

Any Horse Can Win

by Phillip W. Weiss

I'm one of those guys who hang around the track. I make my bets, shoot the breeze with my cronies, and hope I pick winners. While any winning bet is a cause for celebration, at some point picking a winning bet alone no longer became satisfying enough for me. Now, I needed to pick long shots, you know, the horses that no one else expects can win, the horses that are forty to one or fifty to one, the kind of odds that drive almost every player away. So, I began playing longshots. Race after race, I bet on horses that everyone else had written off. Soon I became known as the guy who bets longshots and was even given a nickname, Longshot Jack (even though my name is not Jack). Soon I started hitting longshots. In one race I hit a thirty-four to one, in another race a forty-two to one, in another race, a fifty-three to one, and so on and so forth. While it was true that to get to these wins I had to go through lot of losses, and I mean A LOT, more than I would care to mention, finally hitting a long shot filled me with a feeling of joy and accomplishment that made the journey all worthwhile. You see, I had something to prove which was that handicapping was a waste of time, that picking winners was pure luck and that on any given day any horse that was fit to run could win any race. Along the way, I began to become familiar with the jockeys who tended to bring in longshots. Most of these jockeys won few large purses and usually did not get the best horses to ride. Yet from time to time they

brought in winners. One of those jockeys was a female. Her name was Shannon Maguire. She was twenty-three years old, weighed one hundred five pounds, had beautiful blond hair and was as cute as a spiffy doll. While I appreciate the virtues of a good-looking woman, my interest in Shannon had nothing to do with her looks. Being an apprentice jockey and competing against many well-established male jockeys, Shannon got to ride the least talented mounts, that is, the horses with the least impressive pedigree and owned by the least successful stables. But horse racing is a funny business. Sometimes a horse that no one expects to win will run like the second coming of Secretariat. Well, this is exactly what happened with a horse ridden by Shannon. Soon after her debut at the track, she started bringing in long shots, a twenty-two to one in one race, a thirty-one to one in another race and so on. I noticed this and soon I was extolling the virtues of Shannon Maguire to all my cronies at the track. What I didn't realize at the time was that since she was an apprentice, Shannon was riding with a seven-pound weight advantage, which is a big weight differential. (Try carrying a two-pound weight for one mile and you will soon understand what I mean.) Then one day, Shannon lost a race, and then another and then another. I had no idea why Shannon was now losing. One of my cronies, who was a trainer, told me that Shannon was no longer an apprentice and no longer had the weight advantage. I thanked him for that information and based upon what I had been told, stopped betting on horses rode by Shannon. To me, any horse rode by Shannon was a sure bet to lose and for a while, Shannon's horses continued to lose badly,

finishing dozens of lengths behind the winners, confirming my expectations. I told my cronies at the track that I totally wrote off Shannon as a jockey who could bring in a winner. Then one day, something happened that forced me to re-examine my expectations. Shannon was the jockey for a horse in a maiden claiming race for two-year olds. Of course, no one, including myself, believed the horse had any chance of winning, and the horse went off at thirty-seven to one, the kind of odds normally associated with horses that nobody believes can win. Well, the race started, Shannon's horse quickly took the lead and about one minute later won the race by two lengths. Besides leaving me impressed, Shannon's win reminded me of the utter unpredictability of horse racing. My cronies at the track also reminded me of what I had said about Shannon, that Shannon could not bring in a winner. Unfazed I looked straight at my cronies and with all the semblance of seriousness I could muster, said with a straight face that I always thought Shannon Maguire was one of the finest jockeys in the United States, a jockey who could bring in winners, that she should be congratulated for her big win today and that she proved that on any given day any horse can win. On that final point, no one argued. As for me, I learned or rather confirmed what I already knew but for a moment had put aside which was when it comes to horse racing, don't take advice from anyone because they don't know what they are talking about, keep your own counsel and after making a bet, hope for the best.