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*'T'd rather have a goddam horse.*

*A horse is at least human, for God's sake.'*

J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

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# THE START

Chasing foxes and servants can only keep a man entertained for so long. During the late 18th century, with no French Revolution to remove their heads and duels falling out of favour, English aristocrats increasingly occupied themselves by seeing whose horse was the fastest.

Speed was of the essence and, by mating their mares with exotic imported stallions – namely the Byerley Turk, the Darley Arabian and the Godolphin Arabian – aristocrats found themselves galloping faster and faster. Eventually, in 1780, they reached Derby.

They would have reached Bunbury but when the Earl of Derby and Sir Charles Bunbury tossed a coin to decide what to call a new race, at Epsom, Derby won. Over a century later, if Bunbury had still been alive (he wasn't) he might have been consoled by his appearance in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As it was, he was consoled by winning the first Derby with a handsome chestnut called Diomed.

The important thing to remember is that every

thoroughbred horseracing today is a descendant of either the Byerley Turk, the Darley Arabian or the Godolphin Arabian. The bluffer might usefully, and nonchalantly, remark, 'Of course, there isn't really much difference between any of them. They all come from the same three stallions, historically.'

This should be enough to spark off any attendant bloodstock expert and, while he or she delivers a long and complicated monologue, all that is required of the bluffer is to adopt a knowing and superior air, nodding occasionally.

## THE HEART OF THE MATTER

If a horse seems to have a lot of body near the front, it is worth speculating in approving terms on the likely size of its heart and lungs. Just as a car with a 2000cc engine is more powerful than a 1000cc version, so the size of a racehorse's heart affects its performance.

A big heart, known in racing as 'an engine', is a good thing. The two greatest Flat racehorses, arguably of all time (because there's always an argument), Secretariat and Frankel, both had exceptionally large hearts. Secretariat's heart weighed about 21lb, well over double the average. Like Frankel, he had 'a tremendous engine'.

Yet, with a racehorse, the heart of the matter is not so much the heart as the legs. It doesn't take a degree in anatomy to figure out that they have a fundamental design flaw.

Having started off, in the proverbial mists of time,

with five toes on each foot, the thoroughbred somehow managed to lose four of them, leaving it with only its middle toe to stand on. If that isn't bad enough, it has ridiculously thin legs.

Whereas most creatures use their legs to move around, the thoroughbred racehorse uses his to give sleepless nights to his owner and trainer, and a lucrative occupation to members of the veterinary profession. The expression, 'He's got a leg', although at first sight both obvious and reassuring, upon closer examination turns out to be shorthand for 'He's got a leg but it's got something wrong with it. I haven't looked at the other three yet.'

The bluffer will always be on sound ground when asking, 'How are his legs?' The same thought will have occupied most of the trainer's waking hours since he was first issued with a licence. During brief intervals when the trainer is not worrying about his horses' legs, he is feeling them, because he knows they can't be trusted. No trainer's wife has as much attention paid to her legs, however fine, as the most knock-kneed horse in the yard does.

If the legs in question are fine and dandy today, they are only one false step away from being put in the care of a veterinary surgeon for the next month. Wherever a stone is to be found, a racehorse can be relied upon to seek it out and step on it.

At heart, the thoroughbred is a collection of parts which, when working in harmony, present one of the finest sights known to man. It is a pity that they are most in harmony when the horse is standing still.

Wonderful though the thoroughbred racehorse is, it has an unfortunate predisposition to commit suicide, with the occasional murder thrown in. Even in its stable, it cannot be relied upon not to self-harm, being prone to be 'cast in its box', meaning that it is lying down and either can't or won't get up. This may be because he is due to race at three o'clock that afternoon at Catterick, or because he has got stuck. When you try to help him up, he is liable to injure both himself and you. Someone else will have to call the doctor and the vet. As the horse is more highly valued than his trainer, the first call will be to the vet, whose bill will be bigger than the doctor's, with more scans and sophisticated treatment to be arranged.

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Obviously, things become more dangerous when a racehorse emerges from its box. In the outside world, the opportunities for mayhem are almost infinite. Suffice it to say that if an outing to either the gallops or a racecourse is completed with both horses and humans intact, it has been a good day, and an unusual one. The trainer might even get a decent night's sleep.

He or she will need it, because tomorrow the horse will probably have 'got a leg'.

That is why one of the most admired features of a racehorse is its ears. Not only is it rarely necessary to summon a vet to examine a horse's ears but, pricked up and alert, they give a horse's head a noble air. The horse stands there, staring into the distance, ears erect, a magnificent sight, ready to be photographed. When it puts its ears down, it means that the photographer is about to be bitten.

If you still think you'd like to own one, it's time you trotted along to the sales. More on this later.

## WHAT THIS BOOK WILL DO FOR YOU

Horseracing is a maze. People have spent lifetimes trying to find their way around it, even out of it. The bluffer hasn't got a lifetime to spare and, when he finds himself on the spot, this short but definitive guide offers invaluable help.

It sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about horseracing and to equip you with the vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and techniques that might even allow you to be accepted as a horseracing expert of rare ability and experience. But it will do more.

It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that, until you read this, you probably didn't know the difference between a handicap and a hurdle.