



op/ed

by byron rogers

KEEPING THE GAME SIMPLE

I'm a simple guy. I swear. My Mom said I never understood why my sister took forever to decide what to wear out on a Saturday night. I worked on the basis that if what you said when you opened your mouth didn't make sense, then the best clothes in the world wouldn't help you at all. It helped when I opened my mouth--I could sell just about anything, but the idea was I kept it simple and did alright.

It suits me fine to keep it simple (stupid). I should know. After all, it doesn't matter how long-winded an answer I give on why a pedigree is well structured. It invariably boils down to answering the question, "Is it an 'A+' or not?" People just don't have time for detail these days. We are time-poor, and brevity and ease is the key to getting anything sold or indeed done. We just want an answer; a simple one we can process and make a decision on without too much thinking. While every aspect of our lives seems to move towards making it easier to make a decision, there is one business that has not moved with the times--betting on horseracing in North America.

If one could design a more arcane, mystifying and obtuse system specifically designed to annoy customers, both present and future, than the current American betting system, I have yet to witness it. Quite simply, there is no way that anyone could have done a better job in creating a system that is less likely to take the wagering dollar off customers at North American racetracks than the one currently in operation. What should be simple is actually made quite hard.

Let's start with the way you find out what a horse is going to pay. The favorite in a race posts up at 6-5. Now, I once worked for a bookmaker so I know what this means, but to the average or new player, the one who grew up with a calculator at hand and who never had to do fractional mathematics (or at least forgot a long time ago), what hope do they have? Why do we create a system that requires that the customer understands that 6-5 means that for every dollar they put on they are going to get \$2.20 back? Does the average person walking through the door, the new customer, the one that we need to turn from fans into either bettors or owners (or a combination of both) immediately know that when they look up at the screen? No. Will the average bettor in 10 years know? I think not. While I can hear everyone groaning about educational standards, let's leave that for another column and live with reality.

How about we make it easy for a new player (you know, we kind of need some of those) to comprehend and post \$2.20 next to the horse instead of 6-5. I for one would like a little peace and quiet when I am deciding who to lose my money on rather than having some pimply teenager ask me how much he is going to get back if he puts a dollar on a horse at $\frac{1}{2}$ (my answer is usually "your money is better invested if you buy that blonde over there by the bar a drink.")

That gets me to the next point. Who was the mathematical wizard that said that you display results in \$2 dividends? Were they smoking crack when they came up with that idea? Seriously, since when did that make sense? It was clearly designed by a technician who wanted to make his life a little easier rather than someone who knew a little about the customer using the service (apologies in advance to the guy that actually did design it but I suspect he is long gone). Sure, once you have been to the track 1,000 times you get used to it, but why should we make getting used to it something akin to a rite of passage for new players? How about something simple. You put a dollar on, you can see what you are going to get in return and that is what is displayed, all to a one-dollar base. Nice and simple.

Finally, as I said earlier, I like to keep it simple, which sometimes translates into mental laziness. It's a bad habit I know but hey, we all have those, right? But here is a simple difference between what is called designing a product to lose a customer and designing one to keep one. I like to play trifectas. It is my thing. I have various plays--standing out horses, wheeling, you name it. One thing I never think about is how much it is going to cost me. Bad habit, I know, but I work on the theory of getting the horses right and then worrying about how much I have to spend.

Not long ago I walked up to the window at Keeneland with a trifecta bet and after punching the ticket, the teller pleasantly replied, "That will be \$240, sir." Me being me, going into the last at Keeneland, I only had \$200 left as I was desperately trying to get out of trouble. I looked at her in despair. "But I have \$200 in my wallet which I want to give over to you," I thought to myself. With less than a minute to post, I couldn't be bothered reworking the elegantly designed trifecta, nor beg the guy behind me for \$40 as he looked as though he was in the same predicament, so I moved along to watch the race and then wished I hadn't when it got up and paid a juicy \$1,600.

Here is the point. Go to Australia and ask for the same bet and the teller will say, "No problem, sir." She will take my \$200 gladly and give me a ticket back which says I have the dividend, whatever that may be to one dollar, 8.33 times. I wouldn't have altered my combinations--the computer just would have worked out how much of the bet it could have for me.

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I bet as much as I want to, not what the mathematics dictates I have to. It is pretty simple--get the money out of the customer and make it simple to do so. There is the difference: in Australia, the pari-mutuel got my money. In America, Caesar got a big tip at the local Mexican restaurant when he taught my four-year-old son to say, "bring me more beers" in Spanish.

Fred Pope may have it right when he says the system is upside down as far as how it compensates racetracks, but I feel there is a greater problem. We have a growing generation of gamblers who used a calculator at school, and which doesn't have the time to handicap properly and who just wants to gamble and have fun at the racetrack. Sure, they are not the big players today, and some might argue 'why should we change something for them?' but these are the entry level players that may (we hope) turn into bigger players or owners in time to come. Surely we should make it as easy as possible to understand how to bet? Unfortunately, they are walking in and being presented with a system of betting that requires complex explanation. How many are we turning away by default simply through their own ignorance and lack of understanding of what appears to them as a complex presentation? Why would we do that in the first place? It is almost like we designed a system with the intention of turning new players away.

Rightly or wrongly, this game is propelled and funded by both betting and a love of the horse. If we have any hope of attracting new fans, players, owners and the like to our game and having them fall in love with the horse at the same time, we need to make playing the game one thing to start with. Simple.

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