



Charlie Davis

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Thirty-one-year-old Charlie Davis of Seattle, Washington, had a different indoctrination into betting harness racing than most. Where most everyone reading got their start through friends and family, Charlie did not. In fact, he never even watched a harness race before last summer and had never even bet a horse race of any kind before 2008. How did he turn into a harness fan, bettor and horse owner in only seven or eight months? We sat down and asked him.

Q: What's your history when it comes to betting and gambling in general?

A: I was always a sports bettor and huge sports fan. I spent most of my time betting NFL, College Football, College Basketball, and the Premier League. I enjoyed it because I had an edge that I could exploit to make money.

Q: What was the edge?

A: I loved numbers and still do. Sports gambling is great because everything is on the Internet and it is all 100% free. I could get box scores, past records, spread and betting line records, weather – everything. When you have that kind of data available, there's no limit to what you can do. I input everything into a database and I would bet each day with some success.

Q: Do you still sports bet?

A: No, not really. I began going less and less to Vegas and online wagering was becoming a no-no, so I quit and concentrated on my life and my job. I still had an itch though, so in around early 2008 I started looking into other games of skill.

Q: And then you came across horse racing?

A: I did. I started visiting chat boards that were racing focused and I read as much as I could, and I got involved. Remember, I had never bet a horse race in my life, so it was all new to me. I had to ask some stupid questions but as with most things in life, you have to really study and ask questions if you want to learn. I was fortunate to meet a poster on one board who lived in my area and was an excellent handicapper, named Doug Hillstrom. After talking with him for a little while via email we made a date and headed to Emerald Downs, which was our local track. I began learning about horse racing betting with Doug and he was a great help. I had heard that takeouts were astronomical and it was a difficult game to win at, but I was having so much fun that I didn't pay much attention and dove right in. I was not planning on losing money or simply making action bets, though, so I committed myself to learn as much as I could.

Q: What was the process like?

A: I bought and read almost every book available – Crist, Beyer, Brohamer, whomev-

er. Some of them were hard to understand, but I asked questions of helpful bettors and worked through it all. I was playing mainly as a pen and paper handicapper at this time, and I did very poorly. I had heard a lot from my sports betting friends that the takeout was hard to beat in racing when compared to the 4.5% in sports betting, and I was living proof. I lost about \$10,000 really quickly, and wondered if I made the right decision. I still wanted to try, though, so I started to go back to work. I reverted back to my sports betting days and thought I would try to get some data and handicap. That was more difficult than I thought because historical information wasn't free like in sports betting. I bought some past Bris data which was \$1 for past performances and \$0.25 for results files and tried my best at database handicapping. I bet much less, but at least I was not losing as much and I was starting to gain an understanding into how I could successfully attack this game.

Q: Was there a turning point?

A: The turning point for me was a software program that I ran across. It was my kind of program because it was database driven and not a 'black box.' I bought it and began spending many hours learning the system. Suddenly I could at least hold my own and began to like racing and want to follow it more and more. It's a lot easier to like horse racing when you are winning money. A really nice benefit to the day I came across the software that I don't overlook was meeting the program creator, Jeff Platt. He was also the President of a horseplayer group I soon joined called HANA – the Horseplayers Association of North America (www.horseplayersassociation.org). It helped shape my next few years in the sport.

Q: Indeed it did because you are now on the HANA board of directors, correct? What was the impetus for you to get that involved in your new sport?

A: Moving from sports betting to horse racing I saw all of these... what I thought were... ridiculous policies — having to pay big money for past data, high takeouts, having to have three or more wagering accounts to bet all tracks, trainers caught in violation of drug policies that maybe sat out for a week and then repeated their violation, and sev-

eral other issues. It was a strange world and one I was not used to in sports betting. After speaking to Jeff and the crew I was hooked and thought “why not get involved to see if we can make things better?” It's been a blast and despite the time involved in volunteering, it has all been worth it.

Q: What have been the benefits of being part of HANA?

A: The people, the racetrack visits, the camaraderie, and the learning about the sport are all great fun. I have been able to visit racetracks with everyone that I never would have gone to on my own. I have been to Keeneland every meet except one since joining. I have been to Saratoga, I have been to Santa Anita for the Breeders Cup and several other tracks too. When you surround yourself with snake-bit, long-time horseplayers who love racing, it's easy to fall in love with it. In fact, when we had a raceday at Monmouth in Jersey we arranged for a trip to the Hambletonian. It is how I was first introduced into harness racing.

Q: What were your impressions of harness racing your first time?

