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Chapter 2

Ed Bain and Susan Sweeney

IN 1996, ED BAIN made racing history by putting in the largest order ever for back issues of the Racing Form, to the tune of $1,600. If Guinness had any respect for handicapping, Ed would be in the *Book of Records*.

The visionary folks at the Racing Form also made history: the first publishing enterprise since the days of parchment to not offer even a nickel off to a most-preferred client!

Having been in the sales profession, Bain was surprised by the Racing Form's hard-boiled attitude, "but that's what you get," he says, "with a monopoly."

Judging by his delight, you'd think Bain was an archeologist who'd just gotten a hold of the original Dead Sea Scrolls. The parallel is not gratuitous. Bain has had his own deciphering to do. He had devised a successful method of automatic trainer bets based on the Southern California racing circuit, and now he wanted to expand to other venues: New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Illinois and Kentucky.

Ed's wife, Susan, pays glowing respect to his trainer plays, backing it up at the windows. But Susan has her own set of handicapping criteria. She collects on horses that do not fit neatly into anyone else's paradigms.

Ed's 1995 betting income, derived primarily from $200 win bets that he won't vary even during a losing streak, exceeded six figures. Susan is famous at the IRS for eight taxable hits within a year, two of them on the same night! She would have had a third big one the same night but got shut out at the betting window.

When Ed and Susan first met at the beginning of the decade, they were both bankrupt. Ed was deeper in the depths than Willy Loman. He'd even lost his automobile, a salesman's most vital organ. Susan was in debt to the tune of quarter of a million. Ed's problems stemmed from the ordeal of a difficult marriage and a horrendous choice of business partner. Although friends say he did well at the track, his method at that time was not enough to lift him off the canvas. He was adhering to classical speed handicapping, "ever since my Uncle Frankie warned me: 'If you go to the race track, you better learn to read the Racing Form'."

Susan's tribulations resulted from a few bad investments, but she never lost an ounce of confidence.

"I've always been a risk taker," Susan says, nonchalantly. "I was a skydiver and I've had three incidents."

On her 39th jump, using a new parachute, she could not find the rip cord. She was losing altitude fast. When confronted with a life-and-death situation, most horseplayers worry about how they're going to get in another bet.

(When a fire once broke out in the Pimlico grandstand during simulcasting of Laurel races, as the PA system ordered people to evacuate immediately, most of the players rushed to the windows to try to get in a last bet before the machines were shut down.)

On the way down, Susan knew that if she didn't find the reserve rip cord, she would never bet again. The green farmlands of Pennsylvania were swiftly rising and from her vantage point, they no longer seemed soft and mellow.

She was able to find the cord, just in time to land on Route 11 in Chambersburg.

"I had to do one more dive to get over the fear. My fortieth dive went perfectly but I then decided that I was not supposed to be a sky diver."

Today, Susan operates with her feet on the ground, although she seems to levitate when speaking of her man. Talk about the old cliché, "made for each other", Ed and Susan were destined to bail each other out. After getting together, everything began to click. Susan wrote a book called *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Recycling* and began a successful business, with Ed taking on the vital sales facet that Susan preferred to avoid. From her office in the home, Susan orders baling equipment installed on the premises of willing industries, then pays them market rates for their cardboard. Ed sells to distribution centers, retail chains and waste haulers.

Susan does not consider herself a social reformer but is proud that she has succeeded in a "purely male-dominated business."

"The toughest thing in business," Ed adds, "is to manage personalities, so we've decided to operate without employees."

Ed is the full-time horseplayer now, with Susan managing the business Monday through mid-day Friday and then joining Ed on Friday afternoon, usually at a Maryland OTB.

It was during this period of regeneration that Ed decided to discard the classical handicapping tenets and invest in trainer specialties. No matter how good you get with the speed factor, Ed explains, the pari-mutuel system won't let you win because the odds are largely generated by speed figures and related factors.

"Having been a speed player," Ed smiles, "when I walk into a track and see everyone handicapping with their figures, I know I'm gonna get 'em."

Today, in remembrance of hard times, Ed and Susan keep their family and business finances on a cash-only basis. They use only one credit card, one that requires payment before the end of the month and charges no interest. Their three-story colonial house was purchased in part with the proceeds from the recycling business, but half the payment came from race track earnings.

Simplicity through Complexity

Ed began his trainer odyssey by attempting to correlate over 100 trainer patterns, then weaving in other parameters. Even without using pace and

speed figures or class ratings, the factorial task was approaching infinity and he would have had to work at the speed of light to approach his goal.

"He tried to overachieve," Susan understates, with a glow in her eyes. Ed flashes his typical serene smile.

"I was tracking 139 patterns!"

During the research, layoffs and claims emerged as Ed's primary factors, but these two categories then expand geometrically. Ed measures first, second, third and fourth race after a layoff; he has the same four-step procedure for claims.

