

The Thrills of 1924, February 29, 1924

Dorothy Day

The New Orleans Item Friday; February 29, 1924 (P. 3)

The Thrills of 1924

—The fever of the track has gotten into their blood and the next day will find them swarming and wriggling through the betting ring, shouting and screaming with enthusiasm or silent and tense with despair.

“No improper language used in this room under penalty of being excluded from the grounds.”

“No drinking or smoking allowed.”

These signs affront the eyes of thousands of women who throng the race track daily and enter the betting ring between races. Some look at them and laugh, others look disgusted. “Something of an insult, eh?” one Englishwoman who was visiting the Fair Grounds, remarked.

The two exquisitely gowned and furred women from Philadelphia, whose guest she probably was, looked around uncomfortably and told of Havre de Gras and Saratoga. The youngest diverted the guest’s critical scrutiny by starting a discussion on her losses.

“I’ve been coming out here for two weeks now, and aside from the first bet I made, I haven’t cashed a one, although I’ve placed them every race. I’ve studied dope sheets, staying up hours to look up the record of the horses. I’ve memorized the sporting page until my eyes are most popping out. I’ve paid for tips every day. I’ve bet on hunches when I decided I couldn’t ‘dope them out’ and then my hunches were askew. If I placed a bet on a horse because I liked his colors or his name, I’d bet on him to win when I should have bet on him for place. They owe me a lot of money around here!”

Everybody Loves Horses

“Yes,” said the Englishwoman dryly, her attention not to be diverted. “It seems to me that they could well afford to devote more space and furnishing to a better ring for the women. Racing’s a gloriously healthy and legitimate sport. Everybody loves the horses and nothing is more exhilarating and exciting than spending your afternoons at the track. Women enjoy it as well as men and they pay out their money to make racing possible, and yet look how we’re treated.”

She looked around the room disdainfully as she spoke.

Downstairs at the Fair Grounds track, there is a huge, paper-strewn room, which appears to be as large as Madison Square Garden. The fruit stands and lunch counters here and

there are like little oases in a desert. The room is always thronged with men and filled with cigarette smoke, but there are barnlike doors every few feet so that the room is well ventilated. Women are not allowed in this room, and if they wish to place a bet, they must go up into the grandstand, through a cave-like entrance, and then into a room not as large as your living room at home. Even if it is pouring rain women cannot go through the men's betting room but must get muddy and besplattered and wet, going around the grand stand to the enclosure to look at the horses and their jockeys.

Thousands Crowd Room

The woman's betting room, as we said, is a small room, slanting on one side with the grandstand, with not a window in it. On every fine day there are thousands of women who must crowd into this room and fight and tear their way to the three or four bookies, not only to place a bet, but to get information as to the horses, jockeys and odds on each race. Long before the gong rings which means that the race is over, the women have crowded into the room to find out which are the jockeys and what are the odds on the next race. There are only three little tables and three or four benches at which they may sit to study their "dope" sheets and figure out how they wish to bet. There are half a dozen glaring electric lights which show strained, smothered looking faces, pushing and swarming circles surrounding white but placid bookmakers.

Next to the betting room is a room from which you can order a cup of coffee or a sandwich. The little waitress, who serves the women, takes care of their umbrellas and superfluous wraps, also provides them with slips of paper on which to bet. She is a very little girl with blonde bobbed hair, and childish eyes. The cold day we were there, she was rather pinched and blue and wore an imitation fur coat under her white apron. Though frozen, she was jubilant, for she had played a hunch and won.

Dressing Room Worse

"I just picked a piece of paper up off the floor and there was the word 'Normal' on it," she was telling the sympathetic women she served, "so I knew a horse by that name was going to run in the next race, and I just had time to place a bet 6 to 1 to win."

"Fortunately there's only one more race today, so you won't have time to lose much," one woman sighed. "If I only knew when to stop."

If the betting room is considered a pen and a disgrace to the track, the women's dressing room is worse. Although there seems to be plenty of space under the grandstand, the room is smaller than any theatre ladies' room. There is a colored maid to see that the floor and fittings are kept clean, but the walls and woodwork are dingy. In one corner there is a battered old couch but there are no other conveniences for resting.

Although it was an ugly, cold day, and there were fewer women at the track than there had been for weeks, even on the wettest days, the little hole was crowded with about 25 women who could scarcely move in the crush, who came there to find solace for their jangled nerves in smoking. There were two windows high up on one side of the room, but they were closed and you could have cut the air with a knife. If one has ever been in a room where men were smoking furiously and come away with hair and clothes reeking with the smell of tobacco,

one wonders how women who are so gorgeously clad can risk crushing and odorizing their clothes in this way.

Get Closer Odds

“They seem to have it in for women at this track,” one bejeweled creature was grumbling. “Look at these quarters. You’d think we were cattle. And the odds! Where they get ten to one downstairs, we get five to one up here. That kid in the restaurant got six to one on that long shot and they were getting ten and twelve to one downstairs. Of course you can send your money down, but you never know whether you’re going to get it back, so you lose both ways.”

“I bet on Telescope to win and cleaned up \$600,” one woman jubilated.

“Yes, and if you’d bet downstairs, you’d cleaned up a thousand,” another tried to dampen her enthusiasm.

“Never mind. I’ve made up for my losses today.”

All you hear, it seems, is that they’ve made up their losses, never that they’ve won. They tell of others who win, and win huge sums, but one woman sniffed, “If they talk about winning fifty thousand, they mean five.” Still our delusions weren’t shattered. Five thousand seems a lot of money.

Women With Gray Hair

It isn’t only the young and brilliantly dressed women who go to the races day after day, never missing. There are old women with gray hair, clutching programs, form sheets, and little books which tell the history and past achievements of every horse.

“Now how in the world did I know that he was a mud horse,” one grandmotherly woman with a capacious bosom, was grumbling. She looked as though she should be home playing patience or placidly knitting, and the race track terminology sounded strange and incongruous from her lips.

There are young girls in shabby imitation caracul coats, who looked as though they were shop girls out on a holiday, chewing pencils and jotting down figures on their programs. There are mothers and daughters together, women who looked as though they taught Bible class and led the choir in singing, school teachers and painted women. But the majority are amazing and beautiful creatures, whose clothes bespeak the Strand and the Rue de la Paix.

And over and over again you hear, “I can’t afford to come another day,” or “Thank the Lord I have my ticket back to New York.” “I shan’t come tomorrow, that’s all there is to it.” But none of them mean it. The fever of the track has gotten into their blood and the next day will find them swarming and wriggling through the betting ring, shouting and screaming with enthusiasm, or silent and tense with despair.