GOING TO THE DOGS

BY FRED BASON

THE ONLY real difference between Samuel Pepys and me is that he is very famous and extremely dead, while I am merely half-dead and my only claims to fame are that I’ve contributed an article to every edition of this annual since volume five and the fourth of my diaries (edited by Noël Coward) was published this year. If anyone has influenced my life it’s been old Samuel, whose diaries inspired me in my youth to become a diarist. If I hadn’t my diaries for reference this useful and instructive little essay would have been impossible to write.

In the year 1666 Pepys wrote in his diary on 30 March:

I out to Lombard Street and there received £2,200 and brought it home and contray to expectation, received £35 for the use of £2,000 of it for the quarter of a year, where it hath produced me this profit and hath been a convenience to me as to care and security at my house, and demandable at two days warning as this hath been.

I now wish to tell you how I lost the chance of making £2,000 by betting on greyhounds, and how I came to win £35 by betting on one dog. Pepys was no gambler. I’ve been a gambler for all of thirty years. My introduction to the sport (apart from a single visit to an early Greyhound Derby) was when a lady friend of mine asked a famous trainer of greyhounds to help to get me ‘on my feet’ by occasionally giving me the names of dogs that were likely to win. Because he loved my girl friend he agreed to help me, and it was arranged that three times a week, at exactly four o’clock I was to ring a certain number and I would be given information about greyhounds that were exceptionally fit, well handicapped, in their most suitable traps, and were being backed by their owners. This seemed a wonderful way to make a quick fortune. Better information was impossible to obtain.

I made my first phone-call and was given one dog’s name. I put 5s. on this dog with my local street bookmaker. The dog won at four to one. I made £1 on my first investment.

Now, reader, if only I’d had the common sense to keep my mouth shut I am sure I could have won £2,000 during the next seven weeks.

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During that period twenty-one names of dogs were given to me. Seventeen won, three got second, and the last one was crowded out at the first bend and never got a clear run. But I didn’t use my common sense. Oh, I can see now what a fool I was! I passed on the information to all and sundry. I became a tipster as a sideline to my business of bookselling. I would provide the information, and my clients would give me a percentage of their winnings. I had in those far-off days a small bookshop. With the pound I had won I purchased a bronze statue of a greyhound. Taking out a pile of books from the shop-window I made room for this statue and above it I placed a bold notice: *Allow me to present to you the name of a greyhound which will, I assure you, win tonight. Its name is . . . Put your shirt on it!* But don’t forget tomorrow who gave you this valuable information.

All day long I buttonholed passersby, drawing their attention to the notice, and begging them to have a bet on my dog. It won at three to one. Early backers on the course obtained nine to two and four to one for their money. People did not forget me. By midday the next day I had received in money just over £4, plus several bottles of beer, many boxes of cigarettes, and two tickets for a show at the Lyceum Theatre (from the leading trumpeter in the orchestra). I was extremely popular, and I was happy. I had won a good deal of money for a large variety of working-class folks.

The third tip given to me won at two to one, by four lengths. My clientele increased. I did not bet myself. If I’d put £1 on the first dog I would have won £4; then the whole lot on the second dog would have made that sum into £12; and then the third dog would have meant £24. As it was (looking in my diaries) I find that I was given just over £6 in money gifts, plus fruit, bunches of flowers, several dozen unwanted books, etc., by the time the third dog had won. But I was perfectly content. I was making lots of pats and was most popular. Over the next few weeks I had only four bets myself—three winners and a loser.

I got a signwriter to change the name above my bookshop from ‘The Little Bookshop’ to ‘The Greyhound Bookshop’. Then, at four o’clock one Thursday, I went to the phone and the voice said: ‘Nothing for you. I expected you to put your own money on the dogs. I didn’t expect you to broadcast the information and upset the odds.’ He told me never to phone him again. If I bothered him once more his boys would come over and bash me up. He said I’d been a bloody fool, and I knew it.

With my information gone, and myself knowing little about dogs, I tried finding winners with a pin. That was hopeless. My luck went, and with it my clients. I returned to the slim living of selling second-hand books. But somehow the craze for greyhounds had got into me. I decided to study the dogs and devise a method of my own—and this time keep it to myself.

Thousands of folk try wonderful and weird methods in the hope of finding winners day after day and making a quick fortune. They lose in the long run, for they have to have a huge slice of luck (more than their fair share) in order to make any method win continually. If you can think up a method whereby you cut out hunches and cut out haphazard betting, and show a small profit on a year, it has a lot to recommend it. You could bet only on the dog in trap number one, stop at a winner, and come home. But should trap number one fail to produce a winner in, say, twelve races (and that’s quite likely to happen) then you can easily lose a sizeable fortune as you double up in order to win back what you have lost.

