

Tom Ainslie's Legacy

Ten Septembers ago, Tom Ainslie passed away. For years he was Richard Carter, a respected writer of crime stories and medical books. But nobody much remembers that career.

It was as Tom Ainslie that he made his name as a man who wrote about handicapping in an in-depth yet easy-to-understand way, at a time when the typical offerings to players were get-rich-quick pamphlets.

Before Ainslie's book *The Compleat Handicapper* was published by Simon and Schuster in 1966, you could go into a mainstream bookstore, anywhere, and find nothing about thoroughbred handicapping. It was Ainslie who considered horseplayers as serious seekers who deserved to be treated as something other than marks.

His best-known book, *Ainslie's Complete Guide to Thoroughbred Racing*, cemented his status as the leading writer about handicapping—ever. He would go on to write several more books on the subject, as well as volumes on other aspects of gambling. It's not much of a stretch to say that without Ainslie, there would have been no Andy Beyer, or Steve Davidowitz, or Steve Crist—literate men who wrote about handicapping as a serious intellectual pursuit.

It is hard to overestimate Ainslie's influence on modern handicapping. Like Zelig, he seemed to be everywhere—reading would-be author James Quinn's first tentative longhand scribbles, helping finance William Quirin's computer handicapping project, hanging out with Jules Fink and the legendary Speed Boys gambling combine, working with Bonnie Ledbetter to produce the first book about body language handicapping, coining the term "impact value," editing William Scott's first book, publishing one of the first exacta fair-value charts, and ghostwriting one of the first handicapping books with an arithmetical approach--Fred Davis's *Percentages and Probabilities*. A featured speaker at several Handicapping Expos, Ainslie was a popular attraction at seminars at racetracks and hotels all over North America.

Looking through Ainslie's books today, decades after he first gained fame, one is struck by how much sense they still make though they predated all the computer programs, trainer studies, and video replays that are available now. Ainslie wrote about distance suitability, form, weight, sex, class, trainers, consistency, jockey, pace, paddock deportment, and odds. He discussed track biases, eligibility conditions, results charts, workouts, running styles, track conditions, and even computer analysis. No aspect of handicapping, it seemed, escaped his stylish and comprehensive scrutiny. Rather than simply promote a single method, Ainslie looked round and round at all kinds of things.

Ainslie never claimed that he had original theories of handicapping. In fact, in his 1970 book *The Theory And Practice Of Handicapping*, he wrote, "Although much of the literature that deals with handicapping procedures is merchandised as if it were the fruit of some heroic espionage operation, there is no such thing as a handicapping secret. In fact, there is nothing new about the principles of handicapping. Nobody knows more about those principles than was known a half century ago."

Case in point: For more than 20 years, I published power ratings that I called Master Win Ratings, using my own particular methods. Or at least I thought they were my own particular methods until one day I came across something Ainslie had written about called the Golden Notebook process. It's remarkably similar to what I did—and he described it long before I ever attended a thoroughbred race.

His genius lay in looking at every aspect of the game without making wild promises about success, either his readers' or his own, and delving into them with wit and wisdom. Instead of considering racetrackers to be sad little hustlers and lowlifes, Ainslie offered another view--thoroughbred handicapping was a subject that could be studied and mastered by intelligent people.

In 1998, three decades after his name became synonymous with thoughtful, no-nonsense observations about handicapping, I visited him at his 50-acre estate in a bucolic town an hour's drive from Manhattan. Though Ainslie was already in his eighties by then, his mind was sharp as we talked about numerous aspects of the sport that made him a respected name at racetracks all over. "I think what I have written is probably out of date," he told me, "but what I wrote was extremely useful to a lot of people at the time."

Ainslie was never a big gambler, although, he said, he had more profitable outings than losing ones. He never sold selections on a phone line, and had nothing but contempt for the system writers of his time. In 1972, though, he did produce a 36-page step-by-step handicapping booklet--Ainslie's Private Method--which he published under his own corporate name of Millwood Publications and sold for \$25, a considerable upgrade in earnings compared with the royalties he earned from his publishers. Ainslie took out full-page ads in the Racing Form, and the money rolled in—many, many, many thousands of dollars. After eliminating races with too many unknowns, the method included some rules to narrow the field to several contenders, and then adjusted the last applicable speed rating plus track variant for distance, surface, class, last-quarter speed, jockey win percentage, and other factors. It wasn't strictly a mechanical system--there was some judgment involved—but with Ainslie's name and the heavy marketing campaign, the booklet became the most profitable piece of writing that Richard Carter ever created.

Once he started writing books about gambling under the Ainslie name—taken from a brand of Scotch because he thought it sounded “horsey”—he wrote only one more book as Carter, a 1971 biography of baseball player Curt Flood.

In his later years, Ainslie wrote columns for the Daily Racing Form, often skewering racing's powers that be for their contemptuous treatment of their customers. He championed the players in the grandstand, not the suits in the offices.

Ainslie always urged handicappers to study and learn, and keep studying and learning. “Oversimplification is a terrible mistake in handicapping,” he told me. “If someone were able to come up with a couple of principles that might help a horseplayer to break even or win once in awhile, that would be lovely—but in real life, most of the time, a couple of principles aren't enough. It's too complicated a game.”

Years earlier, he had watched a TV show about unsuccessful gamblers that he described in *The Compleat Horseplayer*. “As gamblers—guessers--in a game which rewards knowledge and patience but punishes impulsiveness, the persons who appeared on the program exuded defeat. 'Just walking out of the house is a gamble,' some of them said. 'You might be run over by a truck, or a cornice might fall on your head.' The message was clear: to lose one's money on slow horses is the next best thing to being

skulled by falling masonry or squashed by a truck....Nowhere is man's inalienable right to make trouble for himself honored more efficiently than at the racetrack [but] I can state with the certainty of long experience that anyone who combines intelligence, patience, and self-control with a distaste for gambling and a readiness to study the game can make racing the most lucrative of hobbies.”

Ainslie believed you needed several qualities to be able to be a long-term racetrack winner. "You need self-confidence," he told me, "but it's got to be soundly grounded based on the fact that you've already *had* some previous success. You need self-control so you don't start making reckless bets just because you've lost a few in a row. And you certainly need a good knowledge about all aspects of the game.”

A good knowledge about all aspects of the game—yeah, that pretty much sums up Tom Ainslie’s contribution to all of us.