

‘There are few ills that can’t be arrested by backing a winner’

## ON LOCATION

Steve Dennis joins the crowd on a glorious day at Fontwell in search of some happy, winning punters. He’s not disappointed



ALL you need is love? Nah – all you need is a winner. Love wears off, wears out, leaves you wondering whether it was really there at all, yet there are winners in our lives from whom – Rare Holiday, 1990 Triumph Hurdle, 25-1, a fine example – the memory and the glory will never fade.

Every race has the potential to do that. Every race has a winner and that winner will unfailingly kindle a small spasm of undiluted delight in someone, somewhere. There’s Syria, of course, and the price of petrol, and global warming, yet there are otherwise few ills that can’t be temporarily arrested by the rosy glow that accompanies a well-backed winner.

Go forth, said the boss, for once leaving out the exhortation ‘and multiply’, go forth and find some winning punters and bask in their happiness. Go to Fontwell and bring me news of seven happy people so that we may all rejoice.

Actually, there are a great many happy people at Fontwell, for you’d need to be a proper state-of-the-art malcontent not to feel the spirits lift on such an afternoon. The sun is out, the sky is blue, there’s not a cloud to spoil the view – and we’re at the races. It’s an unimprovable combination.

The odds-on favourite in the first race is called Money Money Money, a four-legged call to arms that many answer, so when outsider-of-four Lucys Girl keeps on gamely after the last to confound the betting market the thought occurs that perhaps it might be hard to find a happy punter now.

Wrong; there’s always someone punching the air, and this time it’s Sue Bushell. Why Lucys Girl? Ah, the old, old story.



(Main picture) It’s a tough life for some; (from top right) Colin and Wendy McLean with granddaughter Flo; studying in the sun; Sue and Chris Bushell

‘Lucys Girl seems to be the medium of a trackwide plunge, as well concocted as anything out of Druid’s Lodge’

“My niece is called Lucy, and she phoned this morning because she knew we were going to the races and asked me to put £2.50 on for her,” says Sue, from Womersley, near Guildford. As form students everywhere bite through their betting-shop pens in anguish, Sue’s husband Chris takes up the story.

“I thought it had no chance, but I put a fiver on for her anyway. I got 16-1, but it ended up 20-1 – ah well. Lucy’s 24 tomorrow and she was planning to buy a new Nexus tablet with her birthday money, so her winnings will go some way towards it.” And back to Sue.

“We go racing about four or five times a year, we love the little countryside courses and weather like this is a real bonus. It’s just as exciting to back a winner even when it’s not your money – and it’s our 43rd wedding anniversary today too.”

Perhaps I’d better rework my first paragraph, then. The second race provides a more conventional result, the well-fancied Cinevator justifying the shrewd decision-making of Paul Raymer, who wisely eschewed a trip to watch his beloved Millwall get rolled over at Nottingham Forest last night in favour of the shorter journey here from Blackheath, where he’s the manager of a McDonnell Racing betting shop.

“I didn’t fancy the favourite – it can’t jump a fence,” he says. “I had a score on it and I told all the boys in

the shop to back it too, so let’s hope they did.”

His wife Jo chips in with the news that they also backed Lucys Girl because their daughter is called Lucy. This Lucys Girl seems to have been the medium of a trackwide plunge, as well concocted as anything out of Druid’s Lodge, for after Bold Raider benefits from the ‘full AP’ to get up close home in the third and I pick out Sheila Bailey from a three-woman conga of punting delight, it emerges that she backed Lucys Girl too.

Bailey is here with the corporate crowd on the annual ‘Best of Worthing’ jamboree. She had a pound on Bold Raider because she’d heard of AP McCoy, had a pound on Lucys Girl after deliberately ignoring her daughter’s selections, only goes racing on corporate outings and is slightly breathless after her conga of jubilation. Her friends Melanie Peters and Chelsea Harman, who also backed the last winner, intend to step up from a conga to a sponsored walk of the Great Wall of China next year to raise funds for BabyBuddy, a charity co-founded by Harman’s mother Lorraine and the beneficiary of the bucket collection at Fontwell’s next meeting on September 8.

Three races down and the happiness quotient among punters is high. Some of us, though, prefer our happiness in pint measures, and while such is sought and found another angle on the pleasures of a day at

the track makes itself evident. McCoy – as he so often does – poses for a photo with two children on his way back to the weighing room, his patient grin outshone by the beaming smiles of ten-year-old Annamay Rainey and her brother Kieron, eight.

“He’s been so kind,” says their mother Frances. “We won some money here a year or two ago and bought Annamay a print of AP and Wichita Lineman. Next time we came racing we took it to him and he signed it for us.”

EVERYWHERE you look there’s a winner. Here’s Richard Sole, wet-thumbng his way through a roll of notes after backing the well-named Safe Investment. His brand of delight is a little gruffer than most. He doesn’t want his photo taken but he does allow an insight into his punting technique.

“I asked my wife Sandra what she was doing this morning, and she told me she was going to the bank – so it had to be Safe Investment.” Phil Bull spins gently in his grave. So, will Sandra be receiving a nice present this evening?

“You’ve got to be joking, mate. I’m keeping this to put on McCoy in the last.” Sole greeted his win with the relatively straight face born of years of practice, but not everyone greets a winner that way. When was the last time you actually jumped up and down with your arms in the air as your horse passed the post? That’s a part of you – and me – that’s gone forever, but it can still be found in Bengi-Sue Sirin, who leaves the ground with elation when Nicky Nutjob flashes home in the fifth.

