

# THE *Bluffer's*<sup>®</sup> GUIDE TO

# HORSE RACING

THE  
5 MILLION  
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SERIES



'Utterly brilliant,  
wildly funny  
guide to racing'  
JILLY COOPER



NEW TITLE

THE *Bluffer's*<sup>®</sup> GUIDE TO

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**HORSERACING**

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'I'd rather have a goddam horse.  
A horse is at least human, for God's sake.'

JD Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

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## THE START

Chasing foxes and servants can only keep a man entertained for so long. During the late eighteenth century, with no French Revolution to remove their heads and duels falling out of favour, English aristocrats increasingly occupied themselves by seeing whose horse was the fastest.

Speed was of the essence and, by mating their mares with exotic imported stallions – namely the Byerley Turk, the Darley Arabian and the Godolphin Arabian – aristocrats found themselves galloping faster and faster. Eventually, in 1780, they reached Derby.

They would have reached Bunbury but when the Earl of Derby and Sir Charles Bunbury tossed a coin to decide what to call a new race, at Epsom, Derby won. Over a century later, if Bunbury had still been alive (he wasn't) he might have been consoled by his appearance in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As it was, he was consoled by winning the first Derby with a handsome chestnut called Diomed.

The important thing to remember is that every

thoroughbred horseracing today is a descendant of either the Byerley Turk, the Darley Arabian or the Godolphin Arabian. The bluffer might usefully, and nonchalantly, remark, 'Of course, there isn't really much difference between any of them. They all come from the same three stallions, historically.'

This should be enough to spark off any attendant bloodstock expert and, while he or she delivers a long and complicated monologue, all that is required of the bluffer is to adopt a knowing and superior air, nodding occasionally.

## **THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

If a horse seems to have a lot of body near the front, it is worth speculating in approving terms on the likely size of its heart and lungs. Just as a car with a 2000cc engine is more powerful than a 1000cc version, so the size of a racehorse's heart affects its performance.

A big heart, known in racing as 'an engine', is a good thing. The two greatest Flat racehorses, arguably of all time (because there's always an argument), Secretariat and Frankel, both had exceptionally large hearts. Secretariat's heart weighed about 21lbs, well over double the average. Like Frankel, he had 'a tremendous engine'.

Yet, with a racehorse, the heart of the matter is not so much the heart as the legs. It doesn't take a degree in anatomy to figure out that they have a fundamental design flaw.

Having started off, in the proverbial mists of time, with five toes on each foot, the thoroughbred somehow

managed to lose four of them, leaving it with only its middle toe to stand on. If that isn't bad enough, it has ridiculously thin legs.

Whereas most creatures use their legs to move around, the thoroughbred racehorse uses his to give sleepless nights to his owner and trainer, and a lucrative occupation to members of the veterinary profession. The expression, 'He's got a leg,' although at first sight both obvious and reassuring, upon closer examination turns out to be shorthand for 'He's got a leg but it's got something wrong with it. I haven't looked at the other three yet.'

The bluffer will always be on sound ground when asking, 'How are his legs?' The same thought will have occupied most of the trainer's waking hours since he was first issued with a licence. During brief intervals when the trainer is not worrying about his horses' legs, he is feeling them, because he knows they can't be trusted. No trainer's wife has as much attention paid to her legs, however fine, as the most knock-kneed horse in the yard does.

If the legs in question are fine and dandy today, they are only one false step away from being put in the care of a veterinary surgeon for the next month. Wherever a stone is to be found, a racehorse can be relied upon to seek it out and step on it.

At heart, the thoroughbred is a collection of parts which, when working in harmony, present one of the finest sights known to man. It is a pity that they are most in harmony when the horse is standing still.

Wonderful though the thoroughbred racehorse is, it has

an unfortunate predisposition to commit suicide, with the occasional murder thrown in. Even in its stable, it cannot be relied upon not to self-harm, being prone to be 'cast in its box', meaning that it is lying down and either can't or won't get up. This may be because he is due to race at three o'clock that afternoon at Catterick, or because he has got stuck. When you try to help him up, he is liable to injure both himself and you. Someone else will have to call the



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doctor and the vet. As the horse is more highly valued than his trainer, the first call will be to the vet, whose bill will be bigger than the doctor's, with more scans and sophisticated treatment to be arranged.

