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**A RACETRACKER'S GUIDE TO ELECTORAL  
POLITICS**

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# **A RACETRACKER'S GUIDE TO ELECTORAL POLITICS**

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## A Racetracker's Guide to Electoral Politics

If a modern day DeToqueville, or even ET, descended on the United States today to study American elections, would there be any doubt that they would assume that horse racing is America's favorite pastime? While racetrack attendance may have diminished over the past several decades, the sport's popularity has soared among political commentators and political candidates. In his time, President Nixon was fond of football analogies, but football, no matter how popular it may be in the Nielsen ratings runs well out of the money when compared to horse racing and politics. Politicians and pundits use more horse racing expressions today than any bettor at a racetrack. Racing may no longer be among the major spectator sports, but if you want to be a political participant, you've got to talk the horse racing talk. To make it these days on K Street, you better brush up on your Daily Racing Form as well as the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal – which many might assume to be the major national daily newspaper trifecta.

### Place Your Bets on the Trifecta

First among the political race track expressions is now the **trifecta**. While it's doubtful that many of the trifecta talking teachers of the media have ever played a pari-mutuel trifecta,<sup>1</sup> they have made the trifecta their personal property. The trifecta was popularized by Tim Russert of NBC in the course of the 2000 presidential election. He had John McCain needing to win the trifecta of New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Arizona in order to win the Republican nomination for President.<sup>2</sup> In the general election he had the trifecta of Florida, Pennsylvania, and Michigan.<sup>3</sup> In the recount he had the trifecta of Martin County, Seminole County and the Florida Supreme Court.<sup>4</sup>

Trifectas have become so popular that President Bush has now made it part of White House rhetoric. He stated, "I remember when I was campaigning, I said, would you ever deficit spend? And I said, yes, only if there were a time of war, or recession, or a national emergency. Never thought we'd get -- (laughter and applause.) And so we have a temporary deficit in our budget, because we are at war, we're recovering, our economy is recovering, and we've had a national emergency. Never did I dream we'd have the trifecta. (Laughter.)"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The day after the 2000 election, Tom Brokaw asked Tim Russert "And then we were all saying it's Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania. And talking about a trifecta or a trifecta or whatever it is." Today (7:00 AM ET) November 8, 2000, "Headline: Recap Of Things As They Stand In The Presidential Election."

The point should be that what pundits call a trifecta is actually a Pick 3. A trifecta involves picking the top three finishers in one race in their correct order. There is a priority of finish in the pari-mutuel trifecta. In the pundit trifecta, each of the selections stands on its own without any priority. The pundits are picking the winners of three separate races which is really a Pick 3.

<sup>2</sup> Sunday Today (9:00 AM ET) December 12, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Today (7:00 AM ET) November 6, 2000, "Headline: Presidential Race Still Too Close To Call With Campaign Pollsters For Both Al Gore And George W. Bush Saying Their Candidate Will Win," NBC News: Decision 2000 (1:00 AM ET) November 8, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Today (7:00 AM ET) December 8, 2000, "Headline: Ongoing Legal Battles Over Florida's Election."

<sup>5</sup> "President Calls on Congress to Show Fiscal Responsibility," Remarks by the President at Meeting of the Leaders of the Fiscal Responsibility Coalition, April 16, 2002. See also Remarks by the President at Heather Wilson for Congress Luncheon, April 29, 2002 for a similar trifecta statement.

As we approach the presidential elections of 2004, the trifecta references are starting to mount again. One pundit recently called candidate Dennis Kucinich's singing of three songs "the patriotic trifecta."<sup>6</sup> Most any string of three electoral victories or contests is now called a trifecta. For instance, wins by Republican gubernatorial candidates in Southern states<sup>7</sup> and even wins by Republicans in Oneida County in New York are routinely referred to as trifectas.<sup>8</sup>

If there is one mortal lock in the 2004 presidential campaign, it is that one or more Democratic hopefuls for president will specify a Bush trifecta of failures by citing three items out of Iraq, budget deficits, unemployment, and Al Qaeda. While a true horseplayer might cite to a superfecta of failures, you can be reasonably sure that by one or more Democrats in 2004 will try to hit the Bush trifecta.

One of the problems of the trifecta talk is that it has rendered the more traditional **daily double** prosaic. You just don't see that many references to the daily double in politics any more. Only on the occasions when you need a combination of two votes do you see references to the daily double. The California recall election was an opportunity for the return of the daily double. There were occasional newspaper references to the twin vote - first on the recall and secondly on the installation of a new governor- as a daily double,<sup>9</sup> but the daily double has all but disappeared from political talk.

