YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO HORSE RACING

By Harvey Mayson
About The Author

Harvey Mayson is a professional sports writer specialising in horse racing and betting. He began working at his local newspaper in the south of England before going freelance to work on sporting publications. He currently works on several top sports betting and odds comparison sites.

His keen interest in horse racing also extends to his work as an equestrian artist, living in the Newmarket area for a year painting and photographing racehorses before moving to his present home in Dumfries and Galloway in 2004.

As a journalist and blog writer, Harvey has covered many of the major international race meetings including Royal Ascot, The Grand National, The Melbourne Cup and The Breeders’ Cup. He is also the proprietor of the online Racing Bookshop and he combines his knowledge of the history of the sport with a keen eye for value.

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Introduction

I first took an interest in betting on horse racing during my college days whilst attending the big May meeting at my local course, Chester. Having been attracted by the colour and action of the sport, I was soon delving into the form and studying the races closely for clues to possible future winners. I am writing this guide for the benefit of a relative newcomer to the sport but I hope that my advice will be of use to more seasoned racing fans.

Horse Racing offers a huge variety of betting opportunities and the arrival of internet betting has given the punter access to racing worldwide. As well as the domestic race meetings, online sports books now cover racing in the United States, Australia, South Africa and elsewhere.

There are two distinct seasons in the UK: The Flat racing turf season from March through to November and the National Hunt season from November through to the following March. The start and finish of these seasons has become blurred since the introduction of all-weather racing and summer jumping but they remain essentially as they were. The focus on the big festival meetings still follows broadly the same pattern as it did 20 or 30 years go.
CHAPTER ONE
AN OVERVIEW
Flat Racing

Although All-weather racing continues all year round, it is the traditional Lincoln Handicap meeting at Doncaster in March that marks the traditional start to the new season. All-weather racing has proved very popular but usually involves the lower grade or specialist dirt horses. The bigger stables do not begin to unleash their better horses until the spring with a view to the classic races and the big summer meetings.

The early part of the season is concerned with the trial races as last season's top two-year-olds reappear along with some exciting new talent. Newmarket's Craven meeting features several important trial races although it is an increasing popular trend to go straight to the classics without a previous race.

The ante-post market on the classics begins the previous season and betting on the Derby and Oaks hots up as soon as the Guineas' are concluded. There are major trials at York, Chester, Lingfield, Newbury and in Ireland to determine which horses line up at Epsom in June.

After the Derby, attention switches to Royal Ascot which attracts some of the best horses from around the world. In 2012 Australia's unbeaten mare Black Caviar famously won the Diamond Jubilee Stakes by a narrow margin in front of a sell-out crowd. The meeting began with the world's highest rated horse Frankel winning the Queen Anne Stakes by eleven lengths. He went on to win his fourteenth and final race in the Champion Stakes, also at Ascot, before retiring to stud unbeaten.

There are festival meetings throughout the summer at Newmarket, Goodwood and York as the best horses compete for Group 1 prizes. The top international prizes are the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe in France and the Breeders' Cup meeting in the United States. European trained horses have been proving increasingly successful for the turf races at the Breeders' Cup and have extended their success to Australia with French-trained horses winning the Melbourne Cup in 2011 and 2012.

National Hunt Racing

National Hunt Racing revolves around the Cheltenham Festival meeting in March with the top stables from Britain and Ireland competing for the championship races over hurdles and fences. The best staying steeplechasers are aimed at the Cheltenham Gold Cup and the top hurdlers compete in the Champion Hurdle. There are championship races for all the different divisions from the Triumph Hurdle for four-year-olds to the Foxhunters for Hunter Chasers.

The only jump meeting that compares to Cheltenham is the Grand National meeting at Aintree around three weeks later. The Grand National is still one of the most popular races in the World as forty runners compete over four and a half miles and some of the stiffest fences in the country.
There are also big prizes throughout the winter, notably the Hennessy Gold Cup, Welsh National and King George VI Chase. These are historic races in their own right and are often the targets of Gold Cup or Grand National contenders. National Hunt racing now continues throughout the summer but the top yards tend to keep a separate team of horses for these meetings where fast ground normally prevails.