Obviously, things become more dangerous when a racehorse emerges from its box. In the outside world, the opportunities for mayhem are almost infinite. Suffice it to say that if an outing to either the gallops or a racecourse is completed with both horses and humans intact, it has been a good day, and an unusual one. The trainer might even get a decent night's sleep.

He or she will need it, because tomorrow the horse will probably have 'got a leg'.

That is why one of the most admired features of a racehorse is its ears. Not only is it rarely necessary to summon a vet to examine a horse's ears but, pricked up and alert, they give a horse's head a noble air. The horse stands there, staring into the distance, ears erect, a magnificent sight, ready to be photographed. When it puts its ears down, it means that the photographer is about to be bitten.

If you still think you'd like to own one, it's time you trotted along to the sales. More on this later.

## **WHAT THIS BOOK WILL DO FOR YOU**

Horseracing is a maze. People have spent lifetimes trying to find their way around it, even out of it. The bluffer hasn't got a lifetime to spare and, when he finds himself on the spot, this short but definitive guide offers invaluable help.

It sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about horseracing and to equip you with the vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and techniques that might even allow you to be accepted as a horseracing expert of rare ability and experience. But it will do more.

It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that, until you read this, you probably didn't know the difference between a handicap and a hurdle.



‘He’d better be good.’

*Demi O’Byrne, after bidding  
\$16 million for The Green Monkey*

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## IS THAT A BID, SIR?

Imagine that you are Alice, the one in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and have just fallen down a rabbit hole, emerging to find yourself in a strange land full of strange creatures and strange happenings. The land is divided into territories, with names such as Tattersalls, Goffs and Keeneland. You have entered the fantasy world of bloodstock sales. A strange word, bloodstock. A strange word in a strange land.

Alice was probably not dressed for the bloodstock sales, and you should not dress over-smartly yourself. If jeans are good enough for Sheikh Mohammed, ruler of Dubai and the biggest racehorse-owner in the world, then they are ideal for you. No suit, no tie, no outward sign that you are an enormously wealthy big player, or could be if a horse appeared that merited the attention of your discerning eye.

The bluffer will need a sales catalogue to clutch and examine studiously, and a pad of small yellow sticky labels. Place the labels at intervals throughout the catalogue, so that they poke out intriguingly from the edges of the pages. Then write notes on the labels and pages. 'Two pints of

semi-skimmed milk', 'cough mixture', 'fetlocks?', '£400,000 max'. That sort of thing.

At Keeneland, a beautiful venue in Kentucky, USA, blessed with lovely trees and birds, vendors with their yearlings (horses in the calendar year after the year of their birth) stabled in the barns supply drinks and snacks while you express interest in Hip (alias the lot number worn on its hip) 345. You ask to see the horse and stare intently as it is trotted up and down. Write a few more notes in your catalogue: 'big bum', 'white blaze on nose not straight', 'excellent cookies'.

At Tattersalls, in Newmarket, it is worth leaning against the railings as the horses are walked around behind the sales ring, ready to enter it. Each horse's lot number is displayed on a label stuck to the horse's backside, a bit like an apple in a grocery store, but more expensive and less popular for eating.

A knowledgeable look is the main requirement for the bluffer, perhaps reinforced by the occasional mutter: 'long pasterns', 'short back', 'over at the knee'. There are several horses walking round, so the chances are that at least one of the things you say will be right. With horses, so much is a matter of opinion. The bluffer is always of the opinion that his opinion is a match for anyone else's. After all, some of the most respected bloodstock agents in the world have chosen some real turkeys, which is what they might as well have been.

