

# Horseplayer Extraordinaire

*Newspaperman for the turf tribe*

**D**ESPITE NEWSPAPERS' hard times, at least one daily is thriving, even though its price—\$5 to \$6 a copy—makes it one of the most expensive papers in the world. In a way, that high price is the *Daily Racing Form's* strength: 95 percent of its revenue comes from circulation, only 5 percent from advertising. Furthermore, the DRF, which is to horseplayers what the *Wall Street Journal* is to investors, also prospers online: about 20 percent of its revenue comes from downloading fees for its racetrack data. Steven Crist '78 is the DRF's publisher and chairman; he was bitten by the racing bug in college and has built his entire career around the turf. "The stats and numbers stuff is there," he says, "plus the animals, the gambling—and the weird subculture: the racetrack is...well, like people who ran away and joined the circus."

Though it's edited in downtown Manhattan, the DRF publishes—every day but Christmas—up to 35 regional editions keyed to action at local tracks. (Horses race in more than 30 states, in all parts of the country save the Deep South.) There are 35,000 horse races per year in the United States, which, after Japan and the United Kingdom, bets the third-largest amount of money on their outcomes. (Racetracks in Asia can draw 75,000 to 100,000 on weekends, compared with a typical Saturday's 10,000 at Belmont Park, not far from Crist's home on Long Island.)

The racetrack economy has evolved in recent decades. "Fifty years ago, horse racing

had a virtual monopoly on legal gambling," Crist explains. "Other than Las Vegas, there were no casinos. Now there are a lot of gambling and entertainment options and, sad but true, it's much easier to sit at a slot machine and pull a handle than to spend years learning how to read the *Racing Form* and handicap horses. You have to work before you make a bet on a horse race; at a casino, you just walk in, order a drink, and start gambling."

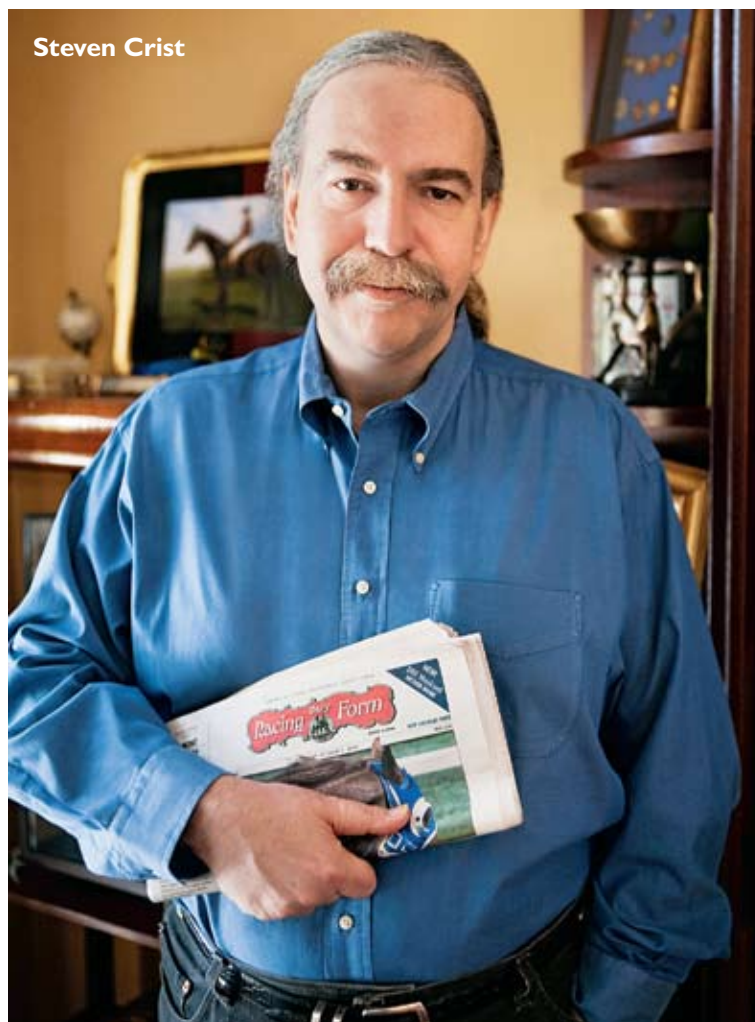
But if slot machines and lotteries have siphoned off income from racetracks, there's still an annual racing handle of

\$13 billion—more than Hollywood's box office—and the Internet has made it easy to wager on races from the comfort of your home, which is exactly what Crist does.

