

## How Gambling Saved My Life

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Getting hooked on gambling was the best thing that ever happened to me. No racetrack or casino would be brazen enough to print that testimonial, but there it is.

It happened in the summer of 1996, when I was twenty-nine years old. I had been living in Chicago for a year, working part-time for a publication that billed itself as the World's Greatest Newspaper, sleeping alone in a stuffy studio apartment, and writing a novel about a rock band called Rumpledforeskin.

It was late June, a few weeks after the Belmont Stakes, when my father called. His wife was coming to town for a conference, and he needed to kill an afternoon. He suggested we do it at the track.

At the time, I followed horse racing as closely as I followed the rodeo circuit—I didn't know who'd won that year's Kentucky Derby, I'd never heard of the Breeders' Cup, and I'd skipped over all the gambling poems in Charles Bukowski chapbooks—but going to the track seemed like a guy thing to do. We'd done it before. When I was growing up, my father took me, once a year, to a little harness track in Jackson, Michigan, forty miles south of our home in Lansing. It was the sleaziest place I'd ever been. The bar sold shots of bourbon in paper cups. There was a pawnshop 200 feet from the entrance. All the patrons chain-smoked and complained about the attitudes of the local police. I figured Arlington Park would have the same biker bar/bingo hall ambience. That's one reason I agreed to go.

I was mistaken. Arlington was absolutely pastoral. From the Northwest Highway, the pre-Interstate pike that links it to Chicago, the track

resembled a grand resort hotel. Its roof, a cowl painted the green of ancient copper, floated above the summer trees. We walked through a stadium-sized parking lot to the east gate, where a garden spelled out A-R-L-I-N-G-T-O-N in red begonias.

It was a Monday afternoon, so the grandstand had the empty, aimless feeling of a shopping mall. I spread out my program on a table and ran my eyes across lines of statistics as dense and tiny as box scores.

I had learned to handicap—to dope out the winner of a horse race—when I was just a small child. In our family photo album, there is a picture of me holding a racing sheet as if it were a choir book. My great-uncle, Johnny Peralta, was a Wall Street short-order cook and harness racing nut who vacated his Bronx apartment every summer and checked into a motel near Monticello Raceway, in the Catskill Mountains of New York State. My Aunt Peggy always came along for the trip. She didn't seem to mind his horse fever. They had no children, and Johnny had made a lot of money in the stock market by reading *Business Week* and trading on tips from customers, so he was allowed to gamble all he wanted. I was seven in 1974, the year we visited Peggy and Johnny in their motel. He was a tall man with wavy white hair and a deep complexion (a black man from Arkansas posing as a Puerto Rican, we discovered after his death, which explained why he didn't speak with a Spanish accent). The pockets of his guayabera shirts were always filled with cellophane-wrapped cigarillos, which he puffed by the pool and in the smog-alert atmosphere of the track. Uncle Johnny guided me through the program, and when I'd learned enough to pick a horse, he ran two-dollar bets for me. My first winner was Ratsatam, a name I still remembered.

But twenty-two years had passed since then, and I didn't remember how to read the program. So I handicapped at Arlington by looking for horses who had finished second or third in their last race, figuring they were due for a win.

"I'm going to bet five dollars to win on Flash Light," I told my father, as "Call to Post" blatted through the loudspeakers and eight horses cantered out of the tunnel for the second race. "And I'm going

to bet a two-dollar exacta: Flash Light first and A Sunny Delight second." (An exacta requires a gambler to pick the top two finishers, in order. They're more popular than win bets, because they pay more.)

We carried our tickets out to a bench on the apron, the concrete terrace that stair-stepped from the grandstand down to the track. The afternoon was so dazzlingly bright that the sky looked overexposed, and the white sun cast a glow on the infield willows blocking the view of the backstretch. I watched the race on the Diamond Vision screen posted across from the bleachers, but I only remember the last 200 yards, when the horses were charging past my seat. Flash Light took the lead and hurtled down the stretch like a running back headed for the end zone. I was a single guy, and this was the biggest thrill I'd had in months. Leaping from the bench, I fanned the air with my tickets, two flimsy squares of paper.