“I wish I’d put on more than £2 now,” she says. Yes, that’s the usual reaction, Bengi-Sue. “I like to go against the five-star rating in the racecard, and I prefer the consistent ones that always seem to run well. The horse’s name was a plus, obviously.”

Bengi-Sue, who is just about to embark on her second year studying English and American Literature at Goldsmiths College in south-east London

but is not going to spend her winnings on textbooks, is enjoying only her second visit to a racecourse and is chaperoned by her grandfather Geoff Deards, who has been racing countless times and owned horses – including the talented Japsilk – with Richard Hannon when he first took out a licence. He’s had a couple of winners today, although not Lucys Girl.

Thank heavens for that, I thought it was just me.

There’s another jumper. Douglas steams clear on the run-in to send arms aloft by the rails, arms belonging to Wendy McLean, who had never been racing until taking a guided tour here last year and, becoming smitten by the Sussex track.

“It’s Fontwell or nothing for me, I’ve never been anywhere else,” she says. “It’s such a lovely little track, you can see everything so easily.”

“I go for the price, I like to pick outsiders, but even if I don’t have any winners I still have a lovely time here.”

Her infectious enthusiasm is rubbing off on granddaughter Flo, who runs a livery yard and owns a Polish warmblood mare named Czarka but has never been racing before. They’ll both be back in the autumn, any racecourse you like as long as it’s Fontwell.

They skip the last race to beat the traffic but plenty hang around to hover up the odds-on about Sugar Hiccup, including David Moran, who gets out in the getting-out stakes, turning a losing day into a winning one. He usually bets online but reckons there’s nothing like the feel of notes warm from a bookmaker’s paw, nothing like the proximity to the horses themselves.

“I had a day off work, it’s a beautiful day, I only live down the road in Southsea, why wouldn’t I come here? There’s nothing like coming racing, going down by a fence and watching them jump – you just can’t beat seeing it all live. It’s been a lovely day out.”

Especially if you’ve had a winner. Seven winners, seven little snapshots of happiness. What a pity there isn’t an eighth race.

## TONY MORRIS



LAST Sunday I finally got around to doing something I’d been wanting to do for well over 40 years. Those of you who think you know me and have lively imaginations will now be indulging in wild flights of fancy over what it might have been, so let me put you out of your misery: I attended a promenade concert.

Why had I never done that before? Well, summers have always tended to be busy in one way or another, and I’m not one to go to a concert, a play or even the cinema on my own. I need company, and the right company, for anything like that.

My mind goes back to the time, 20-odd years ago, when I took my then live-in squeeze to the Royal Opera House for a performance of The Flying Dutchman.

She wasn’t enthusiastic, but after I told her that it was the shortest of Wagner’s operas, and that her two best friends were also going to be there, she relented and let me buy the tickets.

Of course, the tickets were not all that I bought. There also had to be a meal at a decent restaurant and an overnight stay in a respectable London hotel, so it was bound to be quite an expensive exercise but surely worth it to give my beloved a memorable night out.

The performance was brilliant – well, I thought so anyway – and I came out with spirits uplifted. Then I made the mistake of asking what she’d thought of it.

“It was bloody hot in there” was all she could muster to describe her experience of something that had me in raptures.

Since that episode I’ve always been careful about acquiring a partner for visits to artistic events, and I’ve missed many shows I would like to have seen for want of an equally enthusiastic companion. It came as a pleasant surprise when my eldest daughter, a regular attendee at Glastonbury and other gigs featuring acts I would run a mile from, expressed a desire to accompany me to Parsifal last Sunday. Keen? I should say so; she even paid for the tickets.

Wagner has always been my favourite composer, and Parsifal my favourite of all his operas. I have two recordings of it in my CD collection and I saw it staged at the Royal Opera House many years ago. The Royal Albert Hall production was ‘semi-staged’, so no scenery, no props, and if you didn’t know the story – my daughter, of course, didn’t – a lot was left to the imagination.

Wagner didn’t write much that provided scope for laughter, not even in Die Meistersinger, which is supposed to be a comedy, and there are certainly not meant to be any laughs in Parsifal. In a semi-staged production, I discovered there are laughs.

The single most important event in the opera is the long, lingering kiss that Kundry, the leading female

A long journey there, a nightmare trip home

character, plants on the lips of Parsifal. They were never within a foot of one another. As for the holy spear, about which there is a lot of singing, it made no appearance. And whereas most of the cast eschewed any kind of acting, Sir John Tomlinson, who must have played the part of Gurnemanz hundreds of times, couldn’t help himself. Every gesture he made was imbued with meaning, conveying the drama.

But the fact that in semi-staged form the production could raise the odd chuckle did not detract from the sheer power of the music, which was, as it always is, positively sublime. Daughter and I were both in tears at times.

THE one thing that took the edge off my visit to the capital was the journey home next day. The bank holiday rail service was diabolical, doubling the usual length of my journey from south London to Newmarket. When I read about the increased attendances at Monday’s race meetings, I had to think that while many may well have had a great time on the course, they probably had a lousy time in traffic getting there and back. It is bound to be a consideration when they contemplate whether to repeat the exercise.

I recall a time when bank holidays meant a significant increase in the provision of public transport, with many excursion trains to sports events, seaside resorts and other attractions. The railway companies did their damndest to help families have a fun day out. My first trips to Newmarket were by the race specials from Liverpool Street. Now only the Queen gets a special train on Derby day, racing’s greatest day out.

I remember with particular fondness the most wonderful festive season ever, travelling to Plainmoor in 1957 to watch Exeter City beat Torquay United 3-1 on Christmas Day, and celebrating our 5-1 victory over the same opponents at our place on Boxing Day. Happy days! And made possible by a public transport service that no longer exists.

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