Yet it's harder now to prosper as a horseplayer. That's because racetrack betting employs a pari-mutuel system in which the bettors who pick the top finishers divide the losers' stakes, minus the racetrack commission: hence, poor gamblers subsidize the winners. "Twenty years ago, if you made your own speed figures [a method of standardizing horses' running times for comparison, popularized by noted handi-

capper and *Washington Post* columnist Andrew Beyer '65] and followed horseracing closely, you had a real edge over the majority of the public," Crist explains. "But now, so many of the bad gamblers—the people who *should* be pulling handles on slot machines—have left racing for casinos that one of the great regrets of current horseplayers is: 'Where did all the suckers go?' You want to be betting against people who are betting based on colors and jockeys and hunches."

Today Crist's titles of chairman and publisher are largely honorary and his ownership stake in the DRF is less than 1 percent. "I'm the crazy uncle in the attic whom they leave alone to write and blog and consult about the data," he says. He bets avidly but goes to the track less; having attended 25 Ken-



Steven Crist

tucky Derbies, he hasn't been to Churchill Downs for the past two years.

He bets his own money, and "I do it in a very public way," he says. "For the big betting days of the year, like Breeders' Cup or Derby Day, I do it all in real time [on his blog] and might post 12 or 15 times through the day. I lay out my whole play: here's \$3,000 worth of tickets. People follow along, either rooting for me or against me."

FROM 1981 until 1990, Crist was a horse-racing reporter and columnist for the *New York Times*. As "an old-fashioned print guy, I was dragged kicking and screaming into blogging," he says. "Now, I love the format. You're not constrained by space, and you can do it anytime you want. I usually write a column for Saturday and Sunday, but if something happens on Tuesday that ticks me off, I can post about it immediately. I put up video clips of races and screen grabs of past performances, charts—there's a lot of stuff going on."

Statistics and probabilities of athletic performance laid the groundwork for his love of playing the ponies. He grew up an only child on the Upper West Side of Manhattan; his father had his own public-relations firm and his mother is the film critic Judith Crist. In his 2003 memoir, *Betting on Myself: Adventures of a Horseplayer and Publisher*, he recalls that as a child, he developed an "obsessive devotion to a board game called Strat-O-Matic, a baseball simulation that to this day has a cult following. I would play entire 162-game seasons at my desk," he writes. "I developed an unconscious fluidity at calculating percentages....It became second nature to me that a batter who started the season with 24 hits in 84 at-bats was a .287 hitter."

At Harvard, he concentrated in English and joined the Lampoon. One summer night after his junior year, he went to the Wonderland dog-racing track near Boston with his friend George Meyer '78. It proved an epiphany. Reading the race program's summary of the past performances of the greyhounds racing that night "was like hearing a new language but understanding it right away," Crist writes. The Wonderland track, then a "charming little place, with a festive feeling—the animals, lots of

people," made an immediate impression. "This is the greatest place I've ever been!" he recalls thinking. "I felt right at home, the first night."

For the rest of that summer, Crist and Meyer went to the dogs almost every night, and added horse racing, too, at Suffolk Downs. At first Crist preferred the greyhounds, because the smaller scale of a dog track was "more manageable." (Today, two small cast-iron horses flank his front door, and he and his wife, Robin Foster, a fellow horse-racing writer and editor, are the adoptive parents of two retired racing greyhounds. They also own a nine-year-old retired thoroughbred, Teddy, who raced as Three Steps Ahead.)

Crist's consuming fascination with racing propelled him into his job at the *Times*, where he became the horseracing correspondent. His columns included outspoken criticism of the sport's Bible, the *Daily Racing Form*, which dates from 1894. "The *Racing Form* that I grew up with in the '70s and '80s was just a terrible newspaper," Crist recalls. "The so-called articles were heavily edited press releases, where not a discouraging word was ever said. Gambling was hardly mentioned. There was this huge disconnect between the paper, both editorially and statistically, and the gamblers, who were very sophisticated."