Real gamblers are content to win a little money with a lot of money; i.e., they take odds against. You want a great deal of luck to win a lot of money with a little money. You could, for instance, go to a greyhound track, back only the favourite in the first and third races, night after night. I’ve known people do this and go broke! You could, also, follow any newspaper’s ‘nap’ selection, go to the track where it’s running, and put your shirt on it. But the tipsters are human blocs, and they could so easily have a long losing sequence of their ‘nap’ selection and yet have many winners amongst the rest of their selections.

On horses a known system is to back the first and last favourites of the day at any meeting. The prices are small, usually seven or six to four. But it does occasionally show a profit over the year. You could do the same at the dogs. Certainly the favourite in the first race is a far better bet than the favourite in the last race. That goes for dogs, as well as horses. I have paused for a moment in writing this article and I’ve picked up a newspaper for January 1960. There were eleven meetings last night and six favourites won the first race; but only three won the last race.

I had to devise some system that would not give me a headache or many bets or involve me in great risks. It was for my own personal pleasure, and I meant to make it a winning pleasure if I possibly could.

For a week or two I went to practically every track in London. Then I realized that would not do. I had to get familiar with the running of particular dogs on particular tracks, to note and jot down their idiosyncrasies
—whether they were good ‘railers’ (i.e. hugged the rails on the inside of the track) or ‘wide runners’, who were best suited in outside traps, so that they got a clear run and didn’t interfere with the rest of the field. It was obvious to me (and to anyone else, for that matter) that the inside of any track was the nearest way home, and that trap one was at least two lengths (of a greyhound) better off than trap six. There are some exceptions, but this is the general rule. An exception is when a known wide runner is in trap number one. It will tend to run wide and upset the rest of the field if it gets slightly ahead. A good railer has an advantage when in trap one or two.

Let me give some examples. I now go to a greyhound meeting three or four times a year, no more. I go only when I am pretty sure I have the right dog in the right trap at the right time. On 24 September 1959, at New Cross Stadium, a dog named Racing Bally was running. I had noticed that on 18 September this dog had won easily from trap six, running wide the whole of the race, never trying to get to the inside position on the rails. It was a wide runner. Well, in the same race on 24 September there was a dog named Oona Rascal in trap one, but this dog was also a wide runner, and being in trap one was no real advantage to it. Racing Bally was in its favourite trap, six. In trap five, next to it, was Follom Boy, which was a slow starter. Follom Boy’s best time over the 415 yards was 24.56, whereas Racing Bally’s best time for the same distance was 24.52. Therefore everything was in favour of Racing Bally; and it did win, by four lengths, in the time 24.79—a slow time because, as I had judged, it kept to the outside of the course. Oona Rascal in trap one did just as I thought it would; it ran wide and impeded the rest of the field, spoiling the efforts of the other runners, except my dog, which kept clear of the danger. I was able to buy my Christmas presents in September!

Now there was nothing magical about this win. The entire information was on the race-cards, which gave the running of the whole field for their last four outings, and their manner of running. It just happened that I had remembered to put down the wide running of the Rascal, and had waited for his return to the right trap. Elementary, my dear Watson.

Now I promised to tell you how I won £35 on one dog. It was sheer luck. I had given a successful talk to Bermondsey Rotary Club—successful because I’d made my audience laugh, had sold six copies of my latest published diary, and had made a new friend in a Rotarian plumber—such a nice man. When the meeting was over I walked out of the restaurant at the foot of London Bridge and stood on the bridge looking at the ships and barges being unloaded. A stranger came up to me and said: ‘Do you need some money?’ I said: ‘Yes, please. Don’t we all need money?’ He then said: ‘Go to Harringay greyhound track and bet all the money you can rake up and put it on this dog. It will win.’ He handed me a slip of paper bearing a name. I asked him how he was so sure. He said that he owned the dog; it had lost several times in a row, and was now in a class below its true form and was particularly fit. I then asked him why he’d picked on me. He said I looked respectable (I had on my very best suit), but in need of money. He added that he preferred to share his good fortune with strangers than with his own relations.

I thanked him and we parted. I had only once been to the Harringay track, for it is a long way from Walworth. I knew nothing whatsoever about the dogs there. Well, it was a gamble, and I love a gamble. I went.

The stranger’s dog was in the second race. When the runners and prices went up I was dismayed to find that the dog I’d come to back was ten to one, the outsider. I went and looked at the runners, and found that the dog I was to back was the smallest greyhound I’d ever seen. In the second trap was a much bigger dog. My little dog was in trap one, but obviously no one thought much of its chances. I said to myself: ‘Freddie, what are you going to do? If that big dog in trap two gets out smartly and gets to the first bend first, it will crowd in your little dog and knock it for six.’ My dog was a frisky little thing, but the rest of ‘em looked very track-wise. Well, I’d come a long way to have a bet. I went back again to the bookmakers and found to my amazement that the dog’s price had shortened from ten to one to seven to one. Obviously someone had a good deal more faith in that dog than I had. Someone was betting on it. I found a rosie-cheeked bookmaker and I put a fiver on the dog at sevens.