"He's gonna win!" I shouted, jumping up and down as I anticipated the finish. "He's . . . gonna . . . win!"

He won, by two-and-a-half lengths. I was so excited I didn't notice A Sunny Delight galloping in behind him, fulfilling my exacta. When I cashed my tickets, I collected forty-eight dollars. After that, I felt confident enough to attempt a trifecta, which raises the exacta's degree of difficulty by demanding the top three finishers. I used the favorites, Dreamy and Jukebox Dance, for first and third. Between them I set an eccentrically named long shot, Salukis Corazon. It was a turf race, run on a ring of grass set within the dirt track.

A beginning horseplayer picking a cold trifecta is like a guy who's never held a dart shooting three straight bull's-eyes, but my horses ran 1-2-3. The finish is still fixed in my mind, like one of those 3-D freeze-frame commercials. As Dreamy crossed the wire, the horses were perfectly spaced on the fairway-smooth course, so I could watch the numbers on their saddlecloths—my winning numbers—rush past like lottery balls whooshing from a chute.

The trifecta paid "an even hundred dollars," according to Arlington's nasal Australian race caller. This, I later learned, wasn't a lot of money, but I was now up nearly \$150—three times as much as the

World's Greatest Newspaper paid me for an article. My father shook his head as I walked away from the window, stuffing twenties into my pants.

That Friday, I was supposed to meet some friends on the steps of the Art Institute for the Fourth of July fireworks. I left home early, so I could stop at the offtrack betting parlor on State Street, a gambling joint favored by film critic Gene Siskel and baseball manager Don Zimmer. The races went on past our meeting hour, but I could not drag myself from the OTB. "Maybe they'll be late," I said to myself, as I placed losing bets on the seventh, then the eighth, then the ninth. By the time I got to the museum, my friends were gone. I turned around and headed for a dingy Waldenbooks under the El tracks, where I bought the only horse racing book on the shelf: *Commonsense Handicapping* by Dick Mitchell, a computer programmer-turned-gambler. The system that had worked so well on Monday busted me out on Friday, so I figured I'd better learn to handicap.

By the end of July, I was at the track four days a week. That \$150 score had ignited an immediate romance. I had always loved games—dice baseball games, war games, the puzzles in *Games* magazine—but horse racing was the most magnificent game I had ever experienced, because it was *real*. It was played with real money, bet on real animals. And it wasn't a game of chance, like the slots or the lottery or *Let's Make a Deal*. It was a game of skill and judgment, the *Jeopardy!* of gambling. At the track, the odds are not set by the house, as they are in a casino. They're set by the amount of money bet on each horse. The more money bet, the lower the odds. This is known as pari-mutuel wagering, from a French term meaning "among ourselves." Over the long haul, you can't beat a slot machine, but you can beat the races if you're smarter than all the other bettors. I learned what that felt like when I discovered Bonnie Rob running in a turf race at Arlington. He was undefeated at the track, but the crowd was letting him go at 5-1. I bet him to win, bet him in the exacta, and went home with a wad that caused an awed friend to exclaim, "You won *two hundred dollars*?"

Most men wander in their twenties—the Germans call that age the *Wanderjahren*—but mine had been especially rootless. I'd drifted through three colleges, lived in seven cities, and never earned more than \$24,000 a year. But now, finally, I had found my passion.

That August, my editor offered me a promotion to police reporter. I turned him down. The job would have doubled my salary, but it was an afternoon gig, and what good is money if you can't gamble with it? He was disappointed, but he got used to hearing a bugle in the background when I called to talk about the evening's assignments.

When an old friend asked if I was interested in a job in Seattle, I told him I was tied to Chicago.

"Ahhh," he said. "You meet a woman there?"

