

‘They Massage Horses Don’t They?’

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It's been over 25 years since that glorious warm, blue sky summer day at Belmont Park Racetrack. I not only remember it so well, but I can almost inhale that special racetrack smell, the combination of disinfectant merged with horse manure. The moment you walked into the place, open air as it was, you might have been on some livestock farm for that matter. But this was Elmont, Long Island, and this writer lived within one mile of the track. I had just finished up my sales rep phone calls by noon, and my wife allowed me to do what I always did on beautiful race days like this one: Go to the track. Well, not so fast. First I drove to Guido's deli nearby our place and got my usual Salami and American cheese hero. At the track, wearing my usual racetrack wardrobe of baggy shorts, loose cotton shirt with giant pocket to hold my two Pilot pens and Te Amo cigars, I ventured up to the 3rd floor grandstand. This was my spot right on the finish line. The sandwich was devoured along with a cold draft beer (couldn't beat the racetrack beer) and I puffed on my cigar as I attacked the Daily Racing Form.

By a quarter to one I was joined by my two compatriots, jock's room masseur Stevie Lee and loveable retiree Ira from Great Neck. We were all doping out the first race when *greatness* was being born right before our eyes. "You see that number 3 horse, *Great All Over*?" Stevie volunteered to us. "Well, I worked on him about an hour ago at the barn." Ira and I both were startled to learn that our buddy did more than just massage humans.

Still, looking over the horse's past performances I cracked "Yeah, I think *God* would have to work on this horse to move *him* up!" Stevie countered "I know, I'm just saying that the trainer had me work on the horse for about 45 minutes before he brought him over. The horse was tight too." I again looked at the horse's past form and he wasn't just bad... *he was terrible!* This was a cheap maiden claiming race, the bottom of the barrel in NY, and this horse sure was consistent: he finished up the track from gate to finish in every start." This horse doesn't need a massage... it needs a miracle!" Ira laughed, but very subtly so as not to insult Stevie. "I like the number 4 horse, the second choice in the betting. I cannot see myself putting even a *dime* on that 3 horse. Sorry Stevie." We all laughed. As the horses were approaching the gate, we all scurried up to get our bets in. I went with the 11 horse and threw out the favorite, who looked so good on paper that he was a candidate for a stiff job. Ira bet his 4 horse and Stevie passed on the race. *Great All Over* now had odds of 60-1 and rising." Should be 160-1", Ira offered. "The horse has absolutely no form."

The next two minutes proved fateful for me, and for Stevie Lee, massage therapist extraordinaire. No, *Great All Over* did not win the race at 75-1... that's the stuff of a Walter Matthau film. I'll tell you what he did do, however. He ran the race of his life! After being trapped on the rail in this 13 horse field, he weaved through horses down the stretch and lost the whole race by no more than a head! He finished third, beating 10 horses and causing gasps from track announcer Tom Durkin. Stevie just sat there, perhaps even a bit

shocked at what his work must have accomplished. Ira and I looked at each other, shaking our heads. "What did you actually do to that horse Stevie?" Ira asked. "Could you do the same thing for me... my wife would be grateful?"

Stevie was never asked back to massage *Great All Over* again. Why. "You see", Stevie explained, "If the owner finds out that I improved his horse *that* much by massage, then it takes away from the trainer, and trainers usually have *big egos* in this business."

A few months later, when a writer for a popular magazine found out about Stevie's prowess, he arranged to do a story on massaging horses. Stevie asked a trainer friend of his if he had a horse Stevie could work on. Sure, said the trainer, come to my barn with the writer and work on my colt; The horse is scheduled to race in a few days and could use some loosening up. Stevie set it up and did his thing... not once but actually on two early AM occasions. The horse ran a few days later and won at 40-1 odds. The trainer never invited him back again. Such is the reason why Damon Runyon loved the racetrack experience. You *never* know what to expect!

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