**Betting on Horse Racing**

There are no hard and fast rules about betting on horse racing but it pays to follow the sport closely if you intend to make it pay. This way you will acquire a greater knowledge of the sport, familiarise yourself with the top trainers and jockeys and find your own particular method for betting.

Good recent form is often a great starting point and you need to be aware of the other factors that can influence the outcome of a horse race. These include the going (some horses prefer extremes of going i.e. soft or firm), the distance, the track and the draw. You will also need to understand the handicapping system where horses are weighted in terms of ability so that, in theory, they all have an equal chance. There are often good betting opportunities where rapidly improving horses can run up a sequence of wins.
CHAPTER TWO
RACE TYPES
The first thing to learn about horse racing is the different types of races that go to make up a race meeting on a daily basis. The sport can be split into the two codes of Flat Racing and National Hunt Racing and we are fortunate in this country to have top quality racing action all year round.

**Flat Racing**

**Maiden Races**

Horses come into training from the age of two for flat racing and the youngsters start in maiden races. By definition, these types of races are not generally the safest options for the punter although they can be a good source of finding future winners.

The top stables often give their most promising two-year-olds one or two races at the end of the season to give them a little experience. By studying re-runs of these races from courses like Newmarket and Newbury you can sometimes find horses that are very likely to win in similar company next time.

In my experience, backing horses that have run in maiden races at the Grade 1 tracks is the only way to make profit in this type of event.

**Handicap Races**

The basics of handicapping are relatively simple to understand. Each horse is given an official rating that is believed to be a fair reflection of its ability. The handicapper compares form lines through runners in each race to give each horse a rating which then dictates how much weight they will carry in relation to each other. The basic idea is that every horse has an equal chance of winning.

Although these races are difficult to predict, they are still very popular with punters and attract more money than any other race due to their competitive nature.

**Group Races**

The better class horses would have to carry too much weight to run in handicaps and therefore run in listed or group races. These races are to establish the best horse, often at level weights or weight-for-age.

The top level of flat racing is Group 1 and attracts horses such as Frankel and Black Caviar. They rarely incur any penalty for their previous victories so can go off at prohibitive odds but there are still plenty of competitive races at Group level to bet on.

Group Races, also known as Pattern races or Graded races, include most of the world’s important races. Achieving a victory or a place in these types of races is especially important in determining stud values.
The Classics

The five classics are the headline races for three-year-olds. Fillies compete over a mile in the 1000 Guineas and a mile and a half in the Oaks whilst the top colts are aimed at the 2000 Guineas and the Derby. Both sexes can run in the mile and three-quarter St Leger. It is very rare for a horse to win the Triple Crown of Guineas, Derby and St Leger although Camelot came very close in 2012, winning the first two but finishing second at Doncaster.

National Hunt Racing

Bumpers

National Hunt Flat races (or Bumpers) have become increasingly popular in recent years and there is now a championship race at both Cheltenham and Liverpool for this type of event. It is basically a flat race for national hunt bred horses over two miles, originally introduced to give experience to the late maturing types but increasingly competitive as the prize money improves. There are limited betting opportunities in these races as there is very little collateral form to go on but they can highlight some horses to follow over hurdles.

Novice Races

Novice events are the equivalent of maidens in flat racing. Horses can start over hurdles from the age of three and you may well recognise some horses switching from flat to jumps in the winter.

Just as in flat racing, it pays to study the form of novice events at the better class meetings with the big stables running their more promising novices at Newbury or Cheltenham.

Novice chases are possibly the most risky proposition for the punter as horses race over the bigger obstacles, often for the first time in public. By the middle of the season, the better novices will have come to the fore and you can then start to bet with confidence. You do have to be mindful that the fences on some courses are stiffer than others so a horse that has jumped well at Stratford is no certainty to jump round Cheltenham.

Novices can set up a sequence of wins, both over hurdles and fences, and the top novice events at Cheltenham are now very attractive to ante-post backers.

Handicap Races

The handicap system works exactly the same for the jumps as it does on the flat only with a slightly different weight-distance ratio. Many of the top national hunt races are handicaps including the Welsh National, Hennessy Gold Cup and the Grand National. National Hunt horses tend to stay in training for several seasons so you can get to know their ground and distance preferences very well. This helps to assess their chances for the big handicaps through the season.
Graded Races

The top level-weights races in jumping include the Cheltenham Gold Cup and the Champion Hurdle, designed to establish the top chasers and hurdlers in training. There are a variety of Graded events throughout the season over different distances but Cheltenham is the ultimate goal.
CHAPTER
THREE
BET TYPES
**Win or Each-Way**

The most obvious bet is the straight "win" bet. Many professional punters insist that this is the only way to make regular profits but, as anyone who has backed a run of horses finishing second knows, each-way betting does have its merits.

