Chapter 7
Looking Sharp: Watching the Board; Noting Body Type and Body Language

During my summer break from college in 1994, I got a job as a groom at Yonkers Raceway in New York. If anything was going to wean me off this horse-racing kick, it was going to be this job. I was out the door at 4:00 a.m., at the track by 4:45, and at work by 5:00. The work was hard and dirty, and if the barn had a horse in the last race, I wouldn’t be out of the track until midnight. I loved every minute of it. I kept a written list of each horse’s individual quirks, kept my ears open and my mouth shut, and worked like a dog. After a couple of weeks, I earned the trainer’s trust, and he unofficially named me his assistant. One afternoon, before the races, he handed me a stack of bills and a piece of paper.

“Here are the bets that the owner wants to make,” he said.
“Um. Okay.” Back then, I was very garrulous and well-spoken.
“Bet early. Now go.”

I walked up to the grandstand with a huge wad of bills in my hand and a dilemma. Should I take the money and run? With visions of brass knuckles, cement shoes, and broken bones dancing in my head, I decided to enter the track. But why should I bet early? Why was that important? I couldn’t figure that one out as I munched on a hot dog waiting for the row of happy tellers to move into line. There were all kinds of bets on that slip. Pick threes, daily doubles, and win wagers dominated. I felt embarrassed and proud as our horse opened up at 1-9 on the board in the first race. I had manipulated the tote. Obviously, there would be audible gasps of shock by the 80 or so people at the Hilltop, and they would follow the “hot” money. I looked around for the angry faces accusing me of some sort of larceny. I strained to hear the shouts of the gamblers. There were none. All that I noticed was that the horse started to drift up and up. The horse went off at 2-1, broke stride at the start, and hippity-hopped across the finish line. Well, at least it wasn’t my money.

Years later, I finally came up with a theory (and this is only a theory) as to why I was instructed to bet early. What would be the point of waiting until three minutes to post? If my horse was 5-1 at that point in time, and I lowered him to 2-1, then surely the public would react to the “smart money,” and might make the horse even shorter on the board. Since I bet early, I slipped one past the public. They probably thought some boob (true enough) had just bet his savings on a hunch.

I’ve kept a keen eye on the wagering patterns of maiden races, and am amazed at how many “live” horses open at short odds and then drift upward to acceptable prices. These horses usually run very well and often win. Let’s take the case of E. Ticket.

E. Ticket made her debut in a weak New York-bred maiden special weight on May 22, 2004, at Belmont. She was trained by Joe Aquilino, a horseman who didn’t have very promising statistics with first-time starters at the time. E. Ticket had gaps in her published work tab, and although she had a nice pedigree, she wasn’t expected to take a ton of money. She opened up at 2-5. I rushed down to the paddock to get a look at this “wunderhorse.” She looked good, but the most interesting thing I noticed was that Patrick
Biancone, trainer of Lion Heart and many other stakes horses, was down in the paddock, chatting with Aquilino, and giving E. Ticket the eye.

Biancone didn’t have a horse entered until the next race, so it was interesting that he was there. What connection did he have with Aquilino? Was he merely an old buddy looking for a chat or a prospective buyer of the horse? I knew that Biancone had privately purchased New York-breds for Flying Zee Stable, and it was possible that he was looking to add to his collection. Based on the early money, the Biancone presence, and the fact that her opposition looked terrible on paper, I was ready to make E. Ticket the key on all of my tickets. If only she weren’t so short. Before long, she wasn’t. E. Ticket kept drifting up and ended up at 1.70-1. She showed no interest in the early stages of the race, lagged 18 lengths behind the leader on the turn, and was last turning for home. She began to kick in at the eighth pole, but there was no way she could catch the winner, could she?

(Please Insert E Ticket chart Race #3 Belmont may 22, 2004).

It was an amazing performance from a visual standpoint, but the race was slow, and Biancone never purchased the filly. Maybe he never intended to do so in the first place. E. Ticket didn’t become a star, but she was certainly special that day, and the early money should have tipped everyone off that she could run.

I discussed Sun King in the last chapter. After his eye-catching debut at Saratoga, he was entered in a tough maiden special weight at Belmont. Despite the quality of his opposition, Sun King opened at 6-5 and soon dropped to even money. Handicappers seeking “value” started to bet his competition, and Sun King went off at a juicy 2-1. Sun King showed advanced maturity, and a good deal of heart, to win a long stretch duel.

Watch out for first-time starters and lightly raced horses that open up well beneath their morning-line odds. It could be an indication that they are live.

**Body Type and Body Language**

It’s always exciting to go down to the paddock and get a glimpse of a first-time starter. Who knows if the baby that you are eyeballing is the next great champion? In our mind’s eye, we all have a snapshot of what the perfect horse looks like. I have yet to find mine on the track, but there are definitely things to look out for when watching babies prepare for their debuts. Looking at the horses is simply a logical part of the handicapping process. Would you buy a car without first getting a look at the merchandise? The same goes for the Thoroughbred. It is essential to get a feel for the horse on which you are investing your hard-earned money.

**Sprinters**

When looking for precocious sprinters in maiden races, bigger isn’t necessarily better. I like the blocky, linebacker types. Look for a powerful hind end, muscular thighs, and a shiny coat. Look for dapples on the rump.
Routers

While I look for a strong hind end in sprinters, I’m searching for a powerful chest, a long, strong neck, and long legs with routers. Here, I look for the big boys and girls. They will need the extra body mass to handle the longer distances. I love routers that are dappled out on the barrel of their bodies.

Turf

I look for many of the router’s attributes, but I like a broad hoof, and a muscular shoulder. I have also found that several good turf horses not only have the powerful chest of a router, but also have the strong hind end of a sprinter. These traits are necessary in those slow-paced turf routes where the horses begin to sprint from three-eighths of a mile out.

Mud

I’ve never really liked big horses on muddy tracks. They tend to sink deeper in the mud, and have more trouble getting into a smooth rhythm. Downgrade horses that “high-step” when they are walking in the post parade over a muddy surface. They will gingerly place their hooves down on the mud, and quickly pick them up looking for a dry patch.

First-Time Starters

Look for some attitude. I love it when 2-year-olds announce to the world that they’re ready for action with various snorts and battle cries. It’s nice to see them prance around in a rhythm after the jockey gets a leg up. An arched neck is a good sign. Look for horses that are really mouthing the bit. You’ll even see some foam coming out of their mouths as they attack the bit. Once the horses are on the track, look out for the ones that break off into a gallop with speed and intensity. If all else fails, look for the biggest, most physically impressive baby. They are often the ones that have matured quicker than the others.

Some tracks have enclosed saddling areas. Avoid horses that kick at the back of their stalls, and are generally hard to handle. When a trainer has to circle his runner a dozen times in order to get the saddle on, that’s not very promising. Horses that are washed out on the neck on cool days, or have a large amount of kidney sweat between their legs, should be avoided. Keep away from paunchy runners with baby fat, or skin-and-bones types.