The moment the race began I shut my eyes. I didn’t see that race at all. My dog won by six lengths and I won £35.

Getting back to systems, I’ve discovered a simple one which will limit your visits to tracks, cut down your betting to a very few bets, and yet every year show you a reasonable amount of profit, besides the real pleasure of going to the dogs. This system has not shown a loss on the past seventeen or so years.

The method is to back only substitutes. I will explain. In each race there is at least one reserve dog. Should any of the dogs for some reason fail to run (it seldom happens) then a reserve dog takes its place. You will
easily see when a reserve dog is running. Not only are notices to that effect put up, but on the bookmakers' cards the absent dog will be crossed out and the reserve dog will be clearly indicated. Now you must exercise a little judgment and notice whether the reserve is in a trap favourable to it, i.e. a wide runner in trap five or six, a good railer in trap one or two. Should the dog be in traps four or three you have a small bet on it on the tote for a place only. Should it be in a trap that suits it then bet for a win with the bookmaker at best odds and for a place on the tote. Should the reserve dog become favourite in the betting you put a little more money on it, as it's wise to follow the market.

Let me give you one of dozens of examples to show you what I mean. It is Saturday, 14 November 1953. Reluctantly I've taken an American visitor to the White City Stadium. I hate taking folk with me: they distract my attention from the sport, and will chatter. Having seldom been to this track I am not familiar with the running of the dogs there; so I have to use the system of substitutes, and hope that a reserve dog is being used that night.

Eventually we arrive at the fourth race (8.26), and although racing began at 7.30 I have not had a bet at all. The American (who is not a quiet American) keeps ragging me for coming to a meeting and yet not betting. He's lost £1! The fourth race has a dog named Mobile Gwen scratched from box two, and the first reserve for this race, a dog named Worthy Mate, takes its place. I glean one piece of information from the race-card. (Every one of the ten thousand people there has a card and the same data.) Worthy Mate's best time for 525 yards is 29.90, whereas Mobile Gwen's best time for the same distance is 30.15. Therefore Worthy Mate is about three lengths faster than the original runner. I place a good bet with a bookmaker to win. Then I place a win-and-placed bet on the tote, the place bet on the tote being four times bigger than my win ticket, so that if my dog came second the place-money would still get me out of trouble. Worthy Mate became a worthy friend, winning with the utmost ease. My American friend, trusting to my system, won back all his losses. He was most annoyed when I insisted that we went home at once with our winnings. (Never be greedy. Don't expect to get three or four winners in one night.) He wanted to 'play up to his luck.' I told him to be satisfied.

My system requires self-control. You may go to ten meetings before a reserve dog is used. In that case you merely have extremely modest bets and study the ways of the dogs and the manner of their running. When a reserve dog is used I seldom worry what trap it's in. I put a little more money on when it's in a favourable trap, and a little more still when it becomes first or second favourite. But in any case I bet on it.

I can recall only one occasion when two reserve dogs were used on the same night, and both won! It was Saturday, 27 June 1953, the night of the Greyhound Derby, at the White City. I went to this meeting not so much to bet as to see the pageant and the crowds. The trophy for the Derby was to be presented by the Duke of Beaufort, and for some reason or other I wanted to see him in person. The first of the twelve races that night was at seven o'clock and in the very first race a dog with the weird name of Synchronomes was scratched from trap five and its place taken by a reserve dog named Ganges Convert. I had no need to be converted. It was a genuine reserve dog and it was in the betting. Its best time for 525 yards was 30.38, whereas the absent runner could do only 30.52 for the same distance. The reserve dog was at least four lengths faster than Synchronomes, and faster than any other dog in the race! It was a heaven-sent opportunity, and I had a good bet. The reserve dog won easily.

If it hadn't been Derby night I would then have gone home. But the big race was not until 10.20, and it was now about five past seven. I stayed. Lo and behold, in the third race the dog in trap number four was taken out of the race and its place taken by Postman's Delivery. I just couldn't resist having another bet. Postman's Delivery delivered the goods. The dividends on the tote were 235. 6d. for a win and 9s. 6d. for a place. For an outlay of 4s. one got 35s. and one's own money back. Nice gravy. Those two wins in one night contented me, and I did not go to a meeting for over a year!