Other bet types have even less visibility in politics than the daily double. There are relatively few **exactas** in politics these days<sup>10</sup> and even fewer **quinellas**. Nonetheless, one columnist has recently accused a Florida politician of "pulling off a quinella of political queasiness."<sup>11</sup>

### Here Comes Seabiscuit

While trifecta talk still dominates political rhetoric, the up and coming horse racing/ political analogy, thanks to the success of the book and movie, is now **Seabiscuit**. Everybody wants to be the Biscuit; nobody wants to be War Admiral. Almost all the Democratic presidential candidates have referred to themselves as Seabiscuit.<sup>12</sup> Carol Moseley Braun has said, "We've got the Seabiscuit campaign of the season."<sup>13</sup> Dennis Kucinich has said, My campaign's like the

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<sup>6</sup> William Hershey, "A Hardscrabble Candidacy Kucinich's Childhood Poverty Has Played A Key Role In Defining His Populist Politics," Austin American-Statesman (Texas) October 19, 2003, Pg. A15.

<sup>7</sup> Allen G. Breed, , "Republicans Trying To Continue Takeover Of Southern Governor's Mansions," Associated Press, November 1, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Rob Christensen, "Election's Debris Tells Tale," Observer-Dispatch (Utica, NY) November 9, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, "The daily double is Gray Davis being recalled and a new face chosen. What voter could resist such a twofer?" Editorial, Chicago Sun-Times, October 5, 2003 Pg. 31.

<sup>10</sup> One fairly recent example of the use of the exacta in politics came in "Kentucky Law Firms, Road Builders Give to Both Democrats, Republicans," Knight Ridder Tribune Business News, May 11, 2003 Pg 2 where it was stated that "spreading money around to several candidates -- one lawyer compared it to betting an exacta box at the racetrack -- is a ritual that's gotten new life since Kentucky scrapped its system of public financing for governor's campaigns."

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Ruth, "Is Johnnie The Speaker Of The House, Or The Politburo?," Tampa Tribune, October 19, 2003 Pg. 2. It should also be pointed out that the quinella language does often appear in Australian and New Zealand elections.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Janofsky, "Political Points," New York Times, October 12, 2003, Section 1; Page 28.

<sup>13</sup> Id.

Seabiscuit of the 2004 presidential election,"<sup>14</sup> and "Well, I'm kind of like the Seabiscuit of the 2004 elections. I expect to be closing late and doing well."<sup>15</sup> "Seabiscuit - that's me!" John Kerry has told reporters in New Hampshire.<sup>16</sup> One longtime consultant of Kerry's has stated, "John is like Seabiscuit." "He runs better from behind."<sup>17</sup> The New York Times has written, "Some have compared Dr. Dean to Seabiscuit, the thoroughbred who came from nowhere to become the most popular and successful horse to race in the 1930's. But now he is sounding a bit like War Admiral, the Triple Crown winner who for months shunned Seabiscuit's offer for a match race."<sup>18</sup>

Political consultant Peter Fenn referred to Wesley Clark by saying, "If this was Seabiscuit, he is coming out of the gate, bumping around a little slow here."<sup>19</sup> Dick Gephardt said "he felt like the long-shot horse Seabiscuit, and wouldn't let him [a supporter] down."<sup>20</sup>

And it hasn't been just the Democrats who have used the Seabiscuit analogy. The triumph of Arnold Schwarzenegger was viewed as a Seabiscuit saga. "In the end a Hollywood ending was what the voters wanted. The unlikely outsider - the Seabiscuit, if you will, of the recall - galloped home to victory in a classic three-act political drama, bringing to an end months of speculation and high farce in the golden state."<sup>21</sup> Even though Arnold got some of the Seabiscuit treatment, it was his Republican opponent Tom McClintock who spent much of the election comparing himself to Seabiscuit."<sup>22</sup>

There are some problems with all the Seabiscuit analogies. While it is correct to refer to Seabiscuit as an underdog, it's not right to view him and his political corps of Seabiscuit wannabes as a come from behind horse. There's a difference between a closer and a longshot. Seabiscuit may have been a longshot; he was not a closer. In only three of his 33 victories did Seabiscuit not have the lead at the stretch call. In only four of his 33 victories was Seabiscuit worse than second at the second call of the race. He generally pressed the pace of his races. If politicians are looking for come from behind horses, they ought to emulate Stymie, Whirlaway, or Silky Sullivan.