"No," I responded vehemently. "*Horse racing!*"

In the fall, the Thoroughbreds moved to Hawthorne Race Course, in the polluted suburb of Stickney, Illinois. At Hawthorne, I began keeping a racing log, copying the results from the newspaper into a loose-leaf binder that I carried around the track. After two-and-a-half months, I showed a balance of minus thirteen dollars. Not a blood-bath, but I had to ask myself whether it was worth spending all my afternoons at Hawthorne—a cesspool of cigarette smoke, surly ticket clerks, horse manure, shredded tickets, hot dogs vile enough to burn an inch off your stomach lining, and losing gamblers screaming rabid obscenities at horses and jockeys—if I was just going to lose money. Some days I would devote two or three hours to searching the *Daily Racing Form* for winners and still leave the track with an empty wallet. I was beginning to question the horseplayer's maxim that "the best thing in the world is to win money at the track, and the second best thing is to lose money at the track."

If I was going to win, I decided, I would need a mentor, someone who treated the track as his own personal automatic teller machine. In the winter of 1997, my second year as a horseplayer, I met John Goritz on the second floor of Sportsman's Park, which was right next door to Hawthorne. After the ninth race, most horseplayers chuck their

programs into the trash and slump out to the parking lot. But John was dismembering a *Daily Racing Form* with a pair of scissors, clipping results charts from tracks all over the country. He worked like a tailor at a bolt of cloth, paring away the edges of each page and placing them atop a neatly trimmed stack. He had emptied his backpack, setting out cellophane bags filled with years of *Chicago Sun-Times* racing pages. Half the horseplayers at Sportsman's couldn't even read the *Form*, which was the *Wall Street Journal* of horse racing, with pages of agate-type statistics on every race. They relied on dollar-fifty tip sheets or newspaper touts. But this man was a scholar.

"You've got a ton of stuff here," I said.

"I've been making my living out here for eight years," he told me, working his scissors. "I hit the twin trifecta at Hawthorne for \$24,000 last year. That's the only thing keeping me going. I don't make a lot of money at this. A lot of times I starve."

The scholar was thirtyish, short and pudgy with thinning red hair and the mug of an extra from *On the Waterfront*. He wore a grubby Raiders jacket, an old purple T-shirt, and jeans as baggy as a rhino's skin.

"Come out here tomorrow and I'll teach you how to look at the horses," he said, as he loaded papers into his backpack. "That's the key to this whole game. I used to work with horses, and if you know how to look at them, you'll own this fucking place."

I couldn't meet John at the track that Sunday; the cops towed my car and I had to go downtown to bail it out. But I found him the next day, after the second race, making notations on his *Form* with a red pen. He looked exhausted.

"I was up until five in the morning handicapping the Fair Grounds," he said, referring to a racetrack in New Orleans. I looked down at his newspaper. Every horse's record had been marked up with a private code of ovals, lines, numerals, and letters. "I got home at six o'clock last night, and I spent eleven hours on this."

Sportsman's broadcasted races from tracks all over the country, and John was beating up on three at once: the Fair Grounds in New

Orleans, Gulfstream Park in Hallandale, Florida, and the home track. I, meanwhile, had just lost thirty dollars on Sally's Hero, a bum colt who'd run out of the money in the second.

As the bugle sounded, heralding the horses' arrival on the track for the third race, John yanked on his Raiders jacket and we hustled outside to watch the post parade. My father had given me a pair of Bushnell 15x binoculars for Christmas, and I trained them on the cavalcade of horseflesh.

"Do you see any horses that look really straight, that their legs are lined up really straight?" John asked.

"The 2 looks good."

The horse I was looking at, Danzig's Design, walked as though his spine were an iron rod. No Civil War general's horse had ever looked so controlled, I thought.

"Are you going to bet him?"

"I'm not going to bet this race."

"How come?" John asked, seeming offended that I'd waste his lesson.

"I like Fast Phone, but he's only even money, so he's not worth betting on."

"So bet on the 2," John insisted.

"Look at his record." I spread out my *Form*. "He hasn't been close in his last three races."

