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Vernacular of the Race Track

Esperanto, it is said, is making headway. But how many "average people" know five words of it? is it imaginable that the breath of universal popplarity can ever be breathed into any manufactured language which, according to the best information, is so rigid, fixed, unalterable, sedate, and proper that a patter or a patois or a slang can never be evolved out of it?

It isn't posible to conceive of a baseball "fan" "rooting" in Esperanto, nor a "horse bug" Esperantist howling himself black in the face over a field of thoroughbreds turning into the stretch. It isn't possible either to conceive of the baseball "fan" or the "horse bug" giving up, for all the Esperantos that ever may be invented, the pat and illuminative phrases that they have already invented, devised, and chosen wherewith to express themselves.

Already we have transferred scores of these baseball and racing terms to the currency of our every day speech, and this sort of transplantation goes on unceasingly. Men who begin by using quite precise language involuntarily fall into the use of the patter when they become interested in either of the great American outdoor sports, baseball or racing. St. John today will see the first running races ever held here and the enthusiast will soon no doubt acquire the catchy termsof the track.

Recently, meeting a friend just returned from the race track, I asked him what horse had won a certain race. "Dandelion, he win," was his offhand reply—and this man had taken honors at Harvard. No race track "regular," in talking it over, ever says that he "won" a bet. "I win a bet," is his way of twisting the tense about.

The slang of the baseball diamond probably is of wider currency than the patter of the paddock; because, for one reason, there are more Americans interested in baseball than there are in racing, and because again the patois of the baseball park is more readily understood than the quaintly picturesque lingo of the race track.

It would be possible for a man not familiar with racing patter to listen to a group of racing "regulars" "pony buzzing" for an entire evening without in the least understanding what they were talking about. American track slang differs wholly from the patter of the English tracks. It is keener, more picturesque, and more "nervous and alive," if, as may be, it is more difficult to understand. It is largely a language of paradoxes. It is humorously overdrawn. It is in sore need of a glossary, to which the compliation here to follow shall be a mere sketch or rough draft; for a glossary of racing slang would be an ample volume.

The terms of prophecy, in the patois of the track, are grotesquely exaggerated. Every horse in the race, except the one you are eloquently advised to back, is a "mut" or a "crab," or a "dog," or a "skake," or a "goat," or a "camel," or a "piece of cheese," or a "hunk o' Edam," or anything else that is inconsequential or ridiculous when coupled with the idea of racing.

When He's Bound to Win.

And it is not sufficient that the horse you are advised to bet on will win with absolute certainty. That horse will win with the most absurd ease

"It'll be a joke."
"He'll walk in."
He'll "cop in a stroll."
He'll "win on the bit" or "on the chin strap."
He'll "go ay-way and hide from all o' them other dogs."
He'll "spread eagle them others."
He'll trudge all home alone.
He'll "winsky as far as from here to the Rocky Mountains and back."
He'll "cop a noddin'."
He'll "grease home under reefed tops'ls."
He'll win "in the boy's (jockey's) lap".
"The kid on him'll be lookin' back an' laughin'."
The horse will "roll home."
The horse "could fall down and then win."
The jocky riding him "could get off and peddle matches, and then cop."
The extraordinary animal on which you are urged to gamble your money could "romp around the track twice to them others' once and smother 'em."
The "kid on him could go asleep and then fetch him home."
He'll "be pulled to the shape of a pretzel" at the finish, or "pulled to a doughnut," or "yanked double," or "hauled sideways," when the "tape" is reached.
He'll "make the Empire State Express look like a one-hoss shay."
He'll "make an ice yacht look like a treetoad navigatin' a dusty road."
He'll "win off by himself."
He'll "tin-can all the way."
He'll "run the eyeballs out o' them others."
He'll "cop from flag fall to finish."
He'll "tiptoe 'em out in front all the wayovitch."
He'll "be a kickin' pebbles at 'em all the way."
He "could win on three legs."
He could "carry a bale o' hay and a member of the Fat Men's Club and still win."
He'll "run rings around 'em."
He'll "tie 'em all in figure-o'-eight knots."
He'll "vamp down to the tape like a scared rabbit."
He'll "grab the spinach by a sixteenth of a mile."
The others behind him'll finish next Tuesday week."
He'll "be in the barn, munchin' carrots, when they get in."
He'll "be cooled out and sound asleep in his stall, when them others reach the wire."

And finally, to clinch it, you are informed that this phenomenal thoroughbred is "in." "It's in," is the phrase. "It's in, the red board is down" (the red board confirms the numbers of the three placed horses), "and they're payin' off on him."

The casual racetrack visitor, uncertain as to what horse of the field he will "go to" (i. e., gamble on), must be armored in a veritable Bessemer shell of incredulity to withstand the temptation to choose as his medium of speculation an animal of such prodigious speed and power as these rapidly rattled off phrases portray.

But if He Loses.

The favorite that fails to do the trick is consigned by those who have backed him to win to an unplumbed and fathomless abyss of scorn.

"He's a lob," the disgruntled ones observe of the defeated favorite.

"He couldn't beat me little sister runnin' across the road in a game o' prisoner's base."