Perhaps most significantly, the politician who most embodies the Seabiscuit spirit is likely to be President Bush. Seabiscuit was a well bred horse who was part of the most prestigious Wheatley Stable. He was trained in his formative years by Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons, America's most successful trainer. Nonetheless, during his time with Fitzsimmons, Seabiscuit was a C+ horse. The same could be said of President Bush. Bred consummately for politics, George W. was a C+ student and businessman. Like Seabiscuit, given a new life with new handlers, (Picture Karl Rove and Laura Bush in place of Silent Tom Smith and Red Pollard.) the underachieving George W. turned it around and became a champion. Democrats might challenge the latter thesis by claiming

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<sup>14</sup> Id.

<sup>15</sup> Lou Dobbs Tonight 06:00 PM Eastern Standard Time November 12, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> "Presidential Pols & Politics; That's a rap for Rev. Sharpton," The Boston Herald, October 19, 2003 Pg. 029.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Farhi, "In Kerry Campaign, Overlaps Chafe; Staffs in Washington and Boston Have Different Visions," The Washington Post, October 09, 2003 A SECTION; Pg. A01.

<sup>18</sup> By Jodi Wilgoren, "Reporter's Notebook; The Ex-extemporaneous Howard Dean," The New York Times, September 15, 2003 Pg. A 13.

<sup>19</sup> Capital Report (9:00 PM ET) - CNBC October 8, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> "Gephardt Campaigns In Cherry Hill," Cherry Hill Courier Post, October 1, 2003, Pg. 1G.

<sup>21</sup> Marion McKeone, "That's The Easy Part Over With," Sunday Tribune, October 12, 2003 Pg. 17

<sup>22</sup> "A Day For The History Books," Orange County Register, October 9, 2003.

that he only became a champion when the stewards - played by the Supreme Court – overturned the placing of the electorate. Republicans could counter that the Supreme Court was simply upholding the decision of steward Katherine Harris.

### The Colored Horses

Dark is still in. Though the use of the **dark horse** analogy has been eclipsed somewhat by the advent of Seabiscuit, political candidates who start off the campaign as outsiders and who are less well known than their opponents are regularly viewed as dark horses. It's as if candidates who lack the charisma to reach the Seabiscuit level remain at the dark horse level. One advantage of the dark horse analogy is that it is hardly confined to the United States. Candidates are dark horses throughout the world including, Canada, the United Kingdom, Russia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Australia. It may be the most universal of horse racing/political analogies. Howard Dean started off as the Democratic dark horse and long shot and has become the front runner.<sup>23</sup>

While Wesley Clark has been the subject of some of the Seabiscuit talk, he most often receives the bulk of the **white horse** treatment. He is the man or the general on the white horse riding out of obscurity to save the day.<sup>24</sup> He has become the Ross Perot of 2004.<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, Clark's former position as a general may give him the diversity edge as he becomes not only the man on the white horse but also the **horse of a different color**. The horse of a different color - which is defined as a "different matter entirely"<sup>26</sup> – vote is likely to go to go to Clark as he appears to be the only current candidate with a minimal background in electoral politics.<sup>27</sup>

### The Horse Race

For years, there have been complaints that the media treats elections like horse races, concentrating on the tactics and strategy of campaigns, rather than on the issues involved in the election campaigns. Horse racing journalism concentrates on the box score of who's ahead and why and not on the implications of the election on the governed. As a fan of horse racing, I'm proud to say that this horse racing journalism is alive and well in 2003. Maybe we can convince David Broder, Maureen Dowd, and William Safire to cover the Kentucky Derby. We've seen close electoral contests described as **two horse races, dead heats, virtual dead heats, and real horse races**. On top of that, we've seen the hand wringing of media overseers complaining about the continuation of **horse race election coverage**.<sup>28</sup> In Philadelphia, they have even developed

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<sup>23</sup>“The Stop-Dean Movement Stumbles,” [CNN.com](#), November 10, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> See John O'Sullivan, “Gen. Clark's Political Baptism By Fire,” [San Diego Union Tribune](#), September 28, 2003 Pg G-1; Joe Klein, “The Savior Complex,” [Time Magazine](#), September 29, 2003 p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> See remarks of Michael Kinsley, [National Public Radio](#), Weekend Edition Saturday, September 20, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> [The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy](#), Third Edition. 2002.

