



Outline Of Theory For Equine And Human Survival In Racing

"Prove all things, hold fast to that which is true." Thessalonians 5:21

Depending on one's frame of mind, training racehorses might variously be described as a vocation, a livelihood or an affliction. In fact, it is a fascinating combination of all three. Few professions provide a similar sense of euphoria when things are going well, but the many frustrations involved can often seem a heavy price to pay. Strangely enough, most trainers actually seem to feel that the highs still outweigh the lows. However, they also tend to lose sight of that vital middle element, which is that the exercise is supposed to generate at least enough money, on a regular basis, to enable the stable to be run in a proper manner.

It is proposed to examine closely the process of training both the racehorse and those who attend to him. As we shall be following certain basic precepts of horsemanship, these notes may also prove of interest to readers who do not necessarily come from a racing background. In an acknowledgement of the fact that the text may at times appear a little long-winded, and does occasionally go off at a tangent, the oral tradition of this subject is pleaded in mitigation. The deviations may prove of general interest and may also be thought to lighten the overall tone. The use of the term 'we' throughout is intended to emphasise the widely ignored fact that both trainer and owner of a racehorse, not to mention lad and jockey, are supposed to share a common goal - success!

A professional trainer should be as aware of all expenditure as if he were spending his own money. Unfortunately, this approach is not, in many cases, welcomed by the very people

whose money is at risk. The widely repeated notion that an owner would appreciate an accurate estimate of his animal's ability, or lack of it, is in most cases extremely inaccurate. Many owners will go to great lengths to avoid confronting the fact that their Pegasus cannot in fact fly. Small wonder, then, that the 'Treat owners like mushrooms: keep them in the dark and smother them with bullshit' theory has been so widely and enthusiastically adopted by trainers and owners alike.

Someone has famously said that racing is a game where the trainer has the experience and the owner has all the money, with the game being over when the trainer has all the money and the owner has the experience! Most owners do sail through their racing lives losing money hand over fist and fail to absorb even the most elementary understanding of why that is happening. Indeed, very many owners enter and soon depart the sport with little understanding of what racing is, or at least should be, all about. This sorry state of affairs is so prevalent as to be accepted as the norm. It can hardly be an ideal philosophy in recruiting for long-term participation in the sport, as the ultimate disenchantment factor is predictably high. Fortunately, it is relatively simple to implement a more practical and no-nonsense approach, and it is proposed to explore such a course of action here.

Horse racing, particularly in Britain (because of the low prize money), must be regarded as a very high-risk undertaking, but that risk can be considerably reduced if owner and trainer agree to embark upon a joint strategy of exploiting each and every horse to

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*Daylami, arguably Godolphin's best runner, was bought from his breeder, The Aga Khan. Frankie Dettori up.
(Photo courtesy of Leslie Sampson)*

his maximum potential, and eventually disposing of him to the greatest possible advantage. To have any chance of doing this, they must adhere strictly to a predetermined plan of damage limitation and should never attempt to justify lost causes, either to themselves or to each other. For this seemingly simple plan to work, the trainer needs also to be able to assume that his early recognition of those members of the string not likely to make the grade will be appreciated and that the gaps in the stable strength will be soon filled. Sensible culling must not leave the trainer too short of horses to make a living, or there is little incentive for him to recommend it.

A realistic owner will recognise that, in most cases, a great deal of his loss is made up

of training fees. Those fees are far better spent on fresh prospects with some chance of success than on further confirming the fall in capital value of failures. Enormous amounts of money are wasted simply because very many owners seem unable to grasp this basic precept. This irrational approach seems particularly likely when a homebreeding programme is involved and, for this reason, such ventures should never be allowed to become numerically too significant a part of the stable if we hope for above average success.

Anyone advocating a homebreeding scheme as a basis for a competitive racing stable need only examine briefly the workings of the world leader amongst owners, the Dubai-funded Godolphin operation. Although they have

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access to the produce of the most expensive stud operation ever known, their predominance as a racing stable depends to a very great extent on their continually buying 'made' horses in from outside, with the added consideration that this also effectively removes those athletically proven purchases from the ranks of opposition. If the Maktoum band of excellent broodmares cannot apparently produce enough classy runners to keep Godolphin at the forefront of the sport, there seems little sense in any ordinary breeding programme. The homebreeding-to-race experiment has been carried out repeatedly and, as the results are freely available, we can accept that it is very unlikely to prove effective.