Each-way betting allows punters to get a return if their horse finishes second or third (or fourth in handicaps of 16 runners or more). There are occasions when you fancy a horse to run a lot better than its odds suggest but are not sufficiently confident to say that it will beat the favourite.

**Multiple Bets**

The multiple bet or accumulator is advertised as the way to achieve a big win for a small stake. This type of betting is not entirely for "mug punters" as you can sometimes find some good value doubles or trebles when the individual odds of the horses might not make it worth your while. Accumulator bets are taken more seriously in other sports such as football but remains something of a window dressing for horse racing fans.

**Lay betting**

The ever-increasing popularity of the exchanges has given the average punter the opportunity to play at being a bookmaker, laying horses that he or she does not believe can win.

Picking a horse that won't win is easier than finding one that will but, unless you are laying favourites, the profit margin is quite small. Many punters find it difficult to adapt from backing a horse to win to laying it to lose. Whether or not you try lay betting depends very much on your own particular strategy.

You can also back and lay to guarantee a profit but this is still quite a specialised field and requires a good deal more study than your basic bet. It is not dissimilar from trading on the stock market and I would recommend that you research it thoroughly before dipping your toes in the water.

**Ante-Post betting**

This form of betting does not suit everyone due to the risk of losing your money without the horse taking part in the race. You have to weigh that up against the prospect of obtaining considerably better odds than you would if you waited until race day.

The bookmakers regard ante-post betting as their shop window, helping to draw punters attention to upcoming races and big meetings. There is an increasing trend for bookmakers to offer non-runner-no bet terms from a week or so before the race, particularly for the Grand National, Cheltenham and Royal Ascot. This is obviously a risky market but the availability of
lay betting has made it more attractive, enabling the punter to lay off some of their bet nearer the race to cover against losses.

Many of the factors that you would normally take into account before placing your bet are “unknown” if you bet ante-post. You are not only gambling on the horse making it safe and well to the race in question, you are also gambling on the weather and sometimes the draw. You cannot eliminate all of these factors but you can minimise the risk by at least making sure that the horse is an intended runner.

If you watch an impressive winner of a big race on TV, the bookmakers will be providing prices for it to win another race. It may be a two-year-old that they quote to win a classic the next season or the winner of a classic trial that they quote for the Derby or Oaks. It is always best to have it confirmed that the race in question is their objective before investing your money.

If you read post-race comments such as “depends on the ground” or “that is an option but we might have a better one at home”, then I would err on the side of caution.
CHAPTER
FOUR
STRATEGIES
A Betting Bank

If you are serious about your betting you should make sure that you set yourself a betting bank. Keeping records is essential if you are to have a realistic chance of making a profit in the long term. If you bet purely for entertainment, the occasional win can blot out the many losers that come before it and provide the illusion of success. Only by keeping records and managing your stakes can you really know whether or not you are actually in profit.

Staking

The average punter does not follow any particular Staking Plan but they do know their limits. For example, whether they bet £5 or £10 on a horse may depend on how confident they are or how much money they have in their pocket but they are not going to splash out £50 or £100.

Staking Plans are designed to maximise winnings and minimise losses but any scheme that involves chasing losses should definitely be avoided. Level stakes betting is used to monitor success or failure when it comes to tipsters and any Staking Plan should not vary far from level stake betting.

One plan that is worthy of consideration is a re-investment plan where your profit or loss account is assessed after every 10 or 20 bets. If you are in profit, a percentage of that profit can be added to your stake for the next ten bets or vice versa if you showing a loss. The amount that you re-invest is decided by the average price of your selections as the returns for a punter who regularly bets at 10-1 are likely to be far more volatile than those for a punter betting regularly at 2-1.

Specialise

Racing is almost around the clock these days. The internet means that we can bet on races across the globe with any number of bookmakers, all tempting us with their introductory offers and free bets. You cannot possibly keep tabs on the form for every horse in this country, let alone in America, Australia and South Africa!