A: I was already someone who wanted to support harness racing because at HANA we dealt with the takeout decrease at Tioga Downs. I met people like Jason Settlemoir and Nick Salvi who I immediately liked. I threw a few dollars into the Tioga pools, but I did not have the foggiest idea what I was doing. We were all thoroughbred patrons and none of us had been to harness before — when I found out I could go live to a prestigious race, and spend some time with Moira Fanning [Hambletonian Marketing Director] who was going to help us as a goodwill ambassador, I was excited. I was blown away by the people in harness racing. They were completely different than many of the thoroughbred people that I had met. Moira was awesome, and I asked questions to everyone around me and they were all helpful and happy to answer me in a detailed, patient way. I had never felt more welcomed at a racetrack. I spent two days betting and I even hit a Pick 4 with a LOT of help. I absolutely loved the two days and I was intrigued by the sport itself. I wanted to learn and support it.

Q: Did you find it difficult to learn harness racing when you got back home?

A: Definitely and I am still far below the curve. I tried to do what I did for thoroughbreds. I have been able to read blogs, follow some bettors on Twitter and follow some chat boards. Unfortunately, there is very little literature and what there is tends to be all about ‘feel betting.’ I wanted data, statistics and things like that, just like I had with sports betting and later on the thoroughbreds because that’s the way my mind works.

Q: Did you find any statistics to use?

A: Not really. It was expensive to get them and I did not want to pay that kind of money and spend that kind of time building my databases from scratch while I was still putting so much time in at the thoroughbreds. I estimated it might cost me \$5000 for data and many hours of database architecture. The upfront cost and time was a huge barrier to entry. I thought the data — with harness having all one mile races — would be much cheaper. Plus, because the sport handled less I assumed they would be actively catering to players wanting to switch. Instead I found it much more difficult to get started in than thoroughbreds.

Q: How do you currently play the harness races?

A: I support the sport by taking a look at the sheets at Whatwins, or doing some very rudimentary handicapping. I played the races at Northlands a few weeks ago, but just small. I also play the Meadowlands from time to time, when some friends are chatting about it on Google Talk or Twitter, and I try to play at Tioga Downs whenever possible to support their low takeout initiative.

Q: What do you like about it, when you compare it to the thoroughbreds?

A: I like the fact the form is easier to read, and that the horses race so often. It’s fun to handicap, even when you do not know very much, like me. A friend is a good physical handicapper and that really helps in harness, so I like watching the post parades. You can learn more in harness in the post parade than you can in thoroughbreds, I think. I think it’s a ton of fun to watch. The people seem much less adversarial than in the thoroughbred industry and it feels like a community that I want to be a part of. I think that

is one of the reasons that I made myself an owner; because if I cannot bet it as much as I want to, I might as well still be a part of it.

Q: How did you get into ownership?

A: Being a board member of HANA, and seeing the rest of the crew at HANA were horse owners, I thought it would do me some good to be one too. I invested in Renpher Stables, which was a partnership that a friend got me into for thoroughbreds only. I had heard that there was no better feeling than watching your own horse thundering down the stretch and I found that to be true. It is a real thrill. After visiting the Hambletonian I knew I wanted to become involved in standardbred racing. Not long after, I had my chance because I learned about Frank Antonacci’s Bourbon Slush stable and there was room available. I bought two shares for myself and one for a friend as a Christmas present.

Q: What do you think of it so far?

A: It’s awesome. Frank is great and I have learned so much from him and everyone involved about everything from breaking a horse and training it down to staking and planning out a career. I’m even learning about breeding: who are the best sires, the best granddams and things like that. The best part of it is that they’ve structured it where all costs are paid upfront, and you don’t have to deal with a monthly bill. I could not give a present to someone knowing they had to pay a monthly bill so this worked out great for me and as a gift!

Q: Do you have any free advice to harness racing? What can make our sport more bettor friendly?

A: As a new bettor, some of the issues I mentioned before stick out. I am one of those bettors who only bets tracks with low takeout and in harness there are very few of them, other than maybe Tioga, or the Meadowlands or Balmoral Park Pick 4’s. I can get lower takeout at my ADW, but pool size needs to be bigger and I am pretty sure lower takeout would help pool size. I wish there was data that I could use that did not cost so much and was easy to use and manipulate. I’d also love to have a software program for harness that works for people who like numbers like me.

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Q: Any parting thoughts?

A: I am a lucky guy. I am a member of a thoroughbred partnership, a harness partnership, have been to dozens of racetracks and even played in my very first NHC in Vegas this year. Three years ago I did not know much about horse racing at all. I have met a lot of great people in such a short period of time, from my first friend Doug, to the HANA members, Moira Fanning, Frank Antonacci and many others. I can honestly say, without many of them I would probably be playing poker or still betting sports. I am glad I chose horse racing.