

# A pro finds his haven in the desert

Daily Racing Form commissioned free-lance writer Marc Siegelaub to explore how full-card simulcasting has revolutionized the racing industry. Siegelaub, a frequent contributor to the Racing Forum and an expert in handicapping and gambling, traveled from his home in New York to Las Vegas for a first-hand look at the race books in order to access how information is disseminated from the racetracks to the racing public. He also received input from DRF trackmen and from a cross section of horseplayers around the country for this series. The following is his third report.

It was nearly 6 p.m. and the crowd was filing out of Belmont Park on the closing day of the 1995 spring-summer meeting. The succession of juicy-priced winners in contentious full fields had produced a lively variety show for the 7,500 players on hand. Most of the departing patrons would not be making the 200-mile trip up the turnpike to Camp Saratoga, so the recently concluded card had marked their final live racing event of the season.

Among the last people exiting Belmont was Michael Kipness, a.k.a. The Wizard, creator of the most detailed and informative selection sheet on the New York circuit. Normally, he would have been upstate at the Spa already, chafing at the bit, eagerly awaiting the start of the premier gathering of horses, horsemen and horseplayers in the United States.

But circumstances were different this year: Kipness passed under the majestic archway of Belmont's main gate, strode to his car, gunned the motor and sped out of the parking lot without once glancing in his rear view mirror. When he finally came to a stop, he found himself in a newly constructed housing development at the base of a mountain, 15 miles northwest of the Strip in Las Vegas, and not in the foothills of the Adirondacks getting set for New York's foremost live extravaganza.

"When I walked out of Belmont Park for the last time, I felt liberated," said Kipness recently, lounging around the Pool in his back yard on a hot winter's day. "I felt as if one life was over and a new one was about to begin."

From the moment the backward thoroughbred industry boarded the raceship "Technology" and took off into cyberspace, Kipness felt in his bones he could never go back to the staid old days. Picture-perfect summer afternoons at beautiful Belmont before an empty house were bad enough; arctic afternoons spent at Aqueduct on filthy seats caked with bird droppings, where pigeons outnumbered players, were sheer torture.

Like a clairvoyant, The Wizard had looked into his crystal ball and had seen what the advent of full-card simulcasting would do to the barren racetracks: Oversized grandstands would become quaintly anachronistic; nine-race cards would become something to reminisce over; binoculars would become obsolete tools of the trade; paddock-goers and railbirds would become rare sightings; the bugler would become superfluous; the pungent smells of horse manure in the great outdoors would become sanitized; leisurely 30-minute intervals between events would become passe; terms such as 'reserved seating,' 'public-address announcer..... customer service' and 'live racing' would become archaic; bettors with one-track minds would become few and far between.

But The Wizard also recognized that full-card simulcasting would alter the very perception of horseracing as a retrograde industry moving in slow motion.

Confinement to certain time zones and geographical areas would give way to round-the-clock unrestricted travel; a betting menu consisting of small fields and dull animals force-fed to a captive audience would give way to a garden of eating and a smorgasbord of pari-mutuel delights made available to the masses, the ebb and flow of events proceeding in orderly fashion would give way to a riptide of activity with no beginning and no end; the plodding, laid-back pace of a day at the races would give way to edge-of-the-seat, rapid-fire, multi-card simulcasting.

### **The bug bites**

Like so many 30-something horseplayers, Kipness had tagged along to the racetrack with his dad on weekends in the 1960s, when the game was alive, and the horses were named Dr. Fager, Damascus, Buckpasser, Arts and Letters and Majestic Prince. But it was more than a genetic predisposition to gambling, or a ritualistic bonding between father and son that transformed an impressionable kid into a handicapping prodigy.

Kipness was bitten by the racing bug at an early age. He got a buzz just by ducking under the turnstiles and drinking in the intoxicating sights and sounds of the track – the Runyonesque characters; the electric current running through the stands packed with live wires; the magnificent flying machines and the diminutive, brightly clad, powerfully built athletes on their backs; the tote board lit up like a Christmas tree; the distinctive twang of Fred Capossela's signature announcement: "It is not post time."

