



Presents the **Expert-ease** newsletter

Welcome back, Summer Races!!!
By far, my favorite time of the racing year...



Joe's Corner: Summer FUN Time!!!

I've been to quite a few tracks, and I really enjoy the summertime locations!!! So, which tracks are at the top of my list? It's changed over the years, and this is my current "big five", in order of my first visit. **Enjoy, and be inspired to take a road trip this summer!**

Del Mar (1981): It's hard to knock this long-time favorite off the topmost rung... and it's not going to happen anytime soon! It starts with the weather, which is impeccable almost 100% of the time; I have NEVER experienced an off-track condition there... so there are no "wasted" handicapping days. The crowd is always buzzing (and often buzzed), with beachgoers easily mingling with the bluebloods. It's more like a party disguised as horse racing! The race cards used to be better, but they're the best in California!

Monmouth (1987): I lucked into going there while on a two-week business trip – where they sold forms at the hotel front desk and the track entrance was just ten minutes away – and I made sure to get there every day for the entire trip. I returned there the summer after I retired, and it felt the same. The cards have always been good and the race callers have always been top-notch... it's my favorite second-tier track. I need to get back there soon.

Saratoga (2017): Another "first year of retirement" visit. After going to Monmouth, I headed up north and I took three days to soak up everything: the town, the local area... and the track! I was happy to find the free parking (near the training track), brought my own drinks and food, and was treated to high-quality racing. The grounds needed a bit of TLC work, though... I'm sure they've taken care of that since my only visit. Someday, I'll return...

Kentucky Downs (2023): A newer entry, and it's quickly moved up to #2 on my favorites list. I love the undulating turf-only layout, with a "European meet" feel to it. It also has an attached casino-hotel. The entire staff treats you right, including the boss (Johan Mirkovic). I can't wait to return!

Woodbine (2024): While not a true "summertime" destination, it has some very nice features: the history, high-quality racing AND nice people. As a bonus, Niagara Falls is a little over an hour away. Oh, Canada... I'll be back!

Yours in Racing,

Joe

Quick Hits

Places to Be

At the Track	Get there!!!
NOT at the Track	Anywhere!!
Race Books	Find one!
In-person Tourneys	Try it & Love it!

Things to Do... now & forever

- Keep accurate wagering records!
- Skip a race now and then!
- Stop and smell the roses!

Nostalgic Ramblings

Who was Vagrancy?

This mare was a superior racer¹, going long and short, wet or dry. She debuted as a 2-year-old in summer 1941, then won her second start. At age three, she won the Pimlico Oaks, just one of nine stakes races she won. She also "beat the boys". In 1948, the initial Vagrancy Handicap was first run... and it is still being run! **Respect!**

She produced many stakes winners over her 15 years as a broodmare. And yet, there was no call to the Hall of Fame. **What a shame!**

Featured in Expert: The Good Stuff for 2026!

The 2026 release is ready! What's new, improved & cleaned up...

Pre-Race Screening:

- For the overall setup, the Dirt and All-Weather surfaces have been separated, in both the Master Profile and the Pre-Screening Profile. This gives you more detailed setup options.
- For scratches, you will now see Main Track Only (M) & Also-Eligible (A) indicators
- Added race-screening checks for **claiming** races (for regular AND optional), to override the datafile "race code" if the criteria are met between the datafile (D) and the race screening (S):
 - Optional (D), Regular (S): Regular used if ALL of the horses are in for the claiming tag
 - Regular (D), Optional (S): Optional used if at least one horse is NOT in for the claiming tag
- Refined the PASS/PLAY criteria for the "Distance on the Surface" AND "Surface at the Track" portions of the overall decision-making process. These should result in more PLAY races.
- The final PASS/PLAY decision has more "smart" checks, that will result in more PLAY races.
- If there is at least one PP missing the SR or TV, you will see a popup asking you what you would like to do: [A] evaluate using SR/TV, [B] evaluate using the file-specific Speed Tool, or [C] exit and get the option to print the Race History (where you can look for the "bad" PPs and decide how to go forward); this happens only if these System Settings (**Hor\$etup**) options are set: [1] the SR/TV is your Speed Tool choice AND [2] the Evaluation-Calculations option to temporarily switch to the file-specific Speed Tool is set to a YES option!