By keeping a record of your bets you will soon discover which type of races you tend to be successful in and, just as importantly, those that you are not. Emerging with a profit is as much about eliminating the losers as finding the winners.

You may discover that you are quite an expert at betting in maiden races with a high percentage of winners but have blown all your profits by betting in handicaps. Perhaps your results will indicate that you have a high percentage of winners on the all-weather but struggle with your bets on novice chases. It may even be that you make a profit by being selective through the week but have been giving it all back by betting twice as much on the TV racing on Saturday.
How much time you can afford to spend dedicated to research is down to your personal circumstances. Even a little bit of time spent studying your past results helps to improve your chances of showing a profit in the long run.
CHAPTER
FIVE
READING FORM
The Basics of Studying Form

The days of having to plough through the form book (literally) are long gone with the internet now a reliable source of information for racing fans. The racecards are up in plenty of time to allow you to focus on the most interesting races and calculate your wagers.

The average punter does not need to keep his or her own records of the horses and is happy to check the runners and riders on a daily basis. Whether or not you need to keep notes is down to your own method of betting.

As with most things in life, there is no substitute for experience. The more you follow racing, the more you will understand it and you will gradually develop the ability to assess a racecard in minutes so that you know which (if any) races are worthy of further study. Very few of us have the time or the inclination to go through the form of every race in detail. You may feel that it is worth your while studying the Derby field for several hours but there is a limit to the amount of time we should devote to the lower grade races.

There was a time when it was automatically assumed that the serious horse racing punter would be surrounded by form books or subscribe to a service providing ratings and/or selections. My opinion is that form is so transitory that the only way to follow it properly is on a daily basis. Form books are not necessarily a thing of the past as they are a still a valuable research tool but they are not essential for daily analysis.

One thing that I do recommend is watching the races on television very closely. Even if you don't have a bet, you might spot something during a race that could influence your bets for later on in the day. You can also look out for impressive winners or those finishing strongly in behind. Several online sports sites now offer free video coverage so that you can see the horse's previous races before striking a bet.

The post-race comments are quite precise and will inform you whether a horse was slowly away, hampered and whether it finished strongly or weakened. Although these comments are very professional, they do not always paint a complete picture and it is still possible to spot things that others may have missed.

You may have selected a horse that needs to be held up for a late run but finds itself drawn on the wrong side of the course. The jockey may have had to kick on a long way out if he was left with nothing to race with and finished well beaten. You will know to ignore this run and possibly give it another chance.

It is also worth taking note of quotes from trainers and jockeys after races. They may often indicate a ground preference or suggest a future big-race target. This is particularly important when contemplating an ante-post bet as the bookmakers will quote prices immediately after a race to tempt punters to part with their cash.
**Key Factors**

**Going**

Newcomers to horse racing betting may be a little bemused by the fascination with the going at race meetings but it does have a significant part to play in helping you to make your final selections. The official going can vary greatly from firm to heavy and it is surprising how many horses have a marked preference.

The notoriously unpredictable British weather can change the going very rapidly so you need to be right up-to-date, particularly if you know you are backing a horse with a preference for either quick or slow ground. You can determine their preferences by checking their best performances against their worst and also reading the trainer’s comments in the media.

A sudden change in the going can undoubtedly upset the form. If you have a period of settled weather and the going across the country favours good or good to firm, you can bet with a degree of confidence. If the weather takes a turn for the worse and soft or heavy going suddenly becomes the norm, then you should certainly be very cautious.

**Distance**

**Flat**

The distance of the race is a critical factor in calculating your bets. This is far more important on the flat than over jumps but it is essential that you take this factor into consideration for every race you bet on.

Two and three-year-olds take a few races to find their optimum distance so you will have little to go on. If you see a horse win easily over a mile it is no guarantee that it will prove as effective over a mile and a half. A classic example of this was the Epsom Derby in 2013 where the 2000 Guineas winner Dawn Approach ran far too quickly early on and was a spent force with half a mile still to travel.

By studying the horse’s past races you can get some idea of whether it is likely to stay a longer distance. Comments such as “stayed on strongly” or “never nearer” are obviously more encouraging than “weakened final furlong”. Likewise, if a horse is dropping back in trip you can check back on its previous races to see whether this may improve the horse’s performance.

