



op/ed

by barry irwin

HOW 'BOUT THEM OWNERS?

Rick Dutrow has officially been banned from the game for a decade. Interestingly, like the notorious American miscreant Al Capone, Dutrow was knocked off his perch not by what people suspected he did, but by technicalities. Capone was not sent to prison for murder, but famously for tax evasion. Dutrow has not been suspended for using illegal practices as many suspect him of, but for lesser infractions.

Now that the poster child for corruption in horse racing has left the building, it is time to focus on the owners that send horses to cheaters.

After all, cheaters can only be in business if owners send them horses.

In the world of confidence men and women, there are the wise guys and there are the marks, or squares. The con men and women in the Thoroughbred racing world look at the vast majority of the owners as their personal property, soft targets that are there merely for the taking.

But it is the tiny percent of owners that are the enablers that allow cheaters to steal from the square owners by employing methods to bilk the marks from a fair chance to win purse money and important races.

The con men conspire to tilt the playing field in their direction by using illegal methods and substances to make their own horses more effective in races, thereby gaining a significant advantage.

In the major racing centers, con men have set up shop to run rough shod over their competition for their own gain and that of their enablers.

Basically, there are two types of trainers and there are two types of owners.

One type of trainer wants to take an edge; the other type wants to win by following the rules.

One type of owner wants to win at all costs; the other type wants to win on the up and up, because only by winning in a legitimate fashion can he or she achieve any personal satisfaction.

Con men and enablers can only survive by taking an edge in a game where they are allowed to. Steps were successfully undertaken to remove the high-profile Dutrow from the game for 10 years. Now it is time to deal with the enablers.

Let's look at the mentality of the enablers, those owners that seek out trainers they know or suspect are taking an edge. Many legitimate competitors of enablers know who cheating trainers are because every time there is a power shift among cheaters, these enabling owners move from one cheating trainer to another.

Many of the enablers not only understand that their con men trainers are taking an edge, but some of them most likely further enable them beyond merely giving them horses to train by assisting in helping them acquire the tools of their trade.

Some other owners that send horses to cheating trainers suspect and hope that the trainers are taking an edge, but they never discuss this with the trainer, because they want the benefit of winning with an illegally enhanced horse without the bad vibes or stigma that might go along with pure factual knowledge of the practices employed by the con men. They want the credit for winning without getting their hands soiled.

There are plenty of enabling owners that want the benefits of winning, winning a lot and winning big, and being feted, lauded and admired for having good horses, without any peer, newspaper reporter, television interviewer or race course presenter calling the legitimacy of any of their wins into question.

There are some high-powered, high-profile owners in the game that, both past and present, enable con men to thrive, and some at a very high level of racing.

On the rare occasions that an enabler is questioned about why he or she chose to use a trainer that for all outward appearances seemed to be intent on taking an edge, they invariably answer in the same manner.

"The guy's horses have been tested on a regular basis, his barn has been raided and nobody has found anything."

It reminds me of the remark proffered by one Big Jule, the character in *Guys and Dolls* who took the ultimate edge in the game of craps, which he occasionally played with dice that had no spots! Big Jule, of course, was the lone player that saw the spots and he called them out during a game of craps. He verified his legitimacy by proudly citing his record of "33 arrests and no convictions!"

One need only invoke the name of Lance Armstrong to refute any protestations of innocence based strictly on drug testing.

Look--those of us that compete at a high level in racing know which trainers want to take an edge. Legitimate trainers know who they are as well, as over the years some have complained to me about losing an owner to a cheating trainer. If the owners and trainers that want to play the game on a level field can identify the cheaters, then it certainly stands to reason that the enablers that employ the cheaters can identify them as well.

Perhaps the best-equipped professionals available to determine which trainers are taking an edge can be found at the Ragozin Sheets and ThoroGraph. Len Friedman of The Sheets and Jerry Brown of ThoroGraph produce data that provides clear evidence in a quantitative fashion as to which trainers are able to outlandishly improve performance on a consistent basis.

"Occasionally, a big figure is produced by a trainer that I classify as an outlier," said Brown. "But when I see a high frequency of unusual move-ups, it is a red flag."

It's time to call out the enablers. It's time for the owners and trainers that play by the rules to call out those that make it possible for cheaters to thrive in racing.

It's also time for members of the media to stop glorifying miscreants that in private they assail but in public they hail.

Let's put some peer pressure on the enablers and the con men and women that day in and day out bring our game into disrepute among horseplayers and the public.

When mentioning this idea to a racing professional recently, this person said the problem is that some of the enablers have a huge investment in the game and some of them have infiltrated the highest echelons of power within the sport. This person said that if all of the enablers disappeared tomorrow, racing would be hard pressed to continue presenting the sport on its current scale.

My answer to this is "rubbish."

I think that there are plenty of would-be owners or owners that have scaled back that would pick up the slack, because I know that owners have left the game because they have given up trying to beat the cheaters. This is not something exclusive to Thoroughbred racing; it has happened in other racing sports, both equine and human.

The long-term answer to all of this is Federal legislation, which carries with it the promise of Federal Bureau of Investigation involvement. If the FBI trained its enhanced surveillance techniques and investigative skills on racing's backstretch, they would break up the illegal drug trade once and for all.

In the meantime, I think it's time for those in racing to put some pressure on the con men and women and the enablers.

It would be nice if we could get some support from racing secretaries and racetrack owners, some of whom favor the numbers of horses they get from con men and women over the bad publicity brought to bear by the presence of cheaters in racing.

And it would be nice if the media stopped propping up the miscreants and rewarding enablers with their attention.

In closing, I would like to address a question that is certain to pop up: Why have I chosen not to name names? The beauty of this exercise is that I don't have to name names. These names are a matter of record and can be accessed at the database of any service that provides the names of owners that have had horses conditioned by a particular trainer.

If readers cannot figure out which trainers to check out, perhaps these readers are not as interested or involved in the sport as they may think.