Coupled and Uncoupled Entries

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Coupled entries give you two chances in a race (occasionally, three) so you get not only Speedy Secretariat, but Seattle Speedball as well. And if one doesn't win, well, maybe the other might.

And if you bet a coupled entry for place and/or show, you may get a bonus payday if they both fill in the winning slots.

I first developed a love for coupled entries when I played the harness races, back when Morse Code was big. Sometimes, while one horse ruled a division, a stablemate might have been second best in that same division. Occasionally, another barnmate might have been third best. Now put all of them on an entry in, say, a seven-horse race, and the likelihood that all three dominating horses would fail to hit to hit the board was somewhere around zero. Which is why, one time many years ago, I bet $30,000 to show on an entry to steal a quick $1,500, easy pickings when they finished 1-2-3.

Less money than I won on an entry at the 1995 Breeders Cup at Belmont Park. I bet exactly one race—a mere $200 to win on Lit de Justice in the BC Sprint. He was part of the field, coupled with a pair of unlikely longshots. As it turned out, one of those longshots, a mare named Desert Stormer who probably would have been at least 50-1 on her own, wound up winning the race as Lit de Justice finished third. So my horse lost—but I didn't care, since the winning field entry returned $31.00, giving me a pleasant $3,100 payoff on a loser.

In most jurisdictions (rules vary from state to state), coupled entries are less common these days. When you have a coupled entry, particularly in short fields, fans tend to bet less. A six-horse race becomes a five-horse race. And when one part of the entry looks like a 4-5 shot while the other one looks like 10-1, the player loses in both

directions—a lesser payoff when the top horse wins, and a severely underlaid payoff when the longshot wins.

Typically, two horses race as a coupled entry only if they have common ownership. So if trainer Smith enters two horses and one is owned by Batman and Robin, and the other is owned by Clark Kent and Lois Lane and Robin, the entry races as one betting interest. Otherwise, if a trainer enters two horses, they race as separate interests.

Why would a trainer enter two horses in a race when, at best, only one can win? Often, the horses are in a stakes race, or in a class that doesn't fill often and doesn't race often. Sometimes two classes are combined (such as NW-2 allowance, also eligible $50,000 claimers) and the trainer has a horse in both classes. Other times, the owner plans to be on scene that day and just wants to watch his horses run.

With a coupled entry, it's not unknown for a trainer to give riders instructions such as "Don't fight the stablemate if he wants the lead," or "Take back and let the other one go." Uncoupled entries are not on the same team, and such advice is strictly forbidden. Still, the public is often suspicious: "Why did Horse A battle the favorite, except to set the race up for Horse B?" or "The longshot won because the favored part of the entry didn't try."

That brings us to researcher Ken Massa's conclusions about uncoupled entries. For 2011, he found 5,576 races with purses of $10,000+ that featured one (and only one) uncoupled two-horse entry. All told, in 1,485 of these races (27%), one of the two horses won. Betting both horses would have given you a miserable 0.79 ROI (21% loss on win bets). Broken down:

> Lower Odds—1047 won (19%), ROI of 0.78, IV of 1.56
>
> Higher Odds— 438 won (8%), ROI of 0.80, IV of 0.65

The lower odds horses averaged 4-1, the higher odds horses 10-1. As expected, the lower odds horses won much more often although the losing ROI was similar. There was no evidence of game-playing. The results replicated an earlier survey we had reported in *Meadow's Racing Monthly* nearly 20 years ago.

On betting exchanges, entries are always uncoupled because you bet on each horse by name, not number. This proved pleasing to me on a turf race years ago (when it was possible for non-New Jerseyans to play Betfair). On my line, I had the A part of the

entry at 1-1 and the B horse at 6-1, for combined odds of 3-5. Betfair had them at 3-1 and 5-1. I sure appreciated the 3-1 odds on my top horse, particularly since the entry on track was only 1-1. I bet $2,000 and my guy won for a lovely $6,000 score on a trackside even-money shot.

Coupled entries offer certain benefits, particularly if both halves run 1-2, 1-3, or 2-3. Another Massa survey eliminated all races with a purse value under $10,000 as well as all off tracks and all races that were taken off the turf, and wound up with 1,625 races with a single coupled entry. The entry won 22% of these races, with a not-bad 0.90 ROI. What was most interesting was that the place ROI was 1.01 and the show ROI (72% ran in the money) a magnificent 1.10.

Massa also checked 1,442 races in which there originally was a coupled entry, but one was scratched. These won an OK 16% of the time, but the ROI was an awful 0.66. This could possibly indicate that some players bet this entry thinking they were getting two horses.

Which brings up another possible problem with entries—when there's a late scratch, the rules are not uniform around the country. Let's say you have an entry where one horse looks like 3-5 and the other 15-1. At the gate, the 3-5 horse is scratched. In some jurisdictions (the intelligent ones), the entry is automatically scratched and the remaining horse competes for purse money only—but in others (the stupid ones), you're stuck with the longshot if you're unable to cancel your ticket (or never knew about the scratch at all). This is a particular problem in bets such as pick 4's or pick 5's or pick 6's—are you stuck with the 15-1 shot at a badly underlaid price, or is your ticket considered a win, or does your ticket move to the favorite? Find out what your local rule is.

Final subject: If you create your own odds line, simply add the chances of each part of the entry to get your final total. If you give Quick Guy a 30% chance to win, and Slower Guy a 10% chance, the total of the entry is 40%, meaning 3-2 would be fair odds for the duo—even though such odds on Quick Guy by himself would be an underlay. In the same way, if one part of an entry is scratched late, re-calculate your line using only the one remaining entrant.

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