

CHAPTER 1

Rule No. 1: Every time the starting gate opens, expect to be humbled.

I was the oldest guy in basic training at Fort Dix in 1953, about six years older than everybody else. Because I was older, I had a little bit of status among the guys. Not much, this is me we're talking about, but a little. I told everyone in the barracks that I was a horseplayer and I loved going to the track. I probably made more of it than I should have. The other guys would listen to my stories about the track all the time.

After basic, you get your next training assignment. I had told them I was a writer and mentioned my interest in radio and ended up getting assigned to special services. On my first day there they had me use this machine to print up a sign. Today it would take about 30 seconds on a computer, but in those days it took time. So I'm working diligently on this sign when the sergeant comes up to me and asks, "Are you Pack?"

"Yeah."

"The colonel wants to see you."

Now, in those days in the army when you were in basic training, you never saw any officers. Your company commander is a captain but in basic you might never even see him. A lieutenant is as high as you get. So I went to see the colonel in his office, and I was terrified. This guy was a lieutenant colonel and he's sitting in one corner. And in the other corner is a captain, a black man named Captain Rhett. Nobody in the country led desegregation better than the military. The army was wonderful that way. But it was still unusual to see a black man with a rank as high as captain.

And I walk in the room and I'm practically shaking, trying to keep it together. I salute the colonel and he looks at me and says, "Mr. Pack, I understand that you were a handicapper in civilian life."

Now, the truth of the matter is, as anybody who knows me will tell you, I am not a handicapper, I am a horseplayer. But I knew that someone in the barracks had leaked this, and if I denied it I'd get him in a lot of trouble. So I told him, "Yes sir, I did do a little bit of handicapping before I entered the service."

He walks over to his desk and slowly opens the top drawer. And in it he's got a scratch sheet, "The Armstrong Daily." It was a nicely printed eight-by-eleven folded-over piece of paper that told you who was running. And then he pulls out his copy of that day's *Morning Telegraph*.

Now I'm speechless. I have no idea what to say to him. It's a good thing I was 26 at this point—if I'd have been 21 I would have fainted. I fumble for words and finally come up with something I think just might get me off the hook: "Sir, I rarely bet a horse unless I'm at the track."

And the colonel takes a long look at me. Then he takes a look over at the captain, who nods. And he tells me, "Be in front of your barracks, Class A uniform, twelve o'clock sharp. The captain will pick you up."

I didn't believe this was actually happening. It was like an out-of-body experience. But I looked at the captain and he said, "I'll be there, Mr. Pock." He never called me Pack, he always pronounced it Pock. I did what I was told and went to the barracks and saw this friend of mine, the one who started this "horseplayer" crap and he asks me where I'm going. I say, "I'm going to the Atlantic City racetrack!"

I get ready and head outside and the captain picks me up right on time: “Get in, Mr. Pock.” We set off for the course, a 40-minute drive, and we start talking. After some small talk, he says to me, “The colonel and I only like to bet favorites. But we need the favorites to be legitimate. All I want you to tell me is if you think the favorite deserves to be the favorite.”

Fortunately for me, that’s something I have always been good at. Over the years, I’ve tried to come up with various handicapping rules, some of which you’ll see at the start of each chapter in this book. Many of my rules are based on the idea of knocking the favorite. You can’t bet a horse who is going a mile and an eighth who’s been going well in sprints if he’s a favorite. You’re throwing your money away because he’s going into uncharted territory. Sure, take a chance if he’s a price, or use him in a gimmick, maybe, but don’t throw money away betting horses like that to win. The cut is already around 17 percent—don’t make it any higher by making low-percentage bets on the favorite. Once I understood what the captain and the colonel wanted me to do, I felt a little more comfortable.

We get to the track. And as a race would come up I’d read over the form and we’d go down to the paddock and I’d look at the prices and give my opinion. You’d occasionally see—and you still do—in a maiden race a horse who is 0 for 28 going off at 3-5. Now, that’s the very definition of a bad favorite. And when a horse like that would come up, I’d knock it to the captain. And I did quite well.

I had no money. Most days I’d have with me maybe five bucks. They don’t overpay army privates. I wasn’t able to bet much but it was still a lot better than KP.

As the weeks went by, we went to the track nearly every day. Not every day, but damn close to it. And I continued to do pretty well. Once in a while the bad favorites would win, but most of the time they wouldn't. I would get weekend passes to go home to New York to see my wife, Joy, and on Saturday, I'd go to Belmont. It was great. I'd see my old civilian friends out there and hang out with them all day. They'd ask me about life in the army. "So Harvey, what do you do?" And I'd tell them, "I go to the races."