The Aga Khan might be the exception to prove the rule, but the strength of his organisation did not come about overnight. Rather, it evolved over several human and many equine generations.

Perhaps it may be as well at this point to deal with the obvious argument put forward by breeders, that every successful runner was, in fact, bred by someone. However, if there was any sure way of predicting that horse's success, his breeders would have kept him to race themselves, whether they were a commercial operation or not! Homebreds would be exactly as viable as yearling purchases if they were approached in the same way, that is if something like 75% of them were rejected at the yearling stage as physically unlikely to succeed. Taking into account the wastage that will have taken place even before that point, breeding to race is a statistically senseless exercise. It can easily be imagined what the total expense over a long period of time might be of trying properly to implement such a plan, and many exponents delude themselves sadly over the real price of their fantasy. The true cost involved in training unproductive siblings, added to an unwillingness to sell at the optimum time those animals that do show some ability, is astronomical in terms of both finance

and frustration. Quite apart from the cost to the owner, any trainer accepting a disproportionate number of homebreds should resign himself to the fact that, however healthy his monthly cash flow might appear, his chances of major success are severely compromised, purely because the quality of the intake has not been determined by physical examination.

Harry Hieover, in his 1851 publication *The Pocket And The Stud*, scathingly compares homebred horses to homemade sausages and homebrewed ale, remarking that, "The chances are that those who partake of either delicacy will wish they had been made a thousand miles from home!" This writer is well worth seeking out for his humorous and practical slant on many equine matters.

In fact, not only should we take this hint seriously as far as homebreds are concerned, but there is also a strong argument for adopting, albeit at a more modest level, the Godolphin policy of acquiring made horses after someone else has done all the spadework and buried the casualties. It is always well worth paying a premium to get the right item. A stable that believes in its own ability to produce runners should never be afraid to take on selected horses that have already proven their ability.

Buying foals in the expectation of their becoming productive racehorses is safer than breeding, in that we can at least see what we are getting. Although my brother Dick O'Gorman did select the smart trio *On Stage*, *Fayruz* and *Pacific King* for the stable as foals, such young animals are very much liable to change radically for the worse in the ensuing 12 months. Judging foals is a specialist and high-risk area and, as a general rule, the nearer to his actually entering competition that we commit ourselves to owning a racehorse, the greater should be our expectation of success.

It is unrealistic for any owner to set out with the expectation of actually making money in racing. However great his success in his own field and however much business acumen he may

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Ascot, winner's enclosure scene - the object of the exercise. Mac's Imp (USA) led by George Aitken and accompanied by jubilant connections Tom Mohan and Michael McDonnell after The Coventry Stakes. Alan Munro up. (Photo courtesy of Kenneth Bright)

bring to bear, the Sport of Kings has many pitfalls. The naïvety of many owners leads to a distinct suspicion among racing professionals that Big Business may not, in fact, be particularly cerebral. A more realistic aim is to play this exciting and challenging game for the long haul, to accept the inevitable lows and to hope to prevent these from becoming disasters by applying a sensible policy based on the laws of probability. Although a serious and professional approach is essential, that does not imply the need completely to abandon basic sporting principles. Scattergun attacks and running horses with a view to their future handicap mark seem currently to be the most commonly adopted

procedures, in spite of the fact that both policies have serious financial drawbacks if properly examined. We should actually expect to achieve a more satisfactory outcome by adopting more traditional values than by following the procedures currently adopted by the majority of the opposition. The satisfaction resulting from being competitive in Group races and at Royal Ascot with inexpensive animals will far outshine the inevitable low spots. Major successes are not an unrealistic aim and, as long as all eyes are kept firmly on the long-term objective and the laws of probability used to advantage, it should be possible to generate enough income from sales to remain in the game with that end in mind.