

HORSE SENSE

Thoroughbred racing requires expertise inside, outside track

HORSES from page 1.

Just a \$2 bet can get you such a quick, rushing jolt of emotions this weekend as the State Fair Park nears the middle furlong of its 9-week run of live thoroughbred racing.

Events run every Thursday through Sunday until July 18. Post times are at 5 p.m. on weekday nights and 1 p.m. on weekends.

Call horse-race gambling what you want: a wonderful series of minute-and-a-half roller coaster rides that reel the imagination, a bunch of cheap tickets to addiction and poor mental health or an activity of people chasing horses instead of dreams.

That's too simple.

Much like the Bible and Christians, fans participate somewhere on a well ladder that measures how deep their passion to thoroughbred racing: Some read race forms like daily scripture, and others dip into the text casually on weekends.

Sam Sharp, a 47-year-old Lincoln High instructor, says he's a once-in-a-while weekend warrior.

Grin on his reddening face and winning ticket in hand, Sharp hoots, hollers and high fives his friend after they picked the first three horses in order to

win a \$2 "trifecta" wager.

He seems to be catching his breath as he approaches the ticket booth to cash his winnings.

"Oh... We nailed it," he says. "It's excitement. But I've had a good day. Sometimes I have a bad one where I lose \$30-\$40 and think, 'Damn. I probably could spent that on something else.'"

Sharp quickly points out his conservative style of betting.

"I'm a nickel and dimer," he says. "I'll usually come out here with a friend for refreshment and entertainment more than anything else. I never really bet very much and it's usually split with my buddy. We win together and we lose together."

Others win and lose alone.

Jack Harper sits by himself on the opposite side of the grandstand from Sharp at the end of the night.

Harper is a waifish, 39-year-old truck driver from Lincoln who says he has "been coming out here for 12 damn years."

The live racing ends and he takes off with his last handful of \$1 bills to the enclosed, upstairs clubhouse facility to try his luck on the simulcast races.

The fourth-floor clubhouse resembles a bowling alley in decor and patrons with its smooth, blue-print carpet, tables of working-class families, drinking buddies and couples who appear to be on dates.

Vice becomes this spacious, multi-tiered, air-conditioned hall.

Cigarettes, booze and fried food accompany gamblers at 50-odd simulcast television sets, which feature nine channels of thoroughbred racing from around the country.

Harper is at home here. A bottle of Budweiser in one hand and racing form in the other, he expounds on his waging theories.

Traditionally, bettors as devoted as him depend on systems of handicapping or mathematical chance.

However, an unorthodox combination of intuition, names and numbers make up his gambling method.

"I look at phrases and numbers," Harper says in his distinctive, cigarette-and-sandpaper voice. "I'm like a medieval numerologist who relies on his own cheap series of dreams.

"I respect handicappers, but I don't want to truck with their kind. I feel the universe has a magical component that I want to manipulate to my advantage."

I ask him if he had ever quit while he was ahead and he gave a snappy and



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