

In the 6th

A Short Story



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Preface

I have difficulty remembering very much about 1973. I was only five years old. But I will never forget one special Saturday that year when I was hoisted onto my father's shoulders to watch an historic event.

"Pay attention, Henry. This might be the only time you'll ever see 'Big Red'." Dad always referred to the great *Secretariat* as 'Big Red' and on that afternoon no other horse came close to beating him.

I accompanied my father and his brother on their regular excursions to the track only a few times after that. No two fans were more dedicated to thoroughbred racing, even though their free time allowed only one or two Saturdays a month. As the racing jargon goes, they were just "casual handicappers."

Today, thirty-four years later, I'm enjoying the sport, though never with the passion expressed by my father or my uncle, who died a few years ago. Dad, now retired in Florida, still attends the races but the frequency is limited by his health.

My handicapping friend Steve and I manage to visit the racetrack once or twice a month, ordinarily on the weekend. On most occasions we would be driving to Aqueduct, roughly 40 minutes away. Our other trips were usually divided between the shorter summer meets of Belmont and Saratoga.

He and I have been handicapping together for about 12 years, largely as a pastime, and we have never attempted to make a big

"score" at the races. Like my father and his brother, we are also small-time players, each with less than \$200 in our pockets at any one time. This weekend will be very different, however.

During a business lunch earlier in the week, Steve met an enthusiastic owner of a promising colt named *Omaha's Baby*, scheduled to run in the 6th race on Saturday. On his last outing the champion-to-be stumbled leaving the gate and finished fifth in a race he should have won. As Steve reported, "One of the horses that beat him, *Silver Limit*, is favored to win the contest and, according to my source, the early line on *Omaha's Baby* is 6 to 1." He continued with a gleam in his eye, "Henry, this is the race we've been waiting for!"

The Handicap

On Thursday night I obtained some past performance data from the Internet. Clearly, the four most talented contenders in the field of eight 3-year-olds were: *Silver Limit* in post position #1; *Missing Sailor* in #2; *Omaha's Baby* in #4; and *Space Angle* #5. None of the eight youngsters in the contest had ever raced more than five times, and this was the first for all of them at a mile distance.

Among our four contenders, *Space Angle* appeared promising, but he had not been on the racetrack for almost nine months. Moreover, his rider, Leno Ramirez, was listed as an apprentice. Nevertheless, considering his breeding, Steve and I decided the colt deserved to be among our three selections for second place behind *Omaha's Baby*. We also concluded that every one of the other seven had the potential to run at least third. So, this was to be the groundwork for our betting schemes, which included exacta

and trifecta wagering. Ultimately, we ranked our top four choices 4-2-1-5. *Omaha's Baby* was our "key." If the colt either won or placed, we stood to make some money, and a 4-2 exacta would be "just what the doctor ordered."

To remove any distraction, my partner and I elected to play only this one race, pool our money, \$400 each, and share the winnings 50/50. I would place the bets and, for luck, he would hold the tickets even though I never considered him luckier than me, not for a moment.

While it was never our routine on any other Saturday we decided to enjoy a leisurely lunch at a nearby diner and use the morning odds line to map out our final betting strategy. In this way, we would avoid hasty and emotional last-minute mistakes at the track. This was it. Nothing was being left to chance.

For years, Steve and I relied on a betting table that presented typical payoffs under different circumstances. The table showed, for example, that a 6 to 1 winner and a 4 to 1 place horse could result in an exacta payoff of roughly \$65. Also, if the favorite, *Silver Limit*, ran third, a 4-2-1-trifecta ticket would probably pay just over \$200. Indeed, this 6th race had the potential to be our first major "boxcar" profit ever. I was regretting that my father could not be with us to see it.

Race Six

Steve and I arrived with some time to spare. We checked the tote board immediately. As expected, #1 was favored at 3:2; #2 was 4:1; #4 was 10:1, and #5 was displayed at 15:1. We were both elated. This could be even better than expected!

For the first time in my life I stood in line at the \$50 window, which was, by itself, an emotional lift. It was now twelve minutes to post time.

We wagered two-thirds of our \$800 stake on win and place tickets on #4. Also, we purchased exacta tickets featuring the #4 as our key. And, to be safe, we bought several "4-2-All" trifecta tickets in case *Silver Limit* failed to be in the money.

"Dad," I said to myself, "you're gonna miss a good one here!"

Steve and I were sitting in the shade and the gentle breeze was blowing as the horses were being led from the paddock onto the track. Despite the knot in my stomach, I was confident of our handicap and betting. I think Steve felt the same way.

With less than five minutes to post, an older gentleman sat on the bench next to us. He leaned over and asked me, "How'd you bet this race, young fella?" to which I replied in a confident tone, "My partner and I bet the #4, along with the #2 horse."

He looked down and said, "Well, we almost agree. I think *Missing Sailor* seems like a logical choice. But, in my opinion, *Omaha's Baby* should win this one."

"Yes, I agree."