In November 1959 that famous artist Nicolas Bentley wanted to go to the dogs, and knowing my interest he asked me to keep him company. Now, although Nick is a pal of mine I refused to go. I will go alone or not at all. But I did give him the names of three dogs to back, and told him how to back them, i.e. four tickets win and ten tickets place. I told him to stop when he had won money, and come home. Of the three dogs I gave him two won and the other got second. He won just over £11. Next morning he sent me a pound note as a present, with his thanks. A week later he again wrote asking for some dogs he could do that Saturday night, and I was able again to name three dogs. Two won and the third lost, having being crowded out at the first bend in the course. He won again.

Nick was delighted. He said he was going to tell the Daily Mail about...
me and see if they would make me an additional greyhound tipster on that newspaper. I declined. It would have been asking for trouble to become a tipster again after nigh on thirty years. Besides that, it was beyond my powers to give regular tips and regular advice, day after day, meeting after meeting. It was just fortunate for Nicolas Bentley that he’d won twice.

I have to tell you that the third time was not lucky for him. It was winter, late November, and there was considerable fog. For some reason or another it slipped my mind to tell him not to bet if it was a foggy night. Fog will always upset form and calculations. Greyhounds are delicate and intelligent animals. Just as fog upsets you and me (it certainly upsets me, for it brings on asthma that leaves me gasping), so will it upset any good dog. Mr Bentley lost his money. He didn’t complain, but as far as I know he has not been back again to a race-track. Nothing whatever is certain, except death. If greyhound racing was all so sure I would now be a rich man, and bookmakers would be on relief!

Now for a strange story. On Saturday, 9 January 1960, a race-horse named Long Story won a steeplechase in the afternoon. I saw the race on TV and I remembered that Mr Syder had a clever Irish dog of the same name. I wondered if by chance it was running that night. It was running! For such all my own rules, I had a bet on Long Story the greyhound to do what Long Story the race-horse had done. Bless its Irish heart, it won! This is probably the first time in the history of sport that a horse and a dog of the same name won on the same day.

An element of luck and fate must at times enter into gambling. On Saturday, 16 January 1960, there was at Dagenham greyhound track a dog in the first race with the name Riverside Robin. Well, the greatest friend I have in U.S.A. is Beatrice Winkler and she has a son named Robin and for years they lived on Riverside Drive, New York City. That very morning I had had a letter from Beatrice.

I knew Riverside Robin to be a good raider, and if it was in trap one it would stand an excellent chance of winning. It was in trap one and it won at three to one. But I was too ill with asthma to get out from 152 Westmoreland Road, S.E.17, to go to Dagenham or even to find a local bookmaker. I would have had £10 on that dog. I knew it would win!

In its early days greyhound racing was a working man’s pastime. Today it is big business. You can see men putting £100 on a dog to win, and not turning a hair when it loses. I’ve often been tempted to have a chat with a big-time betting boy and tell him of my humble system. But I remember how I once opened my mouth too wide and put my foot in it. Now, at the request of the editor of this annual, I have told all, as the film-stars do in Sunday papers.

I suppose you are just dying to know why I have a good deal of faith in substitutes, i.e. the reserve dogs. Reason one is that they are seldom used. Hence less betting. Then a reserve dog is running an unexpected race, and therefore has to some extent been hastily prepared and is likely to be excited. It is the only dog in the race running after the hare with the keenness of an understudy replacing a star!

Please don’t write and prove me wrong. I am not a professional gambler. I can only tell you that this method has been kind to me. It has also helped me to some extent to give hospitality to Saturday Book readers who have honoured me by calling on me and my housekeeper Lizzie (who, I am so happy to say, is still with me). It has never made me a fortune; but I have never wanted a fortune. It would be so very out of place in Walworth.

In conclusion I pass on to you a piece of valuable advice. Whatever else you ignore, don’t ignore this, for it’s been learnt from bitter personal experience. When you win money on the dogs, spend your winnings at once. Go for a nice holiday. Buy a new suit. Take the wife to see my pal Alec Clunes in My Fair Lady. Never bank your winnings.

Why? Because there are troublesome, prying people called Income Tax Inspectors, and if you’ve got a nice little nest-egg laid away in the bank you’ll find it quite impossible to prove beyond all doubt that you won it on the dogs. If you’ve got a commission agent maybe he can turn up his books and put the tax man to flight. But if you’ve been betting at the track what proof have you got?

The Tax Inspector may not know a raider from a wide runner. He may not believe that the day Riverside Robin won I had a letter from a dear lady with a son named Robin who used to live on Riverside Drive. So spend your money when you win it, and don’t expect to make a living by betting. You’ll get a lot of fun out of going to the dogs anyway, win or lose. May the best dog win! Good luck!

P.S. I would like to know how you get on at the dogs—but I cannot replace your losses or make a dog win!