Evaluation:

- Allow use of 4½ furlong PPs in 5 and 5½ furlong races. This will allow more PPs to be used.
- When selecting PPs (in Interactive handicapping mode), a "grayed-out" checkbox will now have a color bar in gray next to it; this makes it easier to see... for those of us who squint.
- Adjusted the "second-level" AI for SPEED:
 - Added more "smoothing" techniques for the 1st and 2nd calls; now works with individual racing surfaces (dirt/turf/AW) and sub-types (short/med/long for routes/sprints).
 - Reduced the impact of manual changes to the "in-race" fractions (1st call, 2nd call, last 1/8).
- Added an additional FINISH factor, using the stretch distance difference between the PP being evaluated and the race; only used if "matching" PACE/TRIP criteria happens.
- Improved CURRENT CLASS value for top-three finishes; now applies to "win-only" players
- Adjusted the AI for CURRENT CLASS, by improving the finish position whenever a top-three PP doesn't result in an estimated top-three FINISH. This will improve these class ratings.

Analysis:

- Added more "smoothing" for predicted race fractions, based on sprint and route pars for distance subsets (short, medium, long). This affects both SPEED and PACE/TRIP analysis.
- Changed the PAST CLASS ratio, of the race purse (p) versus the field's average (f), from 50/50 to 20p/80f, which increases PAST CLASS positives scores, and DIG DEEP as well.
- Lowered the "positive" threshold for the IN-MONEY facet, from 25% to 20%, which increases IN-MONEY positives scores, and the associated DIG DEEP analysis.
- Assigned two new rules for the STAR selection status (based on new criteria): [1] reduces a STAR status to an almost-STAR one, [2] removes a STAR status.

Overall:

- For the new All-Weather (AW) surface at Belmont Park (starting 9/26): It's ready for live races. Once enough AW races are run in 2026, I'll do more testing with the race and PP data.
- For the new Pimlico Race Course AW surface (starting in 2027): Ready for the new racing surface change, from dirt to AW, for races starting in spring 2027.

Randomness: It's EXACTLY Like the Word Implies...

What's on the randomness docket? Let's take a look...

Squashing the "bugs"...

As it happens EVERY year, there are small system issues (aka "bugs") to deal with! This year they were found in the horse **Evaluation** and **Analysis** stages.

Evaluation:

The first bug was trouble, literally! In the Trouble evaluation section – which only occurs if you're using Trouble Calls in the **Interactive** handicapping mode – there were two of them. The first was a system error code related to entering a very-specific type of trouble, which was broken because of some code I updated this year. The second was when trouble was found for the first call of a one-turn route race. Both of these issues impacted the SPEED. There was also another SPEED bug that, under a very odd combination of conditions, caused the first and second calls and/or finish time to be a bit too high.

For the FINISH, there were two bugs. The first one was a rounding-up error that was overvaluing "good" finishes: a "win-only" player would see a second-place finish turn into a "shaky" first place finish, and "in-the-money" players would see a top-four finish into a "weak" top-three finish. The other bug undervalued the finish position of a small subset of races, when they were the same sprint/route type as the race.

Analysis:

The only bug here was an odd one! In a few rare cases, when loading a saved race AND scratching a horse from it, the jockey and trainer name would be misaligned... but the data was correct.

Am I missing something... let's find out together!!!

While looking through the races over Memorial Day weekend, I saw that many tracks have increased the purses for their lower-level claiming races. As a sign of the times, as of June 1, I started tracking "cheap" claimers, down to the \$5,000 level. If the seven months of "on-paper" wagers proves promising, I'll add the new criteria to my own pre-race screening for more "playable" races, and "use real money" next year!

Say WHAT? There are Problem Gamblers? No, really...

At an upcoming conference on gambling trends, here in Vegas (at UNLV), they will discuss how gambling is a growing public health problem⁴. **Can anybody be surprised at this?** Everywhere you look, there's an ad for some form of gambling, with enticements to get you to sign up and play. While horse racing has its fair share of "degenerate gamblers", at least we have to wait a little bit between wagers! Sports betting allows wagers for nearly every aspect of a game, with in-game "micro betting" being the norm.

And, just when I thought horse racing wouldn't dare... I discovered that in-race wagering on US tracks is on the rise in Europe⁶. Since it's considered fixed-odds wagering, we don't get to "play that game" in most states. It won't be that far off when gamblers will get to bet on that stalker who went off at even-money and is at the WAY back of the field at the quarter pole at 10-to-1 in real-time.

I'll steer clear, thanks... handicapping before the race is hard enough! And, it's just another way to get those "degenerate gamblers" to squander their bankroll faster!!!

NYRA doing good things (I know, right?)...

Let's talk "new Belmont"! Most of the work will be done when they re-open in September, but the opening will be "low-key"⁷. The new grandstand is 1/3 of the size, and only two of the five floors will be open; a full opening is expected for "Wood Memorial" day in April 2027. It'll be on my travel list for next springtime.