"I've tried to reduce this to the old sales axiom," Ed says. "Keep it simple, stupid."

But he then divides the eight possible patterns into sprints and routes, and his eight factors are now sixteen. Double that by incorporating the potential veto based on negative body language. Then add one more requirement: a workout within five days, which becomes a must for most members of Ed's trainer stable.

"If a trainer gets cold," Susan completes the scheme, "Ed gets off."

Ed Bain provides a few examples of good ones from southern California:

(1) On claim-1 (first race after claim) Roger Stein hits only 10 percent, but on claim-2 it goes up to 40 percent, with claim-3 remaining up there at 38 percent.

With these percentages, Stein makes Ed's "short list" of automatic trainer bets.

I grill him. You mean you don't even consider average mutuel and trainer return-on-investment stats?

"I require a 35 percent hit rate to make a bet, and won't take less than 2-1 on a win bet, so that makes for a profitable combination of average payoff and hit rate."

(2) For first race after a layoff, with a required work within five days of the race, Ed has two Southern California automatics: Wallace Dallase (38%) and Jenine Sahadi (41%).

He looks for a large percentage swing between one category and another.

"Sahadi is an absolute throwout on layoff-2 routes," he marvels.

(3) Most of Ed's samples are relatively large within the context of trainer specialties, but he does not take a doctrinaire stance against investing on the evidence of a short sample. When Maryland trainer Louis Bernier was 4 for 7 on sprint layoffs, some might think he was due to lose. But Ed expects another win when a successful short sample goes against the grain of thoroughbred statistics. Sure enough, at this writing, Bernier is now 5 for 7 with the same pattern, and Ed had the fifth winner, one we shall examine in the layoff section which follows this chapter.

(4) Ed admits he's a workaholic who spends long and dull hours entering the trainer data. For a few other trainer specialties beyond his research, he takes a shortcut by using Greg Lawlor's material, in particular for first-time starters and distance switches.

"Shoe (Bill Shoemaker) is a 40 percent trainer in route to sprint. You have to project what that means. . .40 percent translates to 3/2 odds!"

When Ed takes 2/1 on this pattern, he has built-in a 50 percent advantage. I was sitting with Ed on a day when I had discovered a maiden at Pimlico, Celebrity Flight, who had shown early speed for the first time, in its most recent race. After just one swift fraction, Celebrity Flight called it quits. New-found early speed for one call has long been an underbet wake-up angle. The horse now had the rail on a day when there was an obvious inside-speed bias.

Ed bet the same 5-1 horse for a completely different reason. Trainer John Hicks' win percentage soars on fourth race after a layoff according to Ed's stats.

Sounds like a stretch to me, I said. You're not going to tell me that a trainer manipulates to such a fine degree.

Susan intervenes, with muted conviction.

"The results are what matters."

But I wanted to know whether we were talking about conscious training manipulation or patterns that resulted from unconscious procedures.

"Almost everything a trainer does is unconscious," Ed explains. "They are just following what they believe to be good training methods, and sometimes a particular method produces a particular pattern."

Celebrity Flight wired the field, drawing off on the far turn and never looking back.

Julian Brown had bet the horse because of the bias, and his friend Niels had him for yet a different reason. With our four reasons converging, who knows, maybe there was enough evidence to bet 50 percent of bankroll.

Those who've ridiculed me for advocating trainer specialty bets remind us that trainers can't talk to the horse, nor do they run the race. I was pleased to hear that Ed did not look at his methodology as based on any type of trainer conspiracy theory.

But what if a pattern changes? I remember one year when the first-time starter specialist Richard Mandella began losing with debut horses, then winning second time out. I also recall a period when claim specialist Mike Mitchell was losing with claimed horses. I'd been riding on the Mitchell claim bandwagon but I got off just in time. If I'd have stayed on, I'd still be well today, for Mitchell rebounded and once more became the claiming king.

But surely trainers are human and are capable of changing their habits.

"Sometimes the horse outsmarts the trainer," Ed responds. "Patterns may change temporarily. But they always come back."

Ed is protected in two ways from these shifts. At any one time, the majority of the patterns he's betting are not going to change. And when a trainer gets cold, Ed gets off.

Why don't you simply lower your bet on a cold pattern? I suggest.

"If I lower my bet, inevitably that will be the time it comes home at a big price. I prefer consistency."

During cold streaks, Ed becomes stricter about eliminating horses with bad body language.

Susan takes the body language factor to an extreme, sometimes betting a horse strictly because of the way it looks. She calls this her "looks play."

She recently hit for half of a $45,600 trifecta combining looks and L. Tomlinson's turf sire ratings. After taxes, she collected $15,800.

