

Published based on [The Race Horse and its Betters; The Money and Thrill](#)

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Few would gainsay that betting is deep-rooted in UK life, a passion pursued at every level of society from the bingo hall to the bridge parlour but, of course, especially associated with horse racing. However, notwithstanding, or perhaps because of its widespread nature, gambling has its critics. It is commonly attacked as a nonessential malevolent, as an immoral and unproductive activity seducing its protagonists into unjustifiable involvement and tempting them into crime and corruption. Frankly the relatively tax-free rewards of gambling have attracted a criminal component, and undoubtedly dependence on the level of Dostoevsky's 'hero', masochistically losing his money, his outlays a preface to orgasm, is a clear manifestation of illness.

Most gamblers, however, are a long way from being social deviants. The overt concept behind betting on horses is to earn income, however aside from those owners, trainers, and jockeys in the club, and a select group (though one hesitates to utilise the collectivity with such highly individualistic men) of pro gamblers, most backers can't hope even for a steady income and definitely not for a fortune. A lot of them do not have the wherewithal to finance the big outlays which big winnings require.

Moreover, to achieve success in the long term the hacker wishes to grasp form, genealogy, and probability concepts; the bookmaker simply has to hang around for the punters' mistakes. In time most gamblers lose; they know they lose; yet they continue to bet. What they are looking for is the occasional windfall, the finance for an orgy be it in the saloon or mall. In reality for them gambling is a wasteful but exciting alternative option to saving.

Indeed, excitement is maybe the real incentive for most gamblers. Win or lose, gamblers obtain 'a considerable amount of excitement. And a diversion from the cares and troubles of daily life'. Betting has an important temporal aspect, the delay between making a bet and knowing the result. The effect is that on the racecourse 'some of the most enthralling moments in a man's life. Are those which pass between the time when the horses have flashed by the post and when the winner's number is hoisted', and off the course the stress can be lengthened till the press dash out the early editions.

For most gambling is a chance to brighten up their lives; taking a chance destroys routine be it the daily grind of the factory operative, the never-ending unrewarded jobs of the housewife, or the monotony of the leisured classes, trapped by the obligations of the social calendar. Maybe for the rich gambling is a type of prodigious consumption, a method of putting their wealth in evidence. For the poor betting is, in the words of George Orwell, 'the most cost-effective of luxuries': an outlay of ten new pence or perhaps less gives them an opportunity to beat the system; for a moment they can try and control their fate. And make no bones about it, gambling on horses has more to do with talent than luck. Although they use imperfect data, most backers make a genuine mental effort, picking their decisions by a deliberate application of rational standards. Eventually, betting also performs a social function in providing an open sesame to certain sub-cultures: 'What won the 3.30?' is a safe conversational gambit in any working-class bar. In such cultures the ability to pick winners brings social recognition, and the eagerness to share [horse racing systems](#) particularly the hot tip straight from the stable via dubious buddies of buddies, serves to cement relations. Clearly gambling has its positive side and is not merely the unreliable, anti-social activity, caricatured and condemned by the anti-gambling brigade.

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