

BETTING REVOLUTION GATHERS PACE



With BRUCE TEAGUE

DO you know that in 1991-92 department stores accounted for 26% of all shopping centre sales? Today, according to Shopping Centre News, they generate only 15% of the total. That has absolutely nothing to do with greyhounds but it does show what a changing world we live in. And, like most things in life, betting patterns have changed, too. In recent times, both Win and Trifecta bets have become a problem.

Overbetting on favourites is distorting the markets by cutting Win dividends to sometimes impossible levels.

You can see this in the TRACKSTATS produced by the Greyhound Recorder every month or so.

Figures for 11 NSW TAB tracks include a success rate for odds-on favourites. Most of those are between 40% and 51% but a luckless three - Gosford, Lismore and Nowra - are in the 21%-25% bracket.

A check of the last 300 races at Albion Park confirms these trends - it averaged a 48% success rate for odds-on pops.

The average starting price of an odds-on favourite is close to 4/6 (\$1.67) which means you would need a 60% hit rate to break even. Clearly, many punters are forgetting about value, particularly in NSW which has a much longer history of licensed social clubs and therefore more people fitting in to

the "poker machine refugee" category.

On the other hand, if the market has picked a false favourite then backers of other dogs will be enjoying good "overs". So there still is some reward for skill if you can pick the right moment.

Trifecta betting trends are harder to pin down. The TABs are coy about releasing detailed information.

Even so, recent years have seen the arrival of fresh ways of investing a dollar or so in the hope of a large return. Flexibets, Quadrellas and First Fours/Pick Fours encourage gamblers to outlay small amounts while Mystery bets don't even require them to write down the runners' numbers.

In fact, a few years ago TAB Ltd claimed a Melbourne Cup (for horses) Trifecta dividend was relatively small because an astonishing 75% of successful punters got it by using a Mystery bet.

The computer picks Mystery dogs by mixing up short and long priced runners, its main feature being a Trifecta box of three runners.

Consequently a significant number of investors will always end up with the winning combination, whether it includes a so-called bolter or not. In fact, especially if it includes a bolter.

The effect of these random picks is to destroy an age-old maxim of Trifecta betting - that favourite combinations will be underbet and longshots overbet.

It used to be that less

knowledgeable fans would happily pick a few outsiders in the hope of a windfall prize.

Just like the lottery. That left the more likely winners as "overs" to be enjoyed by hard-nosed pros. It just doesn't happen that way any more.

Anyone outguessing the market by correctly inserting a talented but wrongly priced runner in their combinations is often duded when they find the dividend is only a fraction of what they expected.

So, too, when the favourite only manages a place but the dividend is still poor because it has been included in all those boxed bets. Reports from the gallops suggest similar problems there, too.

Is there a fix? Maybe, but not overnight.

TAB mergers and bigger pools will widen the market and open up opportunities for new and bigger punters to come into the industry.

The long promised introduction of a national form database will be good, too, allowing form students to better analyse trends.

But, clearly, a massive education program is needed to help newcomers and make up for those long-lost souls who once frequented racetracks, learning on the job.

Where do you look for them?

Hard to say without research but you could make a good start by looking into stockmarket haunts where many keen punters lurk. Much better to advertise there than preach to the converted on SKY.

EMPIRES CHALLENGED

The other likely influence on betting patterns is the TAB takeover battle.

It's just taken its first casualties – people suffering from the on-going barney between the two big Sydney galloping clubs, the STC and the AJC, and the SKY-TAB Ltd combine. There's no telling where this will end but it's bound to alter the future somehow.

NSW galloping fans missed out on race pictures for the Golden Slipper, the AJC Derby and Lonhro's farewell race because the parties failed to agree on new contracts and SKY pulled the plug. SKY has been paying the galloping clubs several million dollars a year for those broadcast rights, in contrast to greyhound clubs which have to fork out for the same service.

But the picture is now getting even cloudier.

TAB Ltd has booted out Darwin's Mark Read and his IASBet bookmaking organisation. It cancelled his \$30 million annual account after he stretched the friendship too far when he reportedly copied TAB Ltd odds and sold them direct to his own customers.

Read's own costs are way below those of the conventional TABs because he pays only modest commission to the Northern Territory Government and nothing at all to the clubs generating the

racers.

Mainstream clubs, at their choice, are now losing in three ways: the continuing surge in Betfair's Internet betting exchange business (said to have been \$350,000 on the Golden Slipper alone), turnover going to Northern Territory bookies (such as the losing \$5 million punt on Lonhro), and an unknown amount to illegal SP and overseas bookies (e.g. in Vanuatu – where, interestingly, UNiTAB has some involvement).

(Editor's Note. More and more of these Internet betting sites are springing up all the time. One such site has just opened on Norfolk Island. It is www.austote.com)

That diversion has the major galloping clubs and some State Governments wringing their hands and crying foul.

It's perfectly reasonable for race clubs to be concerned about the lost turnover. After all, it's by far their major source of income. However, it's hard to be sympathetic to the anti-progress policies some adopt or to the monopolist positions of the TABs. All spend too much of their time furiously lobbying Governments to ban the intruders and too little attending to their customers' real needs, preserving the empire rather than moving with the times and planning for the future. Again, lessons from the horrible mess created in Rugby League cannot be ignored.

Notably, the powers-that-be (which meant mostly the old guard headed by Sydney's Ken Arthurson) tried to rubbish the attempts of the one of the world's biggest businessmen to get involved.

Love him or hate him, Rupert Murdoch was never going to go away - nor did he!

Racing's current attitude to Betfair, to "foreign" bookies and to customers generally shows all the signs of repeating that episode. Governments are hoping the newcomers will go away, or can be legislated away, but they're living in fairyland.

Changing course is the only option when the community jumps ahead of traditional business practice. For example, department stores like Myer and David Jones have been learning that the hard way. Declining profits forced them to recast their strategies, their boards and their management teams to satisfy their shareholders and, even then, they still have some way to go.

What the racing industry needs most in the future are fewer monopolies and more competition. Legal competition will best help raceclubs but if that's not available you can bet your bottom dollar that punters will use illegal channels. They always have.

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