Many's the horse bought for 150,000 guineas as a yearling and sold, several slow runs and many thousands of pounds

in training fees later, for 1,500 guineas. The agent, as well as taking five per cent in commission, takes such setbacks bravely in his stride, asking his client, 'Are you game for another go, sir? Only I've just seen a lovely Oasis Dream, and I think we might get her for 300,000.'

That's what they say when describing a horse: an 'Oasis Dream', a 'Galileo', a 'Montjeu'. If Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, appeared at Tattersalls (she probably won't), they'd say she was a Michael Middleton.

## THE ART OF BIDDING

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, there is the Mad Hatter. In the sales ring, there is the Mad Auctioneer, waving his hammer. At Tattersalls it goes something like this:

*Who will give me 300? A tremendous filly. I'm selling now. You wouldn't want to miss out on this. Thank you, sir. Do I have 350? 350 it is and you won't regret it. Round it off now at 400. Well done, sir.*

(That's 400,000 guineas, or £420,000 in the real world.)

At Keeneland it might go more like this:

*500 now, who'll give me 50 more for the Giant's Causeway? Texas gentleman 575, oh he's good. Who's going to help me? Help yourself too, at 700.*

(That's \$700,000.)

Not that \$700,000 is worth paying much attention to. Clapping doesn't start until \$1 million, proper clapping until \$2 million, and a bit of cheering to go with the clapping

at \$4 million.

There's the horse; there's the man cleaning up behind the horse; there are the bid spotters, spotting bids; and there are the bidders, bidding for themselves; and then there are the agents, bidding for others, with their money. No one waves his arms and shouts, 'Cooeee, over here!' It's just a blink of the eye, a nod of the chin, a flick of the catalogue, a poker player's flat face.

At the yearling sales, egos and empires collide to periodically produce gripping eruptions, during which the law of demand and supply, particularly demand, puts up a spectacular display while the law of diminishing returns is ejected from the building.

That's the law that states, roughly speaking, that if you pay \$4 million for a yearling rather than \$2 million, the extra \$2 million will barely improve the chances of it being able to run fast. Not that a million or two is worth fussing over.

Famously, at Keeneland in 1983, Sheikh Mohammed paid \$10.2 million for Snaafi Dancer. Sent to trainer John Dunlop, Snaafi Dancer proved too slow to race. Sent to stud, he proved too infertile to be persisted with. He was discreetly retired to a farm in Florida.

Fortunately for Sheikh Mohammed, in 2006 he lost a bidding battle with Coolmore, John Magnier's Irish breeding and racing empire, for the right to own The Green Monkey, an unraced two-year-old who had shown himself to be very fast over one furlong (a furlong is 220 yards, an eighth of a mile). Unfortunately, there aren't any races over

one furlong.

Demi O'Byrne, in the Magnier corner, and John Ferguson, in the Sheikh Mohammed corner, slugged it out until, finally, O'Byrne made the winning bid of \$16 million. Randy Hartley and Dean De Renzo were pleased. Seven months earlier, they had bought the colt as a yearling for \$425,000.

Sadly, \$16 million turned out to be about \$16 million more than The Green Monkey was worth. Injured in training, he finally appeared on a racetrack as a three-year-old in 2007, but after losing three times, for which he earned \$10,440, he was retired to stud in Florida, where he is available for sexual services for the modest fee of \$5,000. He's not complaining.

Buying multimillion-dollar, or -pound, yearlings is likely to be beyond the bluffer's reach, but bidding for them is not. A few investigative probes will establish the lots likely to attract the big hitters and, when the auctioneer invites bids starting at, say, 100,000 guineas, it is time for the bluffer to enter the fray, with a calm wave of his catalogue.

Having entered the fray, the bluffer will quickly leave it, his job done. 'Yes,' the bluffer can confide later, several times, 'I tried to get the Galileo myself, but I was up against Magnier and Sheikh Fahad. He went for 3.6 million, and I wasn't prepared to go quite that far.'

There is always the second-hand sales, officially known as the horses in training sales. They are for horses that someone wanted once but doesn't want anymore.



‘A racehorse is an animal that can take several thousand people for a ride at the same time.’

*Anon*

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