You also need to combine the distance with the prevailing going. If you believe that a horse “might” stay the distance but the going changes to heavy, the likelihood is that it won’t. Soft or heavy ground puts the emphasis on stamina.
Nothing in racing is an exact science. Six furlongs at Goodwood is not the same as six furlongs at Newmarket. A horse that has winning form over five furlongs may run well at Goodwood over six because of it is a fast downhill track. The same horse may not get home over six at Newmarket because of the uphill finish.

**National Hunt**

The minimum distance for jump racing is two miles. Many horses switch from the flat to jump racing but there is no guarantee that they will stay. There is a general consensus that a mile and a quarter horse on the flat has a chance of proving effective over two miles over jumps. A horse that is a stayer on the flat usually needs two and a half to three miles over jumps to be as successful.

The hurdles and chasers have separate divisions for specialist distances of two miles, two and a half miles and three miles plus. When a horse wins repeatedly over two miles it is usually capable of winning over two and a half but three miles favours stamina over speed.

The young chasing star Sprinter Sacre has been so dominant over two miles that he is likely to attempt three miles in the King George at Kempton. Trainer Nicky Henderson would be far less willing to attempt three miles over a course like Cheltenham but Kempton's flat track gives him a chance of staying.

There are relatively few races over extreme distances during the season but you really want to be certain of your horse's stamina before backing them for races such as the Coral Welsh National or the Grand National.

**Weight**

If you bet regularly in handicap races, you will need to have a basic understanding of the handicapping system. More than half of the races in Britain each year are handicaps including some of the biggest races on the calendar.

The official handicap rating of each horse is determined by a team of expert handicappers at the British Horseracing Authority. The BHA employ an approximate pounds-per-length conversion which is then adjusted for the weights carried. The conversion for flat racing varies according to distance whereas a basic rule of 1lb per length is used for all national hunt races.

For example, for a flat race over five furlongs the adjustment is 3lbs per length. This is reduced to 2lbs per length over a distance of seven furlongs to one mile and is only 1lb per length for all races over fifteen furlongs.

This is obviously not an exact science and the handicappers assess races on visual evidence rather than just the winning margins. A horse may win by half a length without any exertion
from the jockey but the handicapper is not going to be content to allow him to run off a similar rating next time. He will probably put the horse up as though it had won by a two or three length margin.

The object of the handicap is not to prevent a particular horse from winning (although you may sometimes wonder!) but is to give every runner an equal chance. The official ratings are given in the racing press and online and you have to judge whether you think a horse is capable of improving sufficiently to win again off a higher mark.

Horses can incur an automatic penalty for winning a race which is temporary until they have been reassessed by the handicapper. Sometimes their connections may decide to run again quickly in the belief that the automatic penalty is insufficient to prevent them from winning. For example, the horse may be entered in a specific race with only a 6lbs penalty but the handicapper is due to give it a 12lbs rise.

Occasionally you will hear comments about horses not being built to carry big weights. The press do not tell you the relative sizes of each horse and every horse can carry weight so it really needs a little interpretation.

Some horses may not be particularly big but reach a handicap rating that means they are left carrying top weight in their races. If they are then raised in class, they may suddenly be racing off a lot lower in the weights. This is more noticeable in national hunt races where a horse that has been struggling under 12 stone at Stratford or Fontwell finds itself carrying only 10 stone in a better grade race at Cheltenham or Ascot.

**Track**

The huge variety of Britain's racecourses is yet another factor that has to be taken into account. Whilst several of them can be lumped together and described loosely as “testing”, “undulating” or “flat, easy track”, some of them are totally unique. The old saying “Horses for Courses” applies more in this country than anywhere else in the world for precisely that reason.

Take my old local course of Chester as an example. It is a flat, left-handed track of less than a mile. Horses are continuously on the turn from the moment they leave the starting stalls. This track suits horses with early tactical speed. Compare that with a track like the Rowley Mile at Newmarket which is a right-hand track where horses race in wide open spaces with an uphill finish.

There are horses that seem to reserve their best performances for a particular track. Of course, you still have to apply the other factors but a course and distance win is always a good thing to have on your side. I would not necessarily be put off backing a horse if it had not run
at a particular course but a horse with a distinct liking for the track can be worth a few pounds advantage.