"He couldn't beat a steam roller goin' backward."

"He couldn't head a bull up a lane."

"He couldn't beat a fat man in a spud race."

"Him for the glue works."

"He couldn't beat a land crab goin' up grade."

"He's a lump o' Swiss."

"He's only a mornin' glory" (a "mornnig glory," in the turf vernacular, being a horse that "works great guns" when it comes to speed at his morning trials and fails dismally "when he goes to the races" in the afternoon).

"He can't run fast enough to keep himself warm."

"He's a phony and a four-flush and an in-and-outer" ("in-and-outer" being a horse of the "now you see it and now you don't" variety, which wins gallantly today, only to fall down most abhorrently tomorrow, thus lacking in consistency).

"He runs for the books" (a horse, that is to say, that the bookmakers can safely "lay against," knowing that they "have an ace under cover").

"He's a sucker horse" (a horse, namely, that only the "suckers" should back; and the chaps who say this after having backed the "sucker horse" wholly overlook the fact that they are including themselves under that heading).

"He ought to be hitched to a milk wagon."

"He couldn't beat a bum with a wooden prop (leg) in a sack sprint."

"He couldn't beat me old aunt goin' to mass."

"He was lookin' for a hole in the fence all the way."

"He wanted to lay down before he'd gone a furlong."

"He just seen that other horse come alongside and look him in the eye, and he said, 'You can have it.'"

"He couldn't beat a milch cow headin' for a crick."

"He's there with the saffron steak."

"He curled up like a caterpillar in front of a grate fire."

"He let 'em all pass him as if he was tied to a post."

"He couldn't raise enough of a lope to keep his hoofs from crackin'."

There is no middle verbal ground for the race follower. Everything must be expressed in terms that embody the final degree of exaggeration. A horse that has accomplished a good trial or "work out" for a race is said to have done the trial distance "in nothing."

"He put down the mile, on the bit, an' just a-breezin', in nothin'," is the way the "railbird" expresses it; not, as might be supposed, with obvious enthusiasm, such as the remarkable purport of the statement would seem to call for, but in a perfectly cool and self controlled sort of way, as if he was stating a simple fact,—that the horse had travelled over the measured mile without consuming any time at all in doing it.

The great horse that, despite his greatness, is beaten in a noted stake race, is held to be not worth feeding by the user of this uncompromising out and out kind of track patter. Once a "regular" remarked of the mighty Hermis, for whom sixty-five thousand dollars had been paid but a short time before, "He ain't worth eighty-five cents, and I wouldn't give that much for him if he was put under the hammer right now." Hermis had just lost a race by a nose, after being all but left at the post, and that was the answer. The horse that is the idol of today is the "cur" of tomorrow with the "regulars."

While the crack thoroughbred is in the enjoyment of a winning streak—"deliverin' the goods" and "backin' up with the turnips."—he is adverted to as a "Hindu" or a "Salvator" or a "Domino" (these references being to famous horses of the gone time); but just as soon as the acclaimed horse, staling off or weary of campaigning, begins to lose his races, the "hammerfest" of the followers of the game begins, and the shattered idol is a "cur" and a "bogus" and a "near horse," and his prowess was always exaggerated, and he "never had nothin' to beat," and "Sysonby could a made him look like a bone spavined Angora," and so on.

The cynicism of the "regulars" when their "picks" (the horses they select to win) don't "run to the dope" (when they fail to race up to their previous form;, is expressed in many darkly suspicious phrases. If the complaining "regular" believes that the horse wasn't intended to win by his owner and trainer, he says, "The mutt wasn't meant, but was just out for work."—"They gave him a bran mash and a couple o' pails o' water before sending him to the post," he is likely to add. Or, of the horse that beat their pick, they will say, "He was so full o' the hurry up soup that it ran out o' his ears" (the hurry up soup" is the "hop," otherwise speed accelerating drugs, with which some venal trainers "dope" their horses before sending them to the post in order to increase their chances of success).

Hard on the Jockey.

If the jockey falls under the suspicion of the "regulars," they say of him, "I guess he's not there with the strong arm, hey?" and "D'je git hep to that Sandow biceps gag he rung in?" which, interpreted means, "Did you notice how he employed his Sandow biceps to pull that horse?" They'll say of the suspected jockey that he "took the mutt into a million pockets, went to the outside, got hung on the fence by the other crabs nine times, had to go around horses, and even then his horse was climbin' over horses at the finish an' couldn't a lost if the kid hadn't grabbed him from the tap o' the gong."

The incompetent jockey is alluded to as somebody who "couldn't ride in a furniture van."

The starter himself, one of the most powerful of active race track officials, comes in for his share of criticism, when by chance he sends a field away to a ragged start. "Start horses? He couldn't start trolley cars!" the angry mob bawls of him, and they go so far as to intimate that "I guess maybe that starter didn't have a ticket in his boot on that lob he sent away in front, hey?" meaning the quite impossible thing that the starter had gambled on the animal that accidentally beat the barrier and flashed into the lead from the lifting of the webbing.