Eventually, Kipness devoured the seminal works of Tom Ainslie like a baby feeds on mother's milk; he pored over every work written by the venerable handicapper Manny Kalish, who gave the lowdown on shoes and stickers to those readers in search of bettable longshots; he developed sharp instincts by tapping into the font of knowledge dispensed by certain wisemen who sat, like Buddhas, in the grandstand; he forged a lifelong bond with his dad, who still remains his biggest influence and closest confidant.

Kipness and his boyhood amigo Dave Liftin, one of the ace handicappers for *Daily Racing Form*, formed a deep bond from the days when they would sneak a transistor radio into Spanish class, run a wire under their shirts to their ears, stuff the past performances into their textbooks and tune into "Pack at the Track" on the radio to listen to a reenactment of the stretch call of some race from Aqueduct or Bowie.

"There was the time Dave and I bet on a horse running at Bowie that we had tabbed at Aqueduct," recounted Kipness. "We got set up – *Racing Form* and earphones in place – and listened intently as Pack called our race. It seems our good thing was emulating Silky Sullivan, lagging far, far back into the lane. But past the eighth pole, Pack gave him a call; in deep stretch, our horse was moving like a locomotive; at the wire, it was too close to call. After an agonizing few seconds in which Pack played up the drama, he finally called our horse (letter E at the OTB) the winner by a nose. I couldn't contain my feelings and instinctively leaped up and shouted "Yes!" Needless to say, my Spanish teacher did not share my enthusiasm

"Can you imagine a kid nowadays getting the same charge out of the racetrack? Horseracing is too slow, too boring, too complex, too out of the mainstream for the younger generation, who prefer video games to games of skill; they would rather be entertained than challenged."

Consider that Kipness' three children will have little opportunity or inclination to visit a racetrack during their formative years, as their father often did during the glory days of the sport. If they are exposed to the game at all, then it will most likely be as grown-up gamblers, and it will come later in life, via television or computer, in their home or at an off-course site. Not a pretty picture of horseracing's future for a dad who grew up eyeballing glorious athletes in the flesh, communing with great gamblers and reveling in the grand atmosphere.

### **The BRIS connection**

The present, much less the future, was looking awfully bleak when, in 1989, The Wizard received a letter from Richard "Happy" Broadbent 3d, of Bloodstock Research Informational Services (BRIS), that changed the course of his life and livelihood forever.

"I was visiting Saratoga, attending the horse sales," said Broadbent, whose father founded BRIS, the leading provider of valuable on-line data for the breeding industry since 1971, and I purchased The Wizard's selection sheet. I enjoyed reading it, and I appreciated the detail and quality of his product. At that time, I was putting together a handicapper's database, and I thought that The Wizard and BRIS would make a good fit: We were looking to offer our customers an edge by furnishing the best in added-value information and, as it turned out, he was looking to grow his business."

“I was struggling to make ends meet,” Kipness said. “Competition was fierce, and off-track business was declining – I needed to expand my base of operations. Broadbent offered me the chance to get involved with computer technology to reach a wider audience and, as it turned out, that proved to be my big break.”

The Wizard's association with BRIS enabled him to skirt the law of diminishing racetrack returns, until he finally was ready to make the big push. That occurred in the winter of 1994 when Kipness took a calculated gamble and raised the cost of his publication from \$2 to \$5. He figured that most of his customers would be willing to shell out an extra three bucks a day for his “undervalued” selection sheet. After all, the product laid out the information and the reasoning behind each pick in detail and, in his words, “every issue comprised a handicapping lesson.” The decision to separate himself from the pack – from Lawton, Centaur and The Beard – and increase the price of his sheet was his way of telling the public: “You get what you pay for.”