In December 2025, NYRA changed their Computer Assisted Wagering (CAW) rules and stopped taking CAW wagers – in ALL pools – at the two-minute mark. The results have been good news for the "retail" players (aka you and me)⁸. The percentage of CAW wagers has gone down about 10%, but the positive impact the "regular bettor" has improved the outlook at NYRA for overall better growth. **Hallelujah!!!**

I'm a Travelin' Man, I Get Around... to Tracks!

Part of my retirement involves travel... and every trip I take – whether it's alone or with my wife – I try VERY HARD to visit a race track. Big or small, I want to see them ALL!!! So, where in the world is Traveler Joe???

I finally got my act together and took my June “road-trip three-fer”, covering Thistledown, Mountaineer and Presque Isle Downs. After visiting my mom, along with my daughter for a few of the days, I headed to Ohio on Saturday afternoon to start my three-track roadie on Sunday. Pressed for time, I had to visit three tracks in two days!!!

Day one started on Sunday morning at Thistledown; there were NO races, so I just took pictures and wandered around in the casino portion of the grandstand. Nothing too impressive, but I wondered why they didn't have a turf surface; it looked like they did at one time.

I hit the road for Mountaineer, and interesting things happened once I got there. First, an entry door had a sign on it, telling me to leave my weapons (!!) in the vehicle. Then, the track came up muddy, so I had to handicap “old school”... and hit a \$3,200 claimer that more than paid for all of my wagers on the trip. Later on, a track employee had me delete pictures of... the race callers booth!!! **I'm a baaaad boy...**

On Monday, I was off to Presque Isle Downs. The seating area was small, so the covered grandstand patio area was packed. There was a very small air-conditioned seating area – which was mostly empty on a very warm and humid day – and I spent most of my time there. No bets, as all three races pointed to heavy favorites (that lost). And, back at the hotel, the Seabiscuit movie was on TV, so I watched it!!!

Well, that was a lot of driving. How much, Joe? Over 1,200 miles!

So, where will I go after this trip? Well... there's always the lure of returning to Del Mar... but it's not a given that I'll go. And, I'm all set for my return to Kentucky Downs... this time for opening weekend!

Looking to the end of the year, I plan to make it to Laurel before they close for good... maybe in October, before the weather turns cold.

Headline that caught my eye... and sources!

Welcome! This space is for [1] my take on a quirky or hard-to-believe article, and [2] providing literary credit when it's due. Shall we? We shall...

Let's try this AGAIN... Last year at this time, a new track called **Thunder Plains Downs** was supposed to open near Cheyenne, Wyoming... but delays caused by the previous ownership group delayed it until early this fall⁵. No word on whether or not it will replace Sweetwater Downs (the only current Cheyenne area track).

Footnotes: (current year unless otherwise noted)

1. Eliz. Martiniak. Lest We Forget: Vagrancy was a Champion Lost to Time, *PaulickReport.com*
2. Press Release. Hawthorne Files for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy, *PaulickReport.com*
3. Bill Finley. Focusing on Bringing People Back to the Track, Turf Paradise Appears Headed for a Brighter Future, *Thoroughbred Daily News*
4. Colin Lynch. UNLV Conference on Gambling Returns to Bellagio as Problem Gambling Crisis Deepens, *Gaming America*
5. Lillian Davis. Thunder Plains: Construction Ongoing for Inaugural Fall Meet, *PaulickReport.com*
6. Frank Angst. In-Race Wagering Providing U.S. Tracks Added Revenue, *bloodhorse.com*
7. Bob Ehalt. Construction at Belmont Park in the Homestretch, *bloodhorse.com*
8. Bill Finley. With Guardrails in Place, CAW Play at NYRA has Fallen, *Thoroughbred Daily News*

It's a wrap... Enjoy the 2026 release!

Look for the “**2026 Release**” email in a few weeks... with special pricing!



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What I... Reviewed

“Donut hole” bad-odds bets

Most people won't play odds that are too low and/or too high... but what about the range in between (aka a “donut hole”). Since 2018, my “hole” is the range from 3-1 to just under 9/2. And, it's no small amount: 23% of my wagers and a \$400 loss. The rest of my wagers have a nice \$1075 profit. Should I stop “buying donuts”? I'll know by the end of this year. **Stay tuned!!!**

“It's a Fact, Jack”!

Hawthorne filed for bankruptcy... after 117 years². Turf Paradise, at 70 years young and always near closing, has new owners and will be open for a while³. **Go Figure!**