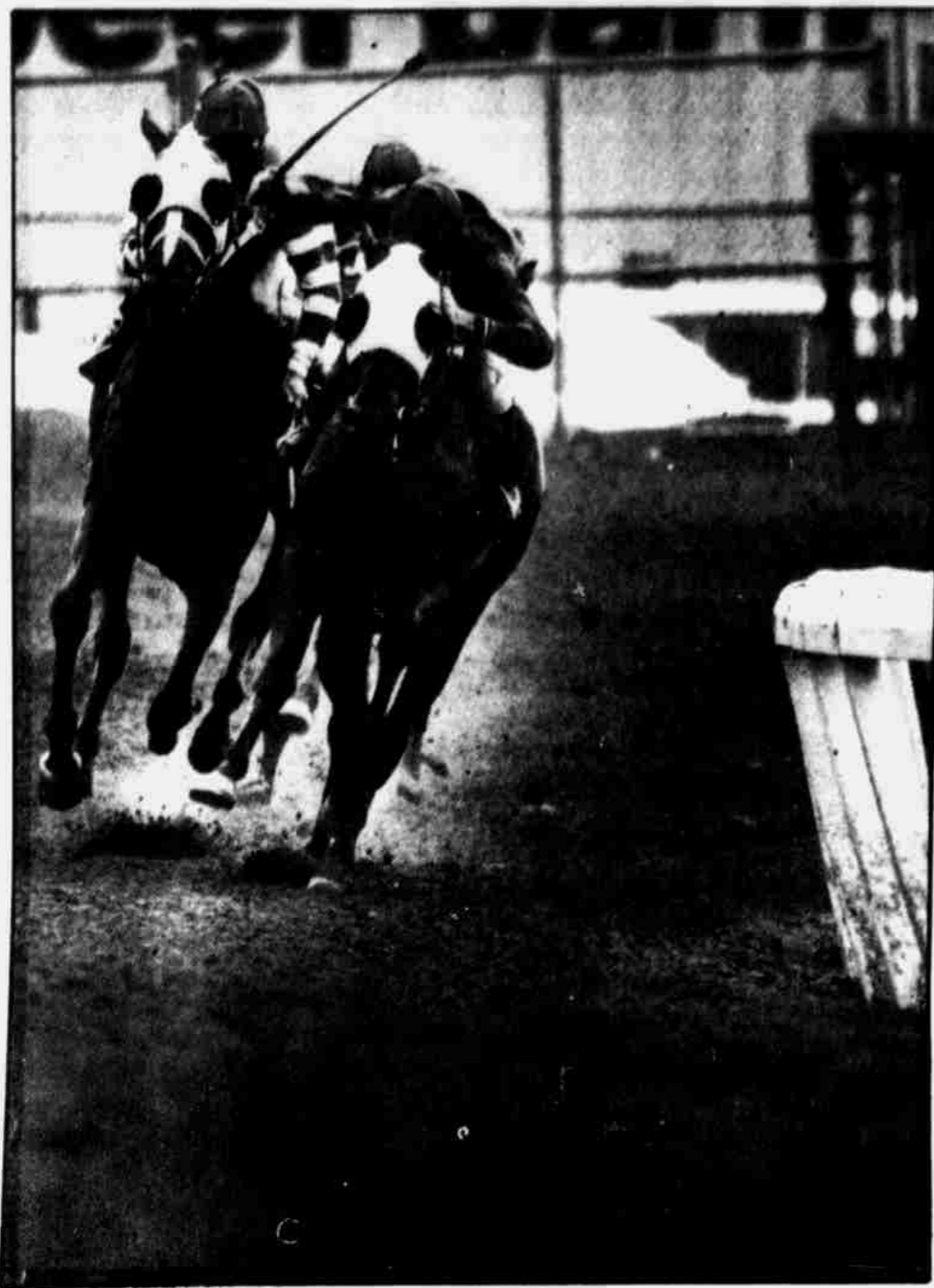
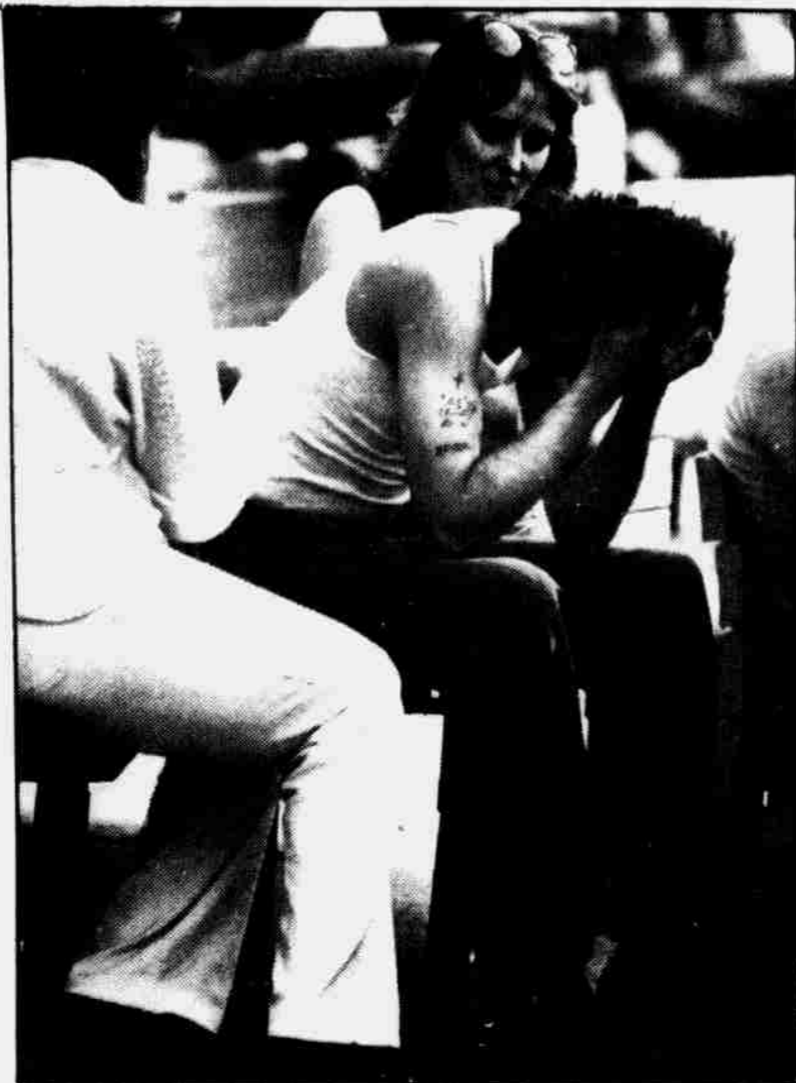