Susan is a type-B personality with few mood swings but the big hit on a $1 three-horse box sent her into shock.

Sometimes skill needs a nudge from luck. Susan had forgotten her Tomlinson booklet but had pretty much committed it to memory when she picked out the only three horses trying the turf for the first time who had been bred to like it. The only problem was that her memory was wrong about one of those three sires. But the Imperial Falcon horse (40-1), the one she was wrong about, happened to have been the best looker in the field, thus qualifying as a "looks play." The rest of the field was tossed out for being bred to hate the turf or for having proven to be losers on the grass.

She coupled the Imperial Falcon horse with a Dixieland Band horse (17-1) and a Zen horse (50-1). Notice that we pedigree freaks use the names of the sires rather than their offspring.

"On looks plays when I do not handicap, I bet very little," Susan assures us, "since I'm in an experimental stage."

That hit was at Fair Grounds. She owes her double-IRS night to a sloppy track at the Meadowlands. All three signers, the two she hit and the other big one she'd gotten shut out on were based on Tomlinson's mud sire ratings.

"What convinced me to play strictly on the basis of mud ratings that night was seeing a horse that was zero for twelve on wet tracks that the public made 3/2."

That favorite lost, of course.

Susan's scores resulted from finding races in which one handicapping factor played a dominant role. Both Susan and Ed speak eloquently against what they call "info overloads."

"Don't overload. Be specific," they echo. "There could be a thousand other factors to consider, but why expand on something that already works."

I've always been a believer in Tomlinson turf sire ratings, but the mud ratings had left me somewhat confused.

"It works," Susan elaborated, "if the slop horse gets a 250 and then next best rating is a 150." In other words, there must be a large gap.

Susan uses Mike Helm's class ratings (from *Exploring Pedigree*) in a similar way, looking for a significant gap in lightly-raced fields.

"But the trainer stat outweighs class, especially in sprints."

On various occasions, I've discussed a race with Susan, listened to her response, seen the results, and discovered she'd outhandicapped me. Mad scientist Ed's forte is focusing on a method based on simplicity from complexity. Susan is a more eclectic, and will break rules when she sees a meaningful nuance.

"I'm not a pro like Ed and I never want to be," Susan says modestly, "but I love racing with a passion."

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Those of us who have seen Susan making tough betting decisions look easy believe she is indeed a pro.

Like many true experts, the ex-sky diver tends to understate her abilities. She has become quite accomplished in the art of analyzing body language. Together, Ed and Susan began to study horse behavior with the classic Bonnie Ledbetter video, then improved their understanding of this art with a video by Joe Takach.

"But the tape that really convinced us that the skill of body language could be mastered," Susan explains, "was The Trainers' Edge, from California."

"The original intent," Ed adds, "was to use this with layoff horses. But Susan is able to use it without handicapping. She can pick them right off the TV monitor."

She likes to see horses "up on their toes, dancing in the post parade and even better, dancing in the paddock." She also looks for "an arched neck."

When a trainer specialty coincides with exceptional body language, Susan loads up. Ed has a different outlook.

"If there's a great trainer stat but the horse looks bad, I pass. But otherwise, I will not vary the size of my bet."

Both Susan and Ed favor turf racing, where you can combine trainer specialties, breeding and body language.

Husband and wife may differ in their approach but they share several important attributes. They are both structured, not allowing whims to detour them from a focused path. Both place high value on reducing stress factors that might violate their decision-making capacity. And both are highly conscious of the fact that the best and perhaps the only way to make money in this tough game is to use bizarre methods that no one else would think of adopting.

Can you win at the races without depending on sophisticated figures? With Ed and Susan comes double-barreled evidence that you can indeed.

Their secret weapon is their unique combination of mutual and mutuel love and respect. The all-important self-confidence factor is nurtured by their partnership. Susan Sweeney and Ed Bain happen to fit perfectly in a book about successful horseplayers, but they would also be stars of a book on successful relationships. The couple that plays together stays together.

But as long as the rest of the world shows no respect for horse bettors, Ed and Susan's success story will belong exclusively to our subculture.

Ed and Susan just sent round-trip tickets to a 17-year-old computer whiz in Alabama who has devised a program for compiling trainer data. Suddenly Ed finds himself with lots of spare time for new discoveries. We await his next winning formula.

Ed has been modest in attributing his substantial betting profits to a trainer method. Julian Brown believes that Ed's disciplined character and positive betting psychology have as much to do with his profits as the method itself.

"Ed is structured, patient and bets longshots," Julian explains.

Julian Brown questions the validity of dividing trainer specialties by sprints and routes. He believes that the pedigree of the trainer's horses

eclipses any training methods, and that a good trainer will win with both routes and sprints if his horses are bred to go both ways.

But Susan is quick to remind us that "if it works, why tamper with it?"