Of course, nobody believed me.

Warren Fisher, who I knew from hanging out on the roof at the old Belmont, told me one day that he had bought a piece of a horse. Warren was certifiably crazy but a terrifically interesting and funny guy. He loved to drink—rum was his libation of choice—and he had a lot of pet birds, parakeets. You'd go to visit him and there would be birds flying all over the place. His father had a seat on the stock exchange and he was the wastrel son. He eventually got a job with Rogers and Cowan, a big press agency, and he was Marilyn Monroe's escort around New York when she came into town. Nice work if you can get it.

Warren tells me, "We may be running at Atlantic City soon." As a guy who had heard the same line from any number of people, I just told him, "Good luck."

A week or so later, I'm at the track with Captain Rhett. I look in the program and I see that horse. Warren is not listed as an owner. The horse is under some dummy name because Warren was a dummy. I said, "Captain, my friend has a horse in the last race today."

And the captain says to me, "Really, Mr. Pock? Which horse?"

And I tell him the name and he says, "That's a longshot."

“I imagine so, but maybe I can get some information from my friend.”

He says, “We’ll see.”

It comes to the ninth race and we go down to where the horses enter the paddock and there’s Warren. He’s with the horse, actually walking him in. He’s dressed like a groom in his jeans and his dirty T-shirt. I shout out, “Warren!!”

He looks right through me, doesn’t see me at all. And I realize that the man has never seen me in an army uniform and he doesn’t even recognize me. So I say, “Warren, it’s me, Harvey.”

“You were *serious*. You really *go* to the races every day.”

That was the first shock. Then I get down to business: “How’s your horse?”

He gives me a little conspiratorial smile and says, “Today’s the day. We’ve been stiffing this horse for the last two months. We’re going to really try today.”

I feel in my pocket, and due to a couple of losing bets earlier in the day, all I’ve got is a buck. I ask him, “Can you loan me any money?”

He takes two tickets out of his pockets and says, “That’s all I have. My ticket and a bus ticket to get home.”

At this point I’m convinced that Warren is serious. I realize that this might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And while I had never done this before, now I have to convince Captain Rhett that this horse is worth betting on and that he needs to lend me money to bet it myself.

I sidle up to him. “Captain, today is the day.”

“Really, Mr. Pock. Look at your friend.”

And I look over at Warren again and I see the captain's point. There he is all disheveled and poorly dressed and he looks like a bum. Then again, what was he supposed to do, wear a tuxedo to walk his horse in? So I make my case.

"You have to understand, sir, these are cheap claimers. The favorite here has no class. This horse might not be as out of it as he looks on paper."

I ask the captain to loan me some money and explain that I only have a buck.

"Well, Mr. Pock, you and I will share a bet on your friend's horse."

The problem is, the bet he wants to share is for \$2. Do I even need to tell you what happened? The horse wins by the length of the stretch and pays \$46. I get my cut, \$23. Normally, that'd be a good day for me. But I'm furious because if the captain had loaned me \$10 I'd be up a lot more. On the car ride home, I'm debating whether or not to go to Leavenworth for killing him. And we're driving up to the base at Fort Dix and he starts speaking, more to himself than to me.

"All my life going to the racetrack, I've been dreaming that one day, something like this might happen to me. But I ignored Mr. Pock."

Now I'm creeping over to the other corner of the seat, just hoping to get back alive. The captain, who had always seemed a normal guy, starts rambling on about seeing a snake on the side of the road and being cursed and about what an idiot he was for not listening to me. The whole thing was just bizarre with this guy talking to himself about me and I'm sitting right there. But we did get back alive and we made a few more trips out to the track after that, but that was pretty near the end.

A few weeks later I got called in and the colonel tells me, "We can keep you here at Fort Dix or we can put you in pipeline." Pipeline meant I'd be reassigned somewhere

else in the country. And you know something? I felt scared at that point. As much fun as I was having, I just didn't think I should be going to the track every day. It felt like there was something wrong with the whole situation and I wanted out. So they put me in pipeline and off I went. It was the right decision. I stayed in touch with my friend who had started this mess. And he told me that shortly after I left, there was a big investigation. The inspector general found out about how the colonel and Captain Rhett chose to spend their time. The colonel was demoted to master sergeant and sent up to New England to a recruiting division. Captain Rhett escaped unscathed and the last I heard he had made major. I never saw or spoke to either of them again and I moved on.