Sports



Clockwise, starting at top left: Two horses battle neck-and-neck as they head down the stretch in a recent race at the State Fairgrounds Track; Race track crew members tend to a horse waiting in paddock; Jockeys at the State Fairgrounds Track wait their turn to participate in the day's races; a day at the races isn't all fun as this fan demonstrates after watching his horse lose; racing fans get a close-up view of the final results by standing near the finish line.



Old Handicapper spends day winning, losing at racetrack

"Do you win?"
 "I always win," the Old Handicapper muttered with a nod of assurance. I expect to retire to Spain soon to write a novel with my winnings."

The Old Handicapper is a well-known media figure, originally based in Omaha, who subsequently has been exiled to Lincoln. He looks every bit the part of a racetrack tout behind his shades — no doubt hiding bloodshot eyes — and the ever fashionable several days' growth of beard.

"The racetrack crowd are my people because the track is a great equalizer," he explained. "It won't be pretty, though."

Representatives of every socio-economic group appeared to be in attendance at the track, ranging from beefy ranchers waving thick wads of bills to black guys wearing see-through shower caps (attention fashion watchers). There were also lots of young longhairs. The dress code includes shades for all, a hat or cap of some sort and a mien of utter confidence while studying the racing form. Their sober intensity may be rivaled only by the new all-quiet-on-the-dorm-front rules for studiousness.

"Most people really do know what they are doing out here. I could study a form the night before and pick out who the crowds will choose as the favorites which should by all logic win," the Old Handicapper said. "But it doesn't always work out that way — that's what makes it a horse race. However, the people who really win big don't know what they're doing.

They pick their age or something and wind up with some outlandish payoffs."

"It pays to watch and see if any of the horses have their hair braided. This means that they could be looking forward to having their pictures taken in the winners circle afterward," the Old Handicapper said. This observation proved to be correct several times early in the day.

By the fifth race the Old Handicapper was well ahead because of some crafty horse playing. The fifth "full of dogs" in the Old Handicapper's eyes, but he decided to go heavily on a 23-1 long shot.

"I had a vision," he explained. The vision must have been a mass hallucination among the crowd as the long shot dropped to a still healthy 8-1 payoff.

"What time does the plane leave for Barcelona?" the Old Handicapper wondered cockily.

From that bit of overwhelming confidence bordering on arrogance, the Old Handicapper suffered a number of business reversals. After several defeats he was reduced to holding his head in his hand mumbling "I'm a hack" inconsolably.

The emotional effect of gambling at the track has an electric quality about it as the tension builds to post time. The drone of conversation builds to a crescendo of squeals and roars. A half hour of boredom for a two-minute buzz. Some winners, more losers. The Old Handicapper won — some.



Photos by Dave Bentz
 Story by Pat Higgins