I ran out to the bleachers to watch the race. Danzig's Design leapt from the starting gate, led all the way around the track, and won by a head, paying \$9.80 for every two dollars bet to win.

Back in the grandstand, I found John sitting with his head in his arms.

"You were right about that 2," he moaned. "Jesus, we should have bet that 2 horse. If we had just bet twenty dollars, we could have won ninety-eight bucks."

For a horseplayer, the only thing worse than losing money is not winning money you should have won, since the sums involved are much larger. John whipped open his *Form* to Danzig's Design's record.

The horse had won a third of his races at Sportsman's. Fast Phone was 1-for-16.

"Look at that. It was obvious. Look how good he does at Sportsman's. He loves Sportsman's."

In the eighth race, I bet thirty dollars on Don't Waste Time, who had won in his first race of the year at Sportsman's.

"See, he loves this track," I insisted, trying to apply the lesson I'd learned earlier in the day.

John disagreed. He liked Notamomentosoon, who figured to take the early lead, and who was running on the drug Lasix for the first time. (Lasix is a diuretic that prevents internal bleeding caused by exertion.) Notamomentosoon jumped to the front of the pack and won by a length.

Now I was out \$142, my worst one-day ass-whipping ever. John tallied up his booty. He'd beaten all three tracks, for \$272, but he seemed more exhausted than excited. He then had to drive twenty-five miles to Balmoral Park in Crete, Illinois, for an evening of harness racing. By the time Balmoral completed its card, he would have spent twenty-nine of the last thirty-four hours either gambling or handicapping.

"I'm starting to get burned out on this," he admitted, as he packed away his charts and notebooks. "I've been doing it for eight years. I don't have a life. I don't even have a girlfriend. All I do is handicap and go to the track. I feel like a bond trader."



That was in February. By March, after a month of John's tutelage, his horseplaying skills began to rub off on me. I was examining horses with a veterinarian's eye. I was taking notes on races. I was cutting out charts and storing them in the satchel I took to the track. My studiousness was rewarded when I hit a spectacular winning streak.

It started on a Friday afternoon in the fourth race. All the touts were pushing A New Way of Life, who had finished second in several

recent races but hadn't actually won in two years. You might as well have bet on the Cubs. I liked the number 7 horse, Bold Jonathan, who had won his last race while weaving through traffic like Jeff Gordon at Daytona.

When the odds came up on the tote board, I swear to God I thought it was my birthday. A New Way of Life was 1-2. This was an underlay of stupendous proportions. (An underlay is a horse whose chances of winning are less than its odds. It's similar to the Wall Street concept of an overvalued stock. Imagine someone tried to sell you stock in Hyundai for \$500 a share. Would you buy it? I don't think so. That's how out of proportion A New Way of Life's chances were to his odds.) Meanwhile, Bold Jonathan was 11-1, while Oconto, another horse with a strong chance to win, was 6-1. I panted after those odds the way the hart panteth after the water brooks in the psalm. I ran to a window, where I bet twenty-five dollars on number 7, Bold Jonathan, and fifteen dollars on number 6, Oconto.

I have saved the chart of this race for inclusion in my posthumous papers. Here's what it says: "BOLD JONATHAN raced in good position from the start, was beginning his rally when he shied away from A NEW WAY OF LIFE in the stretch, exchanged bumps with that rival and was offstrided while coming in a bit late, then prevailed by a narrow margin."

As Bold Jonathan crossed the finish line, I practically dissolved with ecstasy. My skull filled with helium. Then the red neon Inquiry sign on the tote board lit up. Mark Guidry, A New Way of Life's jockey, had complained about the bumping and demanded that Bold Jonathan be disqualified. I ran inside to watch a replay of the stretch run. It was hard to tell who'd started the shoving match, but since Guidry was the winningest rider at Sportsman's, I figured the stewards would take his side. The veteran gambler next to me agreed.

"Looks like that 7's coming down," he said.

