



ABOVE: JOCKEYS struggle for rank in the live thoroughbred racing at State Fair Park.

RICK TOWNLEY/DN



LEFT: GAMBLERS review their racing forms while waiting for the next race to start.

RICK TOWNLEY/DN

Laureate, says he visits State Fair Park 3-4 times during live racing season. He uses betting methods closer to Harper's.

"I flip a coin," Kloefkorn says with a half-serious grin. "Nah, I really depend on intuition."

"Over the years, intuition has pretty much failed me. But I know a few handicappers who usually come out about the same."

Kloefkorn says he loves to watch horses run, and it's even more enjoyable when his picks come in. He says the excitement that comes with winning outweighs the money he attains when so lucky.

It's all about chasing an elusive thrill on the backs of thoroughbreds. Few could personify the ups and downs of such a fleeting pursuit as well as Harper.

Right now, without a loaner in sight, he broods under the cloud of a hard-luck hangover. He'd rather talk about cold cash than the beauty of anything.

In a stubborn tone that seems to defy any force of karma, Harper says horse betting is a cyclical affair.

"The money you lose all eventually comes back to you," he says. "I plan on making every cent back I ever lost here."

It is a week later. Hope is prancing around in the winner's circle

once again and Harper sheepishly roosts on its back.

He approaches me strangely, almost in shock.

"See that race over there," Harper says shaking a bit as he points at a just-finished simulcast race from Hollywood. "I nailed that puppy."

He shows me two of four winning tickets. Impressively, one is a trifecta winner and the other capitalizes on the much higher odds of a superfecta wager.

His stunned look of surprise begins to fade.

"See, that's about \$400 or \$500 right there," he says with bliss pressing his cheeks for nervous smiles. "I was honing in on those chalky suckers. Sometimes you can just get all over a race."

He suddenly turns and looks at the exit doors as if they contain ghosts of bets past.

"I should probably get the heck out of here and go put about \$200 of it in the bank before it's too late," he says.

Discomfort shows forth in a grimace as Harper rubs his chin for a second, pondering his decision.

Apparently enamored by an abrupt, new wave of psychological full-tilt boogie, he shortly turns his worries upside-down and jokes: "Or maybe I should go up to the casino."

tired response:

"Never."

Harper loses his next two bets within a half-hour on races occurring at Prairie Meadows in Des Moines, Iowa. Now only having \$.40 left, he superficially pores over the room for people who might lend him money.

He turns to me, who he had met a few times before, with a wry, humorous bounce on the edges of his lips. Harper unloads a junky's proposition.

"Hey, do you have some cash you could spring me?" he says. No way.

"Come on. I'm good for having it back to you by 9 a.m. tomorrow."

I don't give him money, but do take his suggestions on a couple of horses. Both lose.

Harper says the tough-bet nature of racing is what makes the track potentially exhilarating and financially dangerous at the same time.

Betting horses is not an easy game. Whether you think you know what you're doing or not, it's still gambling.

Hugh Stevens, a 50-year-old real estate salesman, says he's been handicapping races for "many years."

Lighting a fresh cigar and peering through his brown, jet-pilot sunglasses, Stevens downplays the professional image of a handicapper.

"Truth be told, everybody has their own theories," he says. "Personally, I never bet on 'faves.'"

"I wait for a horse with odds in the middle to come up that appeals to me. I look at his past races. I look at the jockey and try to figure out if he's good enough to win. But that's just the way I do it."

"We all win some and lose some." Bill Kloefkorn, Nebraska's Poet