the year, in 100 of them you're going to have bad luck. Sometimes for very serious money. All of us have little trouble remembering the time our 8-1 shot was sailing along four lengths in front in deep stretch when for no apparent reason he ducked into the rail and threw the jockey. Or when our 12-1 shot was about to knife through to victory when the horse on the rail suddenly bore out, sawing off our longshot and causing him to get beat. Or the time our \$90 exacta looked home when some filthy rail-riding plodder stuck his nose up for second over our four-wide-on-both-turns runner-up who became just one more useless third-place finisher.

Sometimes you get bad luck because you made a mistake. For instance, one member of a coupled entry got scratched, you didn't know it, so you bet \$200 to win on the half you didn't like, and he runs up the track while you're still wondering what happened to the good half. Or across the country, a race got taken off the turf, you thought it was still on the grass, you bet accordingly, and watched in horror as the race proceeded on dirt.

Oh, there are plenty more ways to get suffer bad luck—from shutouts and mismarked betting slips before the race, to disqualifications and bad trips during them. But we often forget that sometimes, we get good luck. Traffic causes us to miss the first race, and we save the \$400 we would have lost. Or we bet the third choice, and the favorite gets into a surprise speed duel with the second choice, and guess who benefits? Sometimes that filthy rail-riding plodder is the horse we bet.

Luck, in fact, often depends on one's perspective. When Bayern cut off pace rival Moreno and favored Shared Belief at the start of the 2014 Breeders Cup Classic—then didn't get disqualified—it was good luck for the backers of Bayern and bad luck for the backers of Moreno and Shared Belief.

One day in 2002, I wrote out a series of tickets for a Pick 6 which totaled \$1,692 and called them in to my betting service—unaware that I had marked the wrong number for one of my selections in the last race. The first five races fell like clockwork, and I had the top five favorites in the final race which would have completed a Pick Six worth

somewhere between \$10,000 and \$20,000.

I went to dinner, and a couple of minutes past the scheduled post time, I called a friend to check on that last-race result. It was won by a 9-1 shot, the 10 horse, he told me. The only horse in the race who was even breathing that I didn't use.

When I got home, I checked the sheet I had used to call in my bets. I had wanted to use 1,2,5,7, and 9, but my sheet showed 1,2,5,7, and 10. Could it be? Somehow I had gotten mixed up on numbers, and substituted the winner onto the ticket I had called in?

Yes, indeed.

So I didn't have five consolations worth \$404. Instead, I had the Pick 6, worth \$35,049. And 15 consolations. Because I had mismarked my ticket, I collected an extra \$39,000. I verified the total with my betting service, and enjoyed a very good night's sleep.

###