Most of the "regulars" are deeply suspicious of all steeplechase races of late years, and whenever the favorite falls at one of the obstacles and a long priced leaper wins the race, they loudly call the race a "shoolin" (a fixed affair, that is, in which the steeplechase riders have arranged to drop to the rear of the "meant" jumper and "shoo" him to the wire, they previously, of course, having got their money down on the horse thus generously treated).

Involuntarily the turf writers themselves in time begin to employ curiously exaggerated terms in their daily accounts of the racing. When, for instance, they wish to say that the track on the previous day was muddy, they write that "the track was knee deep in mud," an obvious impossibility, since race horses would be mired before taking ten steps in such going; or that "the track was a swamp, a morass, a sea of mud;" or, if the track was dry and dusty, they say that "the track was as hard as iron, and a Sahara simoon blowing across it all the afternoon made it still harder."

The patter of the betting ring is equally esoteric, exaggerated, and difficult for the novice to understand.

When a bookmaker "rubs" he reduces the price against a horse because of a steady play against the animal.

If he "holds that one out," he declines to "lay a price" against a certain horse, because he is putting on that one himself.

When a bookmaker is "making a Dutch book" (a rare thing, by the way), he is found by the shrewd ones to be laying such prices against the horses that all of them may be played and the man who so plays them can come out ahead no matter which wins.

"Knocking a price down" is forcing the bookmakers to cut the price.

Playing a horse "on the limb" or "to peep" is to play that one to run third.

Playing him "for the plotz" or "one-two" is to play him to run second.

"Standing a tap" is betting all the money you possess on one well liked horse.

"What d'ye like?" is a question heard many hundreds of times an afternoon in a betting ring, and it means, simply, "What horse do you expect to win this race?"

When a horse is "write your own ticket," he is one of the despised outsiders of the long-shot variety, against which any price requested is given by the layers.

When the wise ones decline to take a chance on a fairish horse, that one is said to be "runnin' for Sweeney," or "runnin' for the end book," which means that the tip is out among the bookmakers that no very great effort is to be made by the owners of the fairish one to win that afternoon.

"Following the educated money" is betting in accordance with the judgment of highly expert followers of the game.

A "piker," of course, is a chap who makes small bets; whereas a "plunger or "high notcher" or "bumper Jack" is a man who "sends in" thousands "to a race."

When the "regular" is "broke," he declares that he is "all in."

The successful chap isn't "in funds;" but he "is there with a bundle," or "He ran a shoestring into a Shoe and Leather National Bank," or "He's got a bale of it," or "He walloped 'em for a hatful."

The unsuccessful one has some amusing lamentations. "Beat 'em?" he says disgustedly, replying to a friend's query. "Who, me? Say, I couldn't beat a drum!"

A Story of Crookedness.

While it is easy enough to take this patter apart, word for word, and explain it, it is inordinately difficult for the racing tyro to understand even a simple narrative of a race follower when such a story is being unreeled rapidly by the narrator. Here is an example of this. Not long ago I overheard a racing "regular" telling a little story about a crooked piece of work manipulated by a shady bookmaker and the shady bookmaker's brother.

"You see," said the narrator, "this pipeskerino layer had a brother that was working the paddock end. The favorite figured to be a one-to-ten thing, and he was 'Awkins's 'Orse, at that. Well, the chalker's brother gets to the cluck kid,—the jock, I mean—who's there with the strong-arm, and slips him a half-M to attend to the snatchsky stuff. That's the way it's rigged. Well, all the rest of the the ringsters lay one to ten against the favorite; but the shady peddler slaps up one to two and yells for the high slingers to come at him. He takes in a boilerful of kale at that figure without rubbing. But somebody in the judges' stand gets jerry to it, and the kid is warned that if he doesn't fetch the short-odds clomper home he'll get it where Fanny wears the fichu, and of course there's nothing else for him to do but to hand the two-cross to the phony layer; and he kicks the favorite out from the rap of the drum and fetches him down to the wire by the difference between Central and Rocky Mountain time, and the tricksy layer and his brother get a green ticket for the citron patch for theirs.

What possible chance would the layman have to untangle the meaning of a narrative like that? Yet it meant briefly, that the crooked bookmaker had arranged to have the favorite beaten; but the judges had got wind of the affair and had warned the jockey to do his best, and the job didn't go through in consequence.

Recently I overheard a trainer speaking of a small but promising two-year-old in his "string."

"Why," said the trainer, "that little scrap of a pug is only as big as a guinea pig or a woodchuck or a Mexican dog; but he can carry four piano movers and a ton o' coal in each saddlebag and then put down the five furlongs quicker than a spotlight could reach from the gallery to the stage."

This same trainer was endeavoring to convey an idea of how tired a certain field of horses were at the finish of a cup race at two miles and a quarter.

"Say," he said, "they all had search warrants out for holes in the fence. They were leaning on each other in the stretch like a layout of soused students at a stag dinner. 'Everyone of 'em was hollering for seventeen hours of straight slumber. They were only crawling along, doing about half a knot a week at the finish. You couldn't see 'em move. Oh, they were a tired lot o' dogs, right enough!"

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