Kipness then put some additional distance between himself and his on-track competition by taking a ride on the informational superhighway. Business was booming at BRIS, and Broadbent, who in 1995 started up a company called Thoroughbred Sports Network (TSN) to supply players with “information they couldn't find anywhere else,” placed The Wizard's growing line of handicapping services on the Internet, expanded his electronic profile and heavily promoted Kipness.

But the biggest move was yet to come for The Wizard – he reached deep into his bag of tricks and out came his roots. His divining rod revealed that the racetrack was a dead end and he was a dead duck by limiting his choices to one live site. When the race books in Las Vegas cut a deal with the New York tracks to commingle their wagering pools, the way was paved for The Wizard to take his show on the yellow brick road to the Land of Ahhs.

As soon as Kipness reached the desert oasis for gamblers, he was off and running. He had assembled a crackerjack team of expert handicappers – Tom Amello, Nick Kling, Bernie Moore and Dick Powell back in New York, and he was now in perfect position to create the nationally syndicated selection sheet covering every major racing site around the country. Appropriately enough, The Wizard modeled his far-flung operation after the stable of the ubiquitous D. Wayne Lukas.

Like Lukas, Kipness manages his hand-picked handicappers from his national headquarters and keeps in constant touch with them by fax, phone and e-mail. The members of Team Wizard are based at various off-course outlets so they can catch all action from a medley of tracks, view race replays complete with head-on shots, and gather material and insights to swap in brainstorming sessions. Everyone is encouraged to contribute their input to spice up the handicapping mix, but the ultimate say-so rests with The Wizard in Las Vegas.

### **Very special treatment**

When Kipness relocated to Las Vegas, he faced a multitude of personal choices - from which races to play on a given day to which race book to play in - that emphasized how much the game had changed for the better. He felt like a kid in a toy store on his scouting trip around the city, searching for suitable digs from where to watch and wager on the horses. Ultimately, he selected the Resta, minutes from his front door and 10 miles northwest of the Strip.

“The Fiesta made me feel like a big fish in a small pond,” he said. “The desks provide ample room to spread out and enough privacy to shut out my neighbors. The chairs are comfortable, the lighting is fine and best of all the miniature televisions at each work station come equipped with headphones so that I can control what I see and hear.”

Paul Bach, the race- and sportsbook manager, quickly identified The Wizard as a VIP (very important player). Kipness' handle qualified him for a *Daily Racing Form* and a *Charts Weekly*, lunch, dinner, drinks and other amenities such as his own row of reserved seats with personalized bronze nameplates, and proximity to special electrical outlets to hook up his CD player, videotape machine and laptop computer.

“You have to earn special treatment, and Mike puts money into the machines,” said Bach. “We value his business, and the way we show our appreciation is by making him feel as comfortable as if he were in his own living room.”

Whether in his state-of-the-art office at home or at home in his state-of-the-art office at the race book, The Wizard has an almost superhuman ability to concentrate for long periods. His daily regimen consists of arising hours before the sun peeks over the mountaintops, running four miles along hilly trails, showering, shaving, sipping coffee and settling in for 12 hours of tough, grueling mental calisthenics.

"I think of myself as an athlete training for competition," he said. "When it comes to handicapping, it is imperative not to dull one's instincts and intellect. I don't keep voluminous personal records – most information is in my head – because it's a waste of time and energy. I do have a large-bound notebook containing lightly marked-up charts of all the circuits I follow, and I do have easy access to reference materials, computer databases and private clocking services, but mostly I go by feel and experience. When I open the *Form* or watch a race, I want to be in the right frame of mind to let my instincts do the talking.

"For instance, I create my own race call by tuning out the track announcer with the CD player I keep on hand. It helps me to separate the visual from the auditory, and to supply my own perceptions about how a race develops without being unconsciously affected. First impressions are important, but if I want to listen, there's always the replay."

The Wizard communicates his passion for the game in all its subtle and complex detail like an artist captures a mood through the skillful use of his palette.