"Sonny, *Omaha's Baby* is #3, not #4."

"No," I replied, as I frantically turned the pages of my program.

Steve, also looking down, yelled, "Oh, God! He's right!"

My friend began to rant. Postposition #3 was the second part of an entry and was labeled "1A" while *Omaha's Baby*, in post position #4, was assigned program #3! With less than three minutes to post we had no money on *Omaha's Baby*! We bet \$800 on the wrong horses! He yelled, "How did we miss that?"

In unison, we both bolted for the betting windows. We had to cancel our tickets – and fast! If we were lucky, we could still bet some money on *Omaha's Baby* to avoid a complete fiasco.

Steve stood in one line. I stood in another. Whoever reached the window first, we figured, would cash out our tickets.

The announcement came over the loudspeaker, "Two minutes to post."

My line was moving considerably faster and Steve left his spot to pass the tickets to me. A slow bettor was finishing up at my window. There was only one more person ahead of me.

"Please, I'll give you \$20 to let me go first," I said to the tall fellow in front of me.

"Save your money, fella. You aren't gonna make it – and neither will I."

No sooner did he finish his sentence and the announcement came, "It is now post time!" Then the bell rang.

Both Steve and I were in a daze. What terrible luck! We lost \$800 because we bet the *wrong* horses....

"Okay," I said, "let's go watch the damned thing."

We could hear the announcer. "And they're off!"

We had returned to our choice spot just as the horses left the gate in front of us. The track was a mile oval, start to finish.

The announcer began, "Around the first turn it's *Silver Limit*, followed by *Omaha's Baby*. *Missing Sailor* is right there, and it's two lengths back to *Space Angle* and the rest of the field."

He continued, "The pace is fast; 22.4 to the quarter, and *Silver Limit* still leads the pack with *Omaha's Baby* and *Missing Sailor* stalking the leader."

Steve and I were dumbfounded. He moaned aloud exactly what I was thinking: "It's unfolding just as I figured it would."

The announcer continued, "They're on the backstretch, and the pace remains fast. "*Omaha's Baby* is up to challenge and *Silver Limit* is not giving an inch."

I was depressed and angry as the announcer went on.

"It's 1:10.4 at six furlongs with two panels to go." As they made the final turn, he said, "It's now *Omaha's Baby* by one with *Missing Sailor* coming on. They are in the stretch. *Space Angle*, three wide, is gaining steadily on the outside. That's all for *Silver Limit*."

By now, we were shouting for *Space Angle*. "Come on 4!"

The colts were deep in the stretch. *Missing Sailor* was leading our tired *Omaha's Baby* by a neck, and *Space Angle* was flying!

At the wire, the announcer hollered: "Hold all tickets; we have a photo finish between #4 *Space Angle* and #2 *Missing Sailor*."

My partner and I looked at each other in total amazement. I screamed, "Geez!! I don't believe it! Steve, we've got it!" At post time, #4 *Space Angle* was 10 to 1, #2 *Missing Sailor* was 4 to 1, and #3 *Omaha's Baby* was 6 to 1.

The photo was in and the results were official! It was 4-2-3! *Space Angle* paid \$22.00 to win, \$6.00 to place, and the exacta with *Missing Sailor* paid \$127. *Omaha's Baby* finished third and the trifecta returned a whopping \$520. It was unbelievable! My partner and I would be sharing a \$12,840 bonanza!

Steve asked, "Henry, what did we miss with *Space Angle*?"

I answered, "Well, looking back, it's obvious now.... His past performances occurred when he was a two-year-old. Today, he is three and much stronger. Also, trainer Molina got him ready!"

Then, I said with a big grin, "My father told me many times, 'Henry 'm boy, every once in a while, it's better to be lucky than smart'."

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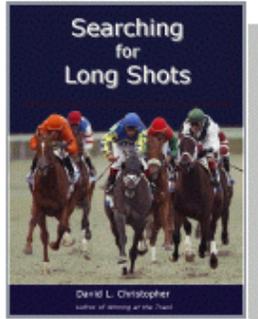


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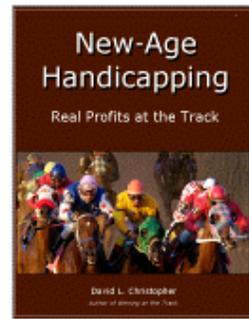
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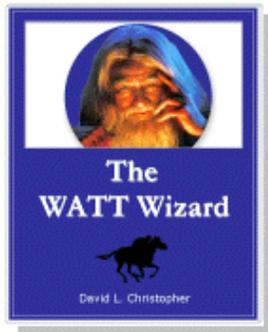
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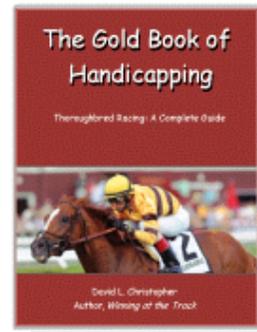
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