The stewards rewound the tape and played it again. And again. The numbers 7 and 4 blinked on the tote board. If the 7 came down, I vowed to leave the track and never again play this rigged game. Then

a fire bell rang, signaling that the result was official. I looked at the tote board: Bold Jonathan's number was still on top, and he was paying off at twenty-seven dollars for every two dollars invested. When I presented my twenty-five-dollar ticket to the teller, he gave me back \$337, my biggest score ever. Yes yes yes oh yes. Say it over and over again, like the last sentence of *Ulysses*. Never had I felt so blessed. I thanked God for creating this world and thanked Him again for putting race-tracks in it.

For the next week, I thought I was the hottest prospect in American handicapping. I imagined I could be like Martin Ritt, the film director who made his living at the New York tracks when he was blacklisted during the 1950s. Betting on horses was going to be a part-time job, a sideline to my writing. Every afternoon as I shouldered my satchel for the trip to the track, I thought, "It's time to go to work." My obsession with horses reached unnatural levels: when the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue came out, I flipped past the bikini shots, looking for articles about racing. At gas stations, when I asked for "ten dollars on number five," my tongue wanted to add "to win." I called my father to tell him, "I'm coming home the weekend of the twenty-ninth. That's when they're having the Dubai World Cup," a lucrative international horse race.

"That's also Easter weekend," he reminded me.

"Is it? I didn't see anything about that in the *Racing Form*."

I conceived a system that was sure to bring me a profit: bet fifty dollars on horses who look like cinches and are going off at odds of 7-5 or better. At first it worked beautifully. That Wednesday, I hit a horse named L'Eric who paid off at 2-1, and on Friday I scored with a pair of 2-1 shots, Laugh Alot and She's Just Winking, putting me up over \$700 since the beginning of the streak.

But then, just as night follows day, just as vultures follow lions, I began losing. Badly. It started in Michigan, during the Dubai World Cup weekend. I wanted to show off my brilliant handicapping to my father, so we drove to a small harness track near Flint that simulcasted races from around the country. Before the fourth at Sportsman's, I announced that Fortunate Wish was a lock and went to the window

to bet fifty dollars. I also bet ten dollars for my father, who believed my stories of horse racing triumphs and trusted me to invest his cash.

Fortunate Wish finished third. My other surefire bet, Pappa Lee, came in sixth, so I was out \$100 for the day. After that it got worse. Much worse.

The losing streak lasted two weeks. After going that long without cashing a ticket, I was nearly deranged. I lost all confidence in my ability to pick winners and was beginning to wonder whether I could make a correct decision about anything. One morning, I stood in front of my closet, unable to choose a shirt. Why get dressed? I thought. I'll screw that up, too.

I was getting tension headaches every time I went to Sportsman's Park. Yet I never left the track without buying the next day's *Form* and searching it for the horse who would get me off the schneid (a losing streak). I wanted a magic insight, like the feverish boy in D. H. Lawrence's short story "The Rocking-Horse Winner," who changes his family's fortunes when he picks the winner of the Epsom Derby. "It's Malabar!" he cries, just before dropping dead.

Eventually I found my Malabar. Allens Alley had stumbled out of the starting gate and then rallied to finish second by a nose. If he got a decent start in his next race, he was sure to win. And, indeed, Allens Alley won by two lengths, at odds of 7-2. A handsome payoff—or it would have been, if I'd been at the track. But Allens Alley won on a day I had decided to stay home and take a break from this game that was tearing down the wall that separated me from madness.

The next morning, when I read the Sportsman's results in the paper, I screamed in anguish. "Mother fuck! The one day I don't go to the track, my horse wins! I haven't had a winner in a week and a fucking half, and now that I finally pick one, I'm not there to bet him. How do you beat this game? How, how, how? Do you have to be there every day of your fucking life?"

The answer to that question, I realized, was yes.