In 1990, representatives of British media magnate Robert Maxwell approached Crist about editing a new paper, *The Racing Times*, to be launched as a competitor to the DRF, which had been newly acquired by Rupert Murdoch. "It was pretty tough to leave the best job at the *New York Times*," Crist says. "I mean, really—to get paid by the *Times* to go to the racetrack and write about it? What a great gig. But how many journalists get the opportunity to create the newspaper of their dreams, and take on the hated *Racing Form*? So I did it."

With the *Racing Times*, Crist's goal was to produce a legitimate newspaper with real reporting and dramatically enhanced statistical data. He hired the 10 best writers on the sport, such as Beyer, and put out what he and many others considered "a vastly better version of the *Daily Racing Form*." Within six months, they had captured 30 percent of the market and the future looked rosy. Then, in 1991, Maxwell went overboard from his yacht and drowned under "weird, suspicious circumstances that have never been resolved,"

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Crist says. Maxwell's estate soon sold the *Racing Times* to Murdoch, who folded it, re-establishing his monopoly.

Crist spent the next three years as a professional horseplayer, and "never enjoyed racing less. Betting horses is a much better hobby than a profession. It plays with your head if you're trying to win to eat." In 1992, Governor Mario Cuomo appointed him to the New York State Commission on Racing in the 21st Century; there, he drafted recommendations and legislation that subsequently became law. And for two years, he was a vice president of the New York Racing Association, in charge of simulcasting, marketing, and corporate development; he introduced in-home simulcasting of races.

Then, one day, the DRF announced, on page 4, that the paper was to be sold. Crist and a group of investors eventually acquired it for \$40 million, and Crist served as CEO from 1998 until 2002. Since then, it has been sold twice to venture-capital groups, but Crist has remained centrally involved.

In addition to his memoir, he has written several other horse-racing books, including *The Horse Traders* (1986) and *Exotic Betting* (2006). The latter deals with the mechanics of new, complicated betting options that racing has developed during the last decade, particularly the "pick six," in which bettors have to pick six consecutive winners. "You don't actually just pick one horse in each race and make out one ticket," Crist explains. "There's a fairly complicated matrix of tickets you fill out and try to include all six of those winners. Until recently, when it's had to compete with other forms of gambling, racing almost pretended there was no betting going on—they made no effort in their advertising and marketing to appeal to bettors, game players, and gamblers. Consequently, racing has done very little, historically, to educate its customers about how to play these bets."

His own wagers have put him ahead



Visit [harvardmag.com/extras](http://harvardmag.com/extras) for a video clip of Steven Crist discussing exotic wagers.

overall, though “when you spend eight to 10 hours a day at this for 20 or 30 years, it works out to minimum wage, or less,” he says with a guffaw. One reason there are only a couple hundred professional horseplayers in the country is the “takeout”: the racetrack skims off 20 percent of every dollar wagered before paying off the winning bettors. The takeout goes toward operating racetracks and paying purses for owners, breeders, trainers, and jockeys, as well as paying the slice for state governments. (Betting sports in Las Vegas involves a takeout of 4.5 percent, roulette takes 5.25 percent, slots, 10 percent, and lotteries 40 percent to 50 percent. Two or three times a year, Crist, an excellent poker player, goes to Vegas to play cards, which he finds “relaxing.”)

Gambling on Wall Street, or at games of pure chance like roulette, holds no interest for Crist. People sometimes remark that the one thing he hasn't done in the sport is own a racehorse, but “I own the horse I'm betting on for one minute and 12 seconds, and that's good enough for me,” he says. “There is a strong feeling of success for your ego when you make a winning bet. When their horse crosses the finish line in front, horseplayers never say, ‘What a good horse!’ They go, ‘That was me—me, me, me!’ That's part of the pleasure of horse racing, and why it's so much more fun to pick your own horses than to bet somebody else's picks. With a Wall Street stock, I can't imagine the same feeling of satisfaction.”

He believes that jockeys are “hugely overrated” as a factor in racing; without minimizing the skill or danger involved in riding, he says, “You could take the top 20 jockeys in America, switch them on all their mounts, and the races would come out the same.” That's an example of his contrarian thinking. In fact, he says, “That's what you have to do to succeed in a marketplace of opinions.” He notes that at the track, for example, if you always bet the favorite, you'll win one-third of the time, but predictably lose at least 10 percent of your stake in the long run.

