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LEARNING FROM THE 1960'S

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LEARNING FROM THE 1960'S

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Learning from the 1960's

In 1965, Hollywood Park's attendance peaked at an average of 34,516 fans for a 55 day spring-summer thoroughbred meeting. Yet, in order to increase interest in racing, the racetracks of California decided they needed to study the trends in fan support of racing. They commissioned a Stanford Research Interest survey which was completed in the winter of 1966. That study is one of the few studies on racing which still remains of interest today.

The study found that there were three classes of people who in general didn't go to the racetrack. These were: (a) the occupational elite i.e., professionals, (b) college graduates, and (c) young adults.

It wasn't that horse racing depended on the poor. The lowest income groups were underrepresented at the racetracks. Up to a point, income and racegoing were positively related. Proprietors and managers went to the track; professionals didn't.

The barriers to racing's growth were the public's general negative attitude towards racing, and the overall complexity of wagering on horse racing. The public "condoned with disinterest" horse racing. The study found that racegoers received no recognized direct or intangible benefits that contributed to a racegoer's prestige or social standing.

The study worried about the effects of suburbanization on racing. Families with children didn't go the track, and "track crowds are perhaps more urbane than most suburbanites have now become used to." In fact, the study fretted that "much of what suburbia represents today is the antithesis of the style of life best suited to support racetrack pari-mutuel wagering." In short, racing risked becoming out of phase with American society.

So what has changed in racing in the 40 years since the report? Almost all the trends have been negative for racing, and Hollywood Park now averages 7,801 fans for its spring-summer meet.

First of all, let's all finally understand that the issue of young people at the track is of limited practical significance. When racing was at its most successful, the most underrepresented group was 20 -29 year olds. 60 to 70% of all racegoers were 40 years or older in 1966. 70 to 75% of all the regulars at the racetracks were 40 or older. When racing was at its strongest, its fans were old. The graying of America ought to be an opportunity for racing. The number of Americans over 65 is projected to increase by 147% from 2000 - 2050 while the overall population is projected to increase by only 49%. This can only help racing.

The other demographics are bad. In 1966, only 10.2 million people over age 25, (representing 9.8% of the over 25 population) were college graduates. That figure now stands at 51.7 million representing 27.7% of all Americans over age 25. Assuming that higher education remains negatively correlated to horse racing interest, then these numbers cannot help racing.

A further problem is the growth in the occupational elite. The number of professionals has been on the rise significantly over the most recent decades. There were 870,000 doctors in 2003 compared to 467,000 in 1980. The number of attorneys nearly quadrupled from 1950 – 1995. Social commentators may complain about sprawl, Wal-Mart, and Applebees, but people clearly want to live in the suburbs.

Growing up in a middle-class suburb in the 1960's, you could see this trend. There was a clear divide. The professionals in the neighborhood (teachers, accountants, and engineers) didn't go to the track. The track people were the salesmen and the small business owners.

So we've had the negatives of higher education levels, growth in professional jobs, and increased suburbanization. Has anyone done anything to override these trends to provide some measure of prestige to racegoing or made handicapping less complex?

The short answer is no. While there are an increasing number of good high-end products for regular handicappers, nobody has made handicapping less complex for beginners. Racetrack programs look like Sanskrit to newcomers at the track. As racetrack attendance has decreased, there has been a diminished media focus on racing and even less opportunity for people to learn how to handicap from the media.

On the prestige issue, racing has probably been helped in small measure by greater public participation and approval of gambling activities. At the same time, these added gambling activities in the form of casinos have provided gamblers with the kind of prestige that the racetrack doesn't normally give them. People brag about going to Foxwoods or Vegas frequently; nobody brags about frequent trips to Aqueduct or Hawthorne Park. Except for Del Mar and Saratoga, racing there's no social status in going to the track. Moreover casinos and lotteries – while they have destigmatized the act of gambling – have provided the simple gambling tools in the form of slot machines and instant tickets that racing has been unable to provide. People might not have understood horse racing, but they wagered on the races when horse racing was the only gambling game in town. Now you can walk into a convenience store and bet simply and quickly.

So what can racing do? It can't change the demographics. Nor can it begin to instantly make racing a prestigious sport. The first task ought to be demystifying handicapping. Let the Daily Racing Form, Bloodstock Research, and sheets people fight over the high end bettors.

Create a program and an experience that does not intimidate novice bettors. The past performance line in a harness racing or thoroughbred racing program is meaningless to newcomers. Find a way to present the data in an easier reader-friendly form. The ideal is to make racing into Texas Holdem poker. Here's a game that is more complex than a slot machine – but as seen on TV with a limited number of cards – (We're not following 6 players in a game of 7 card stud.) relatively easy to follow for most everyone. Maybe this is dumbing down the art of handicapping, but the past performance line isn't reeling in the fans. We need to change the whole concept of past performance programs to make them attractive and comprehensible to new fans.

Maybe the lessons of 1966 can still be relevant in 2005.¹

¹ The author wishes to thank Harness Tracks of America for supplying the 1966 Stanford study.