Writing is an isolated, self-absorbed lifestyle, but gambling is on an entirely different plane of selfishness. No wonder everyone I'd met at the track was single or divorced. Charles Bukowski, the legendary

poet/soak/horseplayer, once wrote that any man who can beat the horses should be painting or writing symphonies or making some woman happy. I want to ask, when would he find the time? A career in gambling is worth it only if you are so free-spirited and/or asocial that you can never endure the confinements of marriage or employment. Horseplayers make sacrifices that would horrify the most driven starving artist in his third-floor walk-up, because their goal isn't money or fame, but rather simply to keep playing the horses. John felt he'd pissed away his youth pursuing the skills that netted him ten grand a year.

"The old-timers, the horses ruined 'em, and they're ruining me, too," he said. "I see myself gettin' older and my life gettin' wasted away, even though I make money at it. For \$10,000 a year you could be a gas station attendant or something. This ain't easy. This is hard work what I do."

After Allens Alley won, I stopped trying to gamble for a living. Once I realized that a part-timer couldn't turn a profit, it was an easy decision to go to the track only on Saturdays, never taking more than forty bucks. But I found another way to make money off horse racing. I wrote an article about John and sold it to the *Chicago Reader*, a weekly newspaper that loved stories about esoteric subjects such as bee stings, archaeology, and, as it turned out, handicapping. They ran it on the cover and paid me \$1,200, which I split with John. I had always justified my trips to the track by telling myself, "Hey, if you wanna be a writer, you gotta have something to write about." Now I was vindicated. I continued to write for the *Reader*, covering other seedy male obsessions—fishing, playing with military miniatures, politics—and, eventually, they hired me as a full-time reporter. John drifted away from the track, too. The last time I saw him, he was smoking a joint outside the Hawthorne clubhouse. Later on, I heard a rumor that he'd gotten on the wrong side of a judge in Wisconsin.

The more energy I devoted to journalism, the less remained for gambling. By the turn of the century, four years after I'd first caught horse fever, I was going to the track just a few days a year, mostly for

Feast Days: the Kentucky Derby, the Arlington Million, the Breeders' Cup. Playing the horses had to be an all-consuming passion or it had to be a hobby, pursued with two- and five-dollar bets. My schooling with John had taught me that dilettantes are doomed to lose their money to racetrack lifers. I always wondered, though, whether I could beat the races if I made it a full-time job. Andrew Beyer, the *Washington Post* columnist and high priest of American handicapping, once wrote, "As difficult as it is, anyone who loves handicapping ought to make at least one attempt in his life to do it seriously. Although handicapping can be wonderfully entertaining as a casual hobby, there is nothing quite so satisfying for a horseplayer as the knowledge that he can make a profit from the game."

Most of us have a Life List. Or maybe we have a single ambition, which we have to achieve to feel fulfilled on our deathbeds. Some people have to climb the highest mountain on every continent. Some people have to run an ultramarathon. Some people have to own every James Brown LP on vinyl or decorate their houses entirely in Coca-Cola memorabilia. I had to go back to the track. It may sound like a frivolous way to spend one of the forty or fifty years I had left, but finding out whether I could beat the races was one of the great unanswered questions of my life. I had to settle it while I was still young and single, not when I was retired, beyond ambition, and, God forbid, living on a fixed income that might cramp my betting.

As it happens, writing a book was my other unrealized ambition. I figured out a way to satisfy both: I would write about the year I spent trying to beat the races and all the odd characters I met along the way. The publisher of this volume liked the idea and gave me a \$4,000 advance on royalties. That was my bankroll. If you mean to gamble seriously, you must have a bankroll, a fund set aside for betting. It prevents you from choking on a hot \$100 wager, because you're thinking, "I don't get paid for another week, and I need gas money."

My living expenses were covered because the *Reader*, bless them, agreed to let me spend the year writing a column about the track. It

was just the sort of eccentric project they love, or at least tolerate. On the first Saturday in March, New Year's Day on the Chicago racing calendar, I stepped off the Cicero Avenue bus and walked toward Hawthorne Race Course, my gait quickened by a sharp, unbroken wind and by the delicious anticipation of gambling nonstop for the next ten months.