<sup>27</sup> “Clark: Still Answering The ‘Who Is He’ Questions,” [The Hotline](#), September 29, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> See for instance “The do-good contingent says we must eschew the horse race and cover the issues. But the press faces an election, too, and it is far more constant than what the politicians face. We have to win a public vote of acceptance almost every day in order to stay viable commercially.” Richard C. Wald, “The Triumph Of The Image,” [Columbia Journalism Review](#), November, 2003 / December, 2003 Pg. 22

cartoons where Seabiscuit and Man o' War acknowledge that "an election is more than a horse race."<sup>29</sup>

### Kinds of Horses

This rather traditional part of election coverage is likely to benefit from Wesley Clark's presence in the presidential race in 2004. From the start Clark has been described as a **stalking horse**<sup>30</sup> for a Hillary Clinton candidacy.<sup>31</sup> From there, it is a short step for Clark to also be a **Trojan horse** - a deception or a subversive group or device placed within enemy ranks.<sup>32</sup> While the Trojan horse gets scant play in the political press,<sup>33</sup> it is likely that we will see far more citations to this term in 2004. If Joe Lieberman becomes critical of the perceived move of Democratic presidential candidates towards the left, he is likely to be considered the Trojan horse among the Democratic candidates.

The late college basketball coach Al McGuire used to refer to top athletes as **thoroughbreds**.<sup>34</sup> That term is now used on occasion in politics in the same manner that McGuire used it to describe basketball players. A top political candidate is now a thoroughbred.<sup>35</sup>

**Long shots** also abound in politics. The term "long shot" now is almost interchangeable with "dark horse" and Seabiscuit. In fact, there are now times when the terms "dark horse" and "long shot" are used together. For instance, Fox News' Carl Cameron stated recently, "Al Sharpton and Dennis Kucinich were doing a lot of complaining. It looked as though they felt as though they were sort of left out of it, and they were beginning to feel offended, treated as -- as dark-horse long-shot candidates."<sup>36</sup> Muriel Dobbin of the Sacramento Bee even achieved the underdog trifecta by describing Carol Moseley Braun as a long shot, dark horse, and Seabiscuit in the space of one article.<sup>37</sup>

### The Original

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<sup>29</sup>Michael Klein, "Inqlings / Radio hosts to field calls on mayoral showdown," Philadelphia Inquirer, October 28, 2003 Pg. E01.

<sup>30</sup>A stalking horse is a "sham candidate put forward to conceal the candidacy of another or to divide the opposition." The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000.

<sup>31</sup>There are numerous stories discussing Clark as the stalking horse. See for example, Donald Lambro, "Clinton Warns Candidates Against 'Too Liberal' Stance," Washington Times, October 23, 2003

<sup>32</sup>The American Heritage<sup>®</sup> Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000.

<sup>33</sup>Most of the political references to Trojan horses come from non-US sources. See for example, "Two Theories," The Economist, September 13, 2003.

<sup>34</sup>McGuire even called one of his players, Bo Ellis the "Secretariat of College Forwards." See Bob Wolfley, "Al McGuire, Marquette Coach, Dies At 72," Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, January 27, 2001.

<sup>35</sup>"'Abdullah-Najib team unbeatable'," New Straits Times (Malaysia), November 15, 2003, Pg. 3.

<sup>36</sup>Fox News Network, Live Event, October 27, 2003.

<sup>37</sup>Muriel Dobbin, "Only Woman Is Undeterred By Long Odds," Sacramento Bee, November 10, 2003, Pg. A16.

Abraham Lincoln is best known for creating what may be the first of the equine/political sayings. The theme of his 1864 reelection campaign was.” **Don’t change horse in midstream.**”<sup>38</sup> If it was good enough for Lincoln, it’s certainly good enough for today’s politicians. It’s even being utilized as a political saying in Japan where Prime Minister Koizumi recently urged voters not to switch horses in midstream.<sup>39</sup> However, the call to voters not to change horses in midstream didn’t help Grey Davis fight off this recall. Perhaps it will be more useful to President Bush who is certainly likely to urge voters not to switch horses in the middle of the campaign against terrorism.

It is unlikely that the trifecta and Seabiscuit will not have the same political shelf life as Lincoln’s changing horse in midstream. But the fact of the matter is that if you judge the state of horse racing by the use of horse racing analogies by politicians and political pundits, horse racing is no long shot to thrive. It’s an odds-on favorite. In a route race, it may be that the long term value of the Seabiscuit saga to horse racing may be its effect on making the name of a racehorse a staple of American political rhetoric.

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<sup>38</sup> See The Phrase Finder, <http://phrases.shu.ac.uk/meanings/115400.html>. See also The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition. 2002, where the term is defined as to “change leaders or adopt a different strategy in the middle of a course of action.”

<sup>39</sup> Gary Schaefer, “Japan's Ruling Coalition Holds Majority In Parliament But Opposition Scores 'Historic' Gains,” Associated Press, November 5, 2003.