

By  
Timothy Dugdale

# A DAY at the RACES

I had been losing badly at the track. Perhaps it was time to switch to blackjack, I thought. This was Macau before the Vegas casinos moved in and started blowing up mountains in China in order to have enough land to build their clip-joint Xanadus. The city seemed like a favorite antique about to be smashed by a rambunctious tot. You could still imagine Robert Mitchum and Jane Russell in town, perhaps a bit long in the tooth with Playtex lifting and separating the both of them.



*That's what gambling is all about – the charge, the thrill.*

I think I was playing at the Hotel Lisboa, a little too lubricated to count cards but steady enough to know when to hold'em and when to fold'em. Suddenly there was gent in a well-cut albeit ratty suit at my shoulder, pulling furiously on a Camel. "You play good," he said in Portuguese. "Keep it up." Then he proceeded to start betting on my hands. Together, we drove Lady Luck deep into the night and romped her well. The cards appeared as if by telepathy. When the time was right to quit, he took his winnings, handed me a salad of bills and disappeared. I stumbled out into the dawn, marvelling at my fat roll of patacas.

That's what gambling is all about – the charge, the thrill. You need an ace, you get an ace. Blamo. A nag that looked like a lost cause on the back stretch finds an extra gear in the clubhouse turn and makes an exotic exacta come true. Most excellent. All the rest – the shopping, the shows, the dining out – is tourism. I once dragged my old man to Churchill Downs. They have an incredible interactive museum that seemed to lift his spirits but he knew what was coming. "Two races, maximum," he warned. "Then we're out." That was until our horses started to coming in. "Well, who do you like in the third?" he said, snatching the racing program from my hands. We ended up staying to the bitter end of some highs and lows with a sweet little bundle to show for our tenacity.

Gambling is best when you're required to make your own luck. Just pulling the lever on a slot machine is not a game. It's toil that you're paying to endure. You may as well be on an assembly line. Games like roulette and baccarat have a certain cinematic cachet but real excitement awaits at the racetrack. Horse racing is not a game; it's a sport, a noble one at that. Unlike in a casino, you're enjoying fresh air. A true race fan does not sit in a lounge; you're in the stands or at the rail. A racing program is a wealth of information if you know how to read it. Every recent race of every horse on the day's slate is in there, with all kinds of pertinent data. Before a wise man places his bets, he nips down to the paddock to watch the parade of ponies, making note of their star qualities or lack thereof. Then you place your bets and get ready for the incomparable thrill of gorgeous animals thundering around a track at full gallop.

When your horses come in, pretty as a picture, the exhilaration is hard to describe. Cheers and hugs all around. And there's money waiting for you at the wicket. Even in defeat, you feel something far more satisfying as you tear up a bum race than you would sitting in front of a godless chiming robot that gladly ate your last twenty dollar bill and can't wait for the next sucker to sit down.