You should also make a note of horses that return to the same race having gone close the season before. Every division has a series of big handicaps throughout the year and quite frequently trainers target specific races. You may spot a horse that was fourth or fifth in a big sprint and is going back again with only a couple of “warm-up” races under its belt. If you know that it is has run well over course and distance at the same time of year, then the chances are that it can repeat the performance or improve upon it.

**Draw**

The draw is one of the most unpredictable elements when trying to assess big handicaps. In most cases, you will not have any real idea of which side of the course is best until the day of the race. Even then, this can change if the weather changes during the course of a big meeting like Royal Ascot.

Any established draw advantage is usually indicated on the form for the meetings on a daily basis but this is not set in stone. The early pace can be another important factor so it is sometimes worth studying the full draw. If you fancy a hold up horse and it is drawn in stall 30 whilst the top five or six in the betting are all drawn low, then you might want to reconsider.

When considering ante-post bets, you should be extremely wary of placing your bets if you feel the draw is going to be a decisive factor. The effects of the draw are by no means confined to sprints or mile races. A case in point was the Northumberland Plate in 2012 when a number of the leading horses were drawn so wide that they could virtually be discounted.

A very wide draw on a turning track immediately puts the jockey under pressure to decide whether to chase his mount up for an early position or drop in behind and hope to get a clear run late on. The risk in the first approach is that the use expends too much energy in the early stages to finish his race whilst the risk in holding the horse up is obvious.

The draw can be the downfall of fancied horses in many of the top staying races including the Ebor Handicap and even the Melbourne Cup.

**Pedigree**

The study of the breeding side of the industry is a specialised area and rarely comes into consideration for the average punter. The exceptions are when analysing maiden races or trying to assess a horse’s prospects for the classic races.

To win the Triple Crown of 2000 Guineas, Derby and St Leger, a horse has to show that he has the speed to win over a mile and a mile and a half, and the stamina to win over one mile and
three-quarters. These days the bloodstock market is all about speed and Derby winners are more normally asked to drop back to a mile and a quarter than go up in trip.

Aidan O'Brien's Camelot was a rare exception in 2012 when allowed to take his chance at Doncaster after wins in the first two classics. He was beaten into second by Encke and it is likely to be several years before another colt attempts the Triple Crown.

For those that have the time, pedigree analysis can be very rewarding. Sires can often have progeny that have distinct traits in terms of stamina and going preference. Even when armed with this useful information, there are so many other factors that help to determine the outcome of a race that cannot be regarded as essential learning for the average punter.

**Time**

If pedigree is regarded as specialist then the study of race times or “speed figures” must surely qualify as purely for geeks! I have never found race times of any real benefit and the reasons are simple.

Firstly, the huge variety of Britain's racecourses means that it is very difficult to compare a fast time at one track with a fast time at another. The going is by far the most significant factor in determining race times. Occasionally you will hear commentators gush over a new course record or a new record time for the race. This does not mean that the winning horse is out of this world. It almost certainly means that the going is unusually quick.

If you've ever seen the racing coverage from America you will see that time is given far more respect. They give out the split times during the live coverage to determine whether it is a fast or slow early pace. In theory, the place to be in a slowly run race is at or near to the front whilst a fast run race suits horses at the rear in the early stages. It is basic common sense that it is easier to go past a horse that is slowing down than one that is still quickening.

There are punters who rely heavily on race times to determine the best bets. They compare times of races over different distances on a certain day against the standard times and then factor in the going. They may occasionally find that a two-year-old has recorded a better than average time which suggests that it could be worth following. For me, this is too much study for too little reward.

**Trainer**

There are statistics available for just about anything in sport these days and racing is no exception. A good racing site should provide you with all of the latest stats for Trainers from the largest stables to the smallest.
Not so long ago, this sort of information had to be painstakingly compiled or acquired through a specialist publication. The question is...How much use can we make of all this information? It really depends on your own personal approach to betting.

Personally, I rarely refer to it other than to confirm whether a stable is in or out of form. You can detect patterns but these are very fleeting and they do not go unnoticed by the bookmakers. There are percentage figures on trainer/jockey combinations and trainer stats for every racecourse in Britain. I prefer to find the horse first. If the trainer stats back up the selection then so much the better but I do not regard them as critical.

