



Photograph by Cloe Poisson

Michael Kipness' father first took him to the racetrack when he was 2. Kipness doesn't like hanging out at the track now, and keeps an eye on races like the Wood Memorial from his office in Guilford.

## The Wizard

In the new global economy, there's room for a wager or two.

A lot of horses are running on April 10, and Michael Kipness has his eye on all of them, especially the 3-year-old thoroughbreds lined up at Aqueduct for the Wood Memorial, an important lead-in to the Kentucky Derby this Saturday.

Although he earns his living by publishing and selling a tip sheet about horse racing, Kipness, aka The Wizard, keeps the sometimes seedy world of the track at arm's length. He practices his business in an early 19th-century office near the Guilford Green, where the only clue to what goes on inside is the satellite dish on the side of the building.

Inside, three televisions are tuned to the Wood, the Arkansas Derby and the Bluegrass Stakes on one of the busiest days in horse racing. His computer is poised on racing sites, and

his phone is set with a speed dial to a telephone betting place. He won't say who is on the other end of the line or where the account is (U.S.? offshore?). He identifies himself only by a number, followed by a four-digit PIN number.

He is trim, 6 feet tall, wears fashionable eyeglasses and looks younger than 48. Kipness appears to be living the suburban dream, a comfortable home, a wife, three kids, Caribbean vacations; he's even coached his son's Little League team. He works 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., six days a week, like many other self-employed professionals in Guilford. The only thing unusual is his type of employment: touting and betting.

This year, for the first time, he's in a conundrum about

picking a winner for the Derby.

"In all the years I've been handicapping, I've never seen such a muddled scene up to today," he says. "It's a real crapshoot, and I have to write my thesis on the Derby. It's sold all over the world."

Based on hours of research of the horses' past performances, viewing tapes of horse races and almost lifelong experience, the Wizard publishes several analyses of horse racing that are available at various racetracks for \$5; he sells versions covering more tracks on the BRIS website for \$6 to \$10 apiece. For 10 bucks, a bettor will get track conditions, post positions, a detailed profile of each horse, advice on betting and which one, in the Wizard's opinion, will

win the race. He has a staff of four full-time and three part-time employees. Then, he follows his own advice by placing small and not-so-small wagers on the ponies.

On one of his better days, Kipness bet \$30,000 on the 1997 Derby winner Silver Charm and won \$50,000, netting \$20,000. Not bad.

For the upcoming Kentucky Derby alone, Kipness estimates that he'll sell about 3,000 sheets. For your information, everything is totally legal.

For the Wood Memorial, the Wizard picks Tapit to win, even though many oddsmakers favor Master David, a horse trained by racing hall of famer Bobby Frankel. According to his tip sheet ([www.wizardpicks.com](http://www.wizardpicks.com), or [www.brisnet.com](http://www.brisnet.com)) he likes

Tapit's speed and his performance as a 2-year-old. The Wizard admits he's had his share of angry customers who've lost money following his advice. He appeases them with free tip sheets and hopes they'll stick around to bet another race.

Kipness starts his day by driving to Branford at 5 a.m. to buy the daily Racing Form. He stops at Starbucks, sits with all the other working stiffs and starts handicapping with the information he reads in the Form.

At about 7:30 a.m. one recent Thursday, I meet the Wizard at the next stop in his daily routine, Club Fitness in Guilford, where he is huffing on the elliptical trainer, listening to tunes on his iPod. We're both members of the gym, aging baby boomers trying to stave off time and shave off a few pounds. I first noticed Kipness at the gym months ago reading the past performances from Aqueduct, Keeneland and other major racetracks while working out. Then my brother Chris, who has been known to bet on a horse or two, asked if I'd ever heard of a Guilford guy who makes a living offering his detailed opinion about horse racing. Gotta be the same guy on the elliptical trainer. I called him up and several months later he introduces me to his world of horse racing.

Kipness likens himself to a stock analyst, only what he's betting on is a lot more fun.

"People have made a lot of money with me over the years," he said as he pedaled a stationary bike at the gym. "Gambling on horses is a better investment than the stock market based on my knowledge and selection of wagers. I have an IRA and college funds for the tax write-off. But I don't like the dynamics of the stock market; there can be corruption in a company and then the stock is dead. Terrorism and world politics affect the market. In racing, you know the outcome in a minute and a half."

One satisfied customer is Jeremy Slevinsky of Watertown, a 30-year-old horse player who has been following the Wizard's advice since his father took him to a Saratoga summer meet 15 years ago.

"He gave me one of my first big winners - \$400," Slevinsky said. "His sheets don't owe me a dime."

Kipness was raised in Manhattan and his father first took him to the racetrack when he was 2 years old. There, he says, he met Damon Runyonesque characters like Manny the Q and Brucie the Brain, but it was a handicapper named Red who gave him his first real education. He used to cut school to go to faraway tracks like Liberty Bell in Philadelphia with Red. In those days, handicappers actually went to the track and were paid a little here and there by the winners when their advice paid off. Nowadays, Kipness earns

money regardless of whether his picks are accurate, and thanks to the Internet and satellite TV, he can handicap and bet anytime, anywhere.

Kipness was brought up in the family restaurant business and was groomed to take over, but in 1986 he decided to make his passion his career. He had already paid for college (he has a degree in psychology and education from Baruch College) and living expenses with his racetrack winnings. Kipness moved his family to Las Vegas but found he wanted to raise his kids in more wholesome surroundings, so they relocated to Guilford five years ago.

"It's awesome to be married to someone who loves what he does and is happy," says Noreen Kipness, the Wizard's wife. "I never have to worry about the mortgage. Michael is very controlled in his betting and he keeps business and the family separate."

As I stretch out on the red couch in his office, waiting for the Wood Memorial to begin, Kipness places his bets with "Angie." He's doing a dizzying array of exactas (picking the first and second place horse in the exact order) and part wheels (using a favored horse as part of a bet like an exacta or a trifecta).

Kipness leans forward in his chair, cracking his knuckles, as the horses bolt out of the gate. Tapit is left in the dust as the other horses pull

away from him. Then, he comes from behind, digs in and wins the race by a half-length, edging out Master David. The Wizard is thrilled because, on his tip sheet, he recommended that bettors go with Tapit to win and Tapit and Master David for the exacta. Personally, he's pocketing \$1,433 on wagers of \$35 on the exacta and \$150 on the winner.

"I bet five or six days a week and at the end of the year I make money," the Wizard says. "It's a part of my income, but mostly I depend on my business. I'm more of a handicapper than a gambler, but I like to bet to back up my opinions."

In the course of five hours, he's shelled out \$2,593 in wagers on a variety of races at Aqueduct and Oaklawn Park in Arkansas and Keeneland in Kentucky. At the end of the day, he's \$432 ahead.

"I didn't do great, but I didn't get hurt either. I picked the winner of the Wood Memorial," the Wizard says. "That was big; it was a big hit for me."

On to the Derby.

*Alix Boyle is a freelance writer in Guilford. She last wrote for Northeast on March 14 about the Guilford High School girls' basketball team.*

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