"The goal of my sheet is to challenge the reader intellectually, and to bring a three-dimensional quality to the handicapping process. If I can paint a picture of a race, then a bettor can see where I'm coming from, which helps him form his own visual impression of the event."

While most players at the Fiesta can't help but notice the intense front right-hand corner of the race book with all the handicapping paraphernalia, all but one have kept their respectful distance. Paddy O'Neill, a square-jawed young man who bears an uncanny resemblance to Bruce Springsteen, and who once worked for Darby Dan Farm and campaigned at Turfway Park, has gotten to know The Wizard up close and personal.

"The guy reminds me of one of those old time Darby Dan classmates of John Galbreath," said O'Neill. "He doesn't miss a trick, he knows what's important and what's not, he works his butt off, and he can flat-out pick winners." High praise from someone who has his own racing page on the Internet and is attempting to crack the ever-competitive informational business in the age of full-card simulcasting.

But there is no such thing as an overnight sensation in this game – a rival would have to "work his butt off" for years and years and get up pretty early in the morning to keep pace with The Wizard. After all, his product is accessible in many different ways – by personal computer, by mail, by 900-telephone tape, on the Internet, at the newsstand and, yes, even at the racetrack – and it is available in many different forms – a conventional selection sheet with detailed commentary for each track, a super simulcasting service features two best bets each from four major racing sites, an in-depth telephone seminar from Southern California, a weekly scouting report on Triple Crown candidates, a thorough examination of stakes races from around the country, and a Breeders Cup handicapping profile and analysis.

The sum of the parts adds up to a whole lot of choice.

"Horseplayers in the age of simulcasting are no longer slaves to one-track, nine-race programs, or half-hour intervals between races," asserted Kipness with revolutionary fervor. "One of the main reasons players lose money is they make bad bets, and they make bad bets out of boredom and lack of choice. The key to winning money is to make the right bets, to avoid situations where you're betting for the sake of betting, to pick and choose your spots and to increase the volume of your bets by playing many tracks, not just one.

Kipness believes that full-card simulcasting means never having to say you're sorry that you bet that horse.

Many off-course outlets serve up 60-plus events in a seven-hour time frame, with races going off like firecrackers on the Fourth of July, so it is possible for the action-oriented gambler to employ The Wizard's 'Crystal Ball' (his best bets) selections from a variety of tracks and fashion a wagering strategy that in total makes up a whirlwind tour-de-horse production.

A typical day at the race book for a subscriber to The Wizard might start out at Aqueduct with a closer who raced against the bias last out, switch to Keeneland for a sneaky turf-bred maiden trying grass after two mediocre dirt attempts, fast forward to Santa Anita for a first-time starter from the barn of Brian Mayberry, hotfoot it to Hialeah to catch a Christophe Clement returnee, and so on.

"It's really rather simple," The Wizard explained. "My goal is to keep horseplayers in the game and solvent by getting them to think big not small, national not local, multi-track not one-track. Full-card simulcasting can be a boon to bettors who lack the desire or discipline to go to a live site and wait patiently for good plays to materialize. By using my selections – 'selection' is one of the most important words in the handicapping lexicon – and spreading around, they can enjoy action without sacrificing quality."

The Wizard's transition from a one-man operation confined to a solitary racetrack to a multifaceted global enterprise comprised of a network of operatives and technologies would have been impossible to conceive or implement without the advent of full-card simulcasting.

He has traveled light years in a relatively brief span of time, but he has miles to go.

Less than a month ago, for example, The Wizard and Broadbent (TSN) tested the international waters during the Dubai World Cup. The numerous hits their page took on the Internet indicated the world is their oyster and shrinking fast. Down the highway, The Wizard envisions spanning the globe with a product translated into various foreign languages for use by an overseas audience tuned in and turned on to racing in the United States.

What all this maneuvering just goes to show is that when an irresistible force (full-card simulcasting) meets a movable object (The Wizard), something is bound to give, and that 'something' is a one-track mind.