

A FAN'S VIEWPOINT

Horse Racing Not “Sinful”

BY WILLIAM B. JOHNSON

As a fan of Thoroughbred horse racing, I have been writing to officials in the racing industry for years trying to encourage them to do something to promote the sport. John Van de Kamp's editorial appearing in *The San Francisco Chronicle* last summer was the first statement to that effect, and a much-needed one.

That article states that the so-called “sin tax” on horse racing should be reduced in California because it presently is so high that horse racing is at a competitive disadvantage. The sport has been suffering as a result. The editorial goes on to explain that we don't want to damage the sport because it has given so much to the citizens of the state. I agree. It also might help to point out that the sport is not, as might be generally perceived, so “sinful” as to deserve punishment, at least in relation to other sports.

I learned something about this while working as an editor for a law book publishing company. I was working on a series of legal annotations for illegal bookmaking. During the course of the research, I read all the published court opinions in the United States involving prosecutions for bookmaking offenses. In most of the cases, evidence introduced by the prosecution represented bets on football, baseball, and basketball, **not horseracing!** In other words, in the area of illegal gambling, football, baseball, and basketball appear to be more “sinful” than horse racing.

The fact that people bet more often on football, baseball, and basketball is supported every year by the Nevada casinos, who report that the sports books take in about five times as much as the race books. When it comes to illegal gambling, there have been published statistics showing that the ratio might be as high as 20 to 1. Obviously, people bet on what they think they understand, and the public is relatively uninformed about horse racing.

There is information available that will put horse racing in perspective with respect to all forms of gambling, whether legal or illegal. There is information that will show there is far less “fixing” of the outcome of events in horse racing than in other sports. Finally, there is information available that will put problem gambling, and particularly problem gambling on horses, in context with other various addictions. People manage to become addicted to alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, shopping, chocolate, eating generally, sex, work, browsing the internet, and numerous other activities that give immediate pleasure and relief from the pain of having to deal with the problems of life.

A recent example of the public status of horse racing occurred in connection with last year's Triple Crown. If Silver Charm were to win the Belmont, there was speculation whether Bill Clinton would invite Bob Baffert to the White House, as he has done with winners in football, baseball, and basketball. The prevailing thought was that Clinton wouldn't because of the gambling associated with

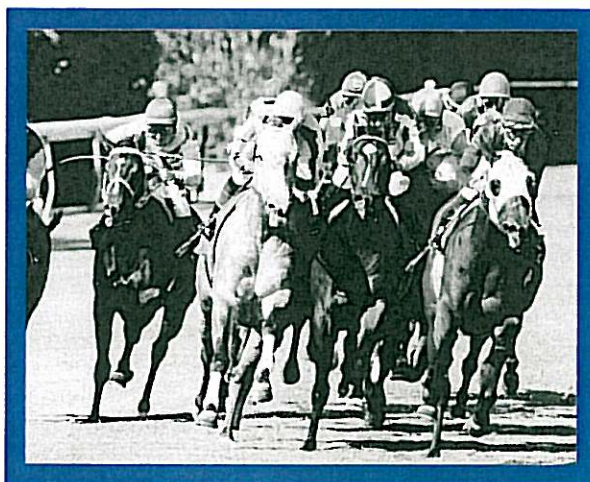


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Thoroughbred horse racing.

If the public knew that there is more gambling, particularly of the illegal type, associated with other popular sports, then deserving people like Bob Baffert, Gary Stevens, and Bob and Beverly Lewis might make it to the White House some day. Moreover, it will be hard for the righteous members of the National Gambling Impact Policy Commission to single out horse racing, when it is such a minor part of whatever problems might be associated with gambling.

All in all, horse racing is magnificent entertainment. Moreover, it allows its followers to participate, via the placing of legal wagers, which economically drives an entire industry. How can this be sinful?

Former attorney William Johnson is a freelance writer for legal publications, and has authored several articles on the subject of illegal bookmaking. He has been an avid horseplayer for 20 years. 🐾