Over the years, Crist has heard every theory under the sun on how to bet horses, but has seen no secret formula for success. “There are a hundred little things going on,” he says. “But the most important single piece of information is how fast a horse can run from point A to point B.”

~CRAIG LAMBERT

## Vote Now

THIS SPRING, alumni can choose five new Harvard Overseers and six new directors for the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) board. Ballots will be mailed out by April 1 and are due back in Cambridge by noon on May 21 to be counted. Election results will be announced at the HAA's annual meeting on May 27, on the afternoon of Commencement day. All holders of Harvard degrees, except Corporation members and officers of instruction and government, are entitled to vote for Overseer candidates. The election for HAA directors is open to all Harvard degree-holders.

For Overseer (six-year term), the candidates are:

Cheryl Dorsey '85, M.D. '91, M.P.P. '92, New York City. President, Echoing Green.

Joseph Fuller '79, M.B.A. '81, Cambridge. Cofounder, vice chairman, and CEO, Monitor Group.

David Heyman '83, London, film producer.

Walter Isaacson '74, Washington, D.C. CEO, The Aspen Institute.

Nicholas Kristof '82, New York City. Columnist, the *New York Times*.

Karen Nelson Moore '70, J.D. '73, Cleveland. U.S. Circuit judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit.

Diana Nelson '84, San Francisco. Director, Carlson Companies, Inc.

David Tang '75, Seattle. Managing Partner, Asia K&L Gates.

For Elected Director (three-year term), the candidates are:

Kenneth Bartels '73, M.B.A. '76, New York City. President and CEO, Paxton Properties, Inc.

Roger Fairfax Jr. '94, J.D. '98, Washington, D.C. Law professor, George Washington University Law School.

Mark Fusco '83, M.B.A. '90, Westwood, Massachusetts. CEO, Aspen Tech.

Lindsay Hyde '04, Boston. Founder and president, Strong Women, Strong Girls.

M. Margaret Kemeny '68, New York City. Professor of surgery, Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, chief of surgical oncology, and director of the Queens Cancer Center.

George Newhouse Jr. '76, Los Angeles. Partner, Brown, White & Newhouse, LLP.

Reynaldo Valencia, J.D. '90, San Antonio. Associate dean for administration and

finance; professor of corporate and securities law, St. Mary's University School of Law.

Victoria Wells Wulsin '75, M.P.H. '82, D.P.H. '85, Cincinnati. Physician, Mid-City Pediatrics.

Irene Wu '91, Washington, D.C. Director of international research, U.S. Federal Communications Commission; adjunct professor, Georgetown University.

## Harvard Serves

DURING APRIL, the University community—in Greater Boston and around the globe alike—are invited to participate in the Harvard Alumni Association's public service initiative, “Harvard Serves.” Inspired by President Drew Faust's exhortation to apply “our knowledge to help advance the well-being of people in the world beyond our walls,” the HAA hopes to mobilize all 300,000 alumni worldwide, and the extended Harvard family, to volunteer our time and efforts in our own communities.

Events will be organized through local Harvard Clubs, Shared Interest Groups (SIGs), and individual classes; organizers will choose one or more dates during the month of April for their service opportunity. If you would like to get involved, e-mail [harvardserver@post.harvard.edu](mailto:harvardserver@post.harvard.edu). A full list of service opportunities and specific dates of projects in your area will be available at [alumni.harvard.edu](http://alumni.harvard.edu) on March 1.

## Alumni Awards

THE HAA CLUBS and SIGs Committee Awards honor individuals who provide exemplary service to a Harvard Club or Shared Interest Group, as well as to clubs and SIGs that have organized exceptional programming. Awards were presented to the following recipients at the HAA Board of Directors winter meeting on February 4.

Jake Arbes '73, of Atlanta. As president of the Harvard Club of Georgia, Arbes has helped the club grow substantially, both financially and socially. Club events, ranging from public-service projects to recent graduate dinners, have attracted more than 100 local alumni. Arbes has also bolstered the club's relationship with the HAA, partnering on programs such as the HAA Global Networking Night, the HAA Global Day of Service, and Early College Awareness.