After you have been following the sport for a while, you will have a general idea about which trainers tend to have their two-year-olds fit first time out and which trainers bring their horses along slowly. Certain trainers are particularly astute at plotting to win a big handicap and the clues are sometimes in the betting market.

Trainers also employ very different methods and you'll get to know them over time. For example, if Mark Johnston runs a horse every week nobody is surprised if it loses the first two and wins the next four. If Sir Michael Stoute runs a horse every week, it is safe to assume that it is not very good.

Many of the leading trainers for flat and national hunt racing now publish updates on the internet or write for a leading newspaper. This helps to keep you abreast of their latest running plans and is all useful information to take on board.

**Jockey**

The standard of jockeyship under both codes is higher than ever but everyone still forms their own opinions on which jockeys they prefer. It may come down to riding style but it is more likely due to a jockey riding a couple of important winners that you have backed.

Basically statistics don't lie, so if a jockey is near the top of his profession and has a good strike rate, you can take it that he's good enough to ride your horse. However, rather like footballers, there are some we like and others we don't.

If a jockey repeatedly messes up, the trainer is going to come under pressure from the owners to get a replacement. As soon as we start following the sport closely we become “armchair experts”. Not only can you take a penalty better than Frank Lampard, you will soon find that you believe you can ride a racehorse better than Jamie Spencer!

I believe that it was Clive Brittain that said that “jockeys are a necessary evil” and that sums them up very well. There will inevitably be countless times when your horse is boxed in, squeezed out, finishes strongly but too late... and it's all down to the jockey.

Very occasionally they will win a race for you that they really ought to have lost. It's all part of the gamble.
CHAPTER SIX

ONLINE BETTING
Betting online has grown rapidly in recent years and is keeping pace with the ever-changing technology to offer a faster and more efficient service than ever before. Whilst the high street bookmakers and telephone betting still have their place, online betting is clearly the way to go.

Bookmakers offer all sorts of enticements to get you to sign up. If you are a newcomer to online betting, then you will be able to set yourself up nicely with hundreds of pounds worth of free bets by opening multiple accounts. Why do you need multiple accounts? Because you will have access to the best prices and obtaining the best prices can make the difference between profit and loss at the end of the year.

There is healthy competition in the bookmaking industry and the special offers and free bets are a bonus to your betting strategy. You will have to read the small print carefully as some bonuses are only paid out if you stake a certain amount of a set period of time. This can also apply to the free bet so do be careful.

Some bookmakers offer a free bet but it has to be a win only bet to the full amount and sometimes you cannot withdraw any winnings until you have staked a certain amount above and beyond your original bet. Most of the offers apply to new customers only but some bookmakers offer better place terms on the big races or price boosts. Sometimes you can get the same price as with a different bookmaker but get your stake refunded if your horse finishes second.

Comparing Prices

If you are hoping to make your betting pay, you simply cannot bet without comparing prices. Most bookmakers now offer a price guarantee that, if the SP is greater than the early price, they will pay out at the bigger odds. I almost never bet at SP. You only need to watch the TV races on a Saturday to see how much the favourites shorten up before the off and then compare them to the morning odds.

I strongly recommend using an odds comparison site and getting your bets on early. You can now bet the evening before on most races at the major meetings. Bookmakers have the feature races and handicaps priced up by 6pm and you need to be quick off the mark to get the best odds. If you follow this policy, I guarantee that you will be amazed at the difference in the SP/early odds and the significance this has on your overall profit/loss.
Recommended sites

If I could recommend only three sites to you they would be as follows;

**Racingpost.com**

Although some of their service is reserved for members only, the majority of the most relevant information for betting on a daily basis is provided free of charge. You can check runners and riders, the latest news and the market movers. Most importantly, you have free access to the form of every horse in training.

**Sportinglife.com**

The Sporting Life provides a scaled down version of the service offered by racingpost.com, but in a more user-friendly format. They have simple-to-read “Fast Cards” and currently provide video form to members of Sky Bet.

**Oddschecker.com**

I have found this to be much the best of the odds comparison sites with a special horse racing section broken down into Flat and National Hunt. I like ante-post betting and this is a great place to keep a check on what is happening in the markets for the big races.