

## CHAPTER 15

### Paddock Inspections Revisited

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Until Bonnie Ledbetter broke into print with descriptions of equine body language, handicappers assigned most if not all horses with copious kidney sweat to the no-bet category. None could be fairly regarded as a betting stickout. All worlds change. Sweating horses are sometimes the sharpest horses in the field. The sweat is part of a keyed-up profile of the sharp, impatient horse clamoring for competition. Handicappers can now not only recognize the sharp horse that might be sweating, they can distinguish it unmistakably from the frightened horse that is sweating as well. Ledbetter has spelled out the differences.

Ledbetter has also revealed that the most critical object of the handicapper's paddock and post-parade inspections is a part of the horse barely touched by previous literature—the ears. More on that momentarily.

In a collaboration altogether helpful and rewarding to handicappers everywhere, when Tom Ainslie combined the body language of horses, as supplied by Ledbetter, to formal principles of handicapping, the resulting inspections guidelines served to extend the knowledge base in the esoteric area tremendously and to alter several preexisting notions that no longer apply.

Even the foundations of the paddock visit have been shaken. The purpose heretofore was to look for negative signs. If horses that figured on paper failed the paddock inspection, races were passed, or at times second choices were upgraded. Handicappers now are advised that horses inseparable on paper can sometimes be distinguished in the paddock and post parade. This represents a fundamental departure in procedure. If contenders are separated at the paddock, previous unplayable action increases, and handicappers had better understand what they are about.

Ainslie reminds us that 90 percent of all races are won by horses described as sharp, ready, or dull. The remaining 10 percent are taken by frightened, angry, and hurting horses, which handicappers presumably avoid. Sweat and kidney lather can be characteristic of both sharp and frightened horses, which represent by far the most interesting dichotomy of body language. Handicappers can support sharp horses on those grounds alone, avoid frightened horses for like reasons. They should set out to become expert about the two profiles. Ledbetter and Ainslie are greatly reassuring on the point, asserting that the body language of each kind is unmistakable.

Of the sharp horses, these may not only sweat but also dance and wheel almost fractiously, affecting apprehension or nervousness, but otherwise are the embodiment of health and vigor. The coat luxuriates with a shine or dapple. Mane and tail gleam. Neither fat nor bony, its rear muscles haunch and perhaps ripple. The animal prances on its toes, a picture of eagerness, often with neck arched, head tucked downward toward the chest, the ears pricked forward, tail up to signal readiness. The horse is alert to the crowd and surrounding commotion. It is not quiet in the saddling stall, but rather full of itself, almost showing off, head in the air, dancing confidently, and this language intensifies during the

parade to the post. The lead rider may have to take a short hold of it in the parade, lifting its nose in the air, lest the sharp horse throttle the lead pony. When warm-ups begin, the sharp horse strides out strongly off the haunches in the first couple of strides, tail up, muscles tensing. Sometimes the horse's head will almost touch its chest, neck arched, ears pricked fully forward. The horse almost lunges into the gate and once inside stands firm, back feet planted, fronts at times shuffling and restless. It springs out of there like jet propulsion. There might not be many of these sharpsters, but they are well worth the hunt. They are, in the banker's lexicon, bettable.

The sharp horse's opposite number, the frightened horse, begs the player's automatic elimination. Its sweat and fractiousness are not symbols of excitement but of fear. Reluctant and resistant en route to the paddock ceremonies, there, and in the walking ring, its head is held high and in continuous motion, eyes rolling so that the whites become visible, ears flicking rapidly in all directions, unsynchronized. Leg action in front is high and uncoordinated, tail swishes from side to side or up and down. The handler might control the horse with a stud chain over the nose, under the lip, or across the mouth. The horse fights the chain, perhaps moving in a semicircle in front of the lead horse, pulling and yanking to get away from it all.

During saddling, walking, and mounting, the horse washes out and moves about kicking and stomping in unorganized maneuvers. Eyes roll, ears flick, nostrils flare. It resists its handlers, who in turn fight back. In the walking ring the frightened horse may wheel and circle away as the jockey attempts to mount. During the post parade the jockey has a tight hold, even as the horse clings to the lead pony as much as possible, perhaps extending its head and neck across the pony. If the lead rider prevents that with the chain, the horse's head is high, eyes and ears moving wildly, the front legs stepping high and sideways. The lead horse proceeds straight down the course, but the frightened horse moves in short, spastic jumps at an angle to the pony.

Before the starting gate arrives, all energy and hope have been lost. This kind also throws tantrums in the gate, casting itself or hanging over the partitions. Coincidence determines what happens when the gate opens. Often, frightened horses burst out first, as if fleeing, but they exhaust themselves in a panicky run long before the homestretch. If they break tardily, they typically show keen bursts of speed that catch the others but deplete the horses of late speed, such that they are absolutely exhausted just as the stretch run begins.

Handicappers already may be familiar with the ready, dull, and hurting horses, but not so with the angry horses, characterized by Ledbetter as the sour kind easily provoked during the prerace ceremonies. Ill-tempered, angry horses range from mildly irritated to wildly furious, and all but the mildly irritated should be expected to lose. Angry body language differs from the language of fright, but the result is the same. Angry horses rarely sweat. The telltale sign of its annoyance is flattened ears or, in furious moments, ears pinned directly onto the head. Handicappers should not fail to consult Ledbetter for the angry profile and are well advised to renew acquaintances with the ready, dull, and hurting kind.

Handicappers are also alerted that sharp horses can turn angry during any phase of the prerace ceremonies, if distracted or upset by handlers or circumstances. If horses behave fractiously when parading before the stands, dancing sideways, rearing, or bucking, heads tossing up and down, and tails swishing, handicappers who have not

visited the paddock and many who have will have difficulty recognizing whether the horses remain sharp or are seriously fractious. What differentiates the two conditions at this crucial point is the position of the ears. The ears of the sharp horse remain alert and in the forward position, or perhaps turned backward to the chirping rider, but straight. But if the ears flatten or become pinned or assume the airplane position, even as the tail swishes and pops irritably, the horse is now out of sorts. Handicappers should continue to watch the horse, paying attention to the ears. If they remain flattened or pinned, avoid the horse.

Ainslie relates the body language of horses to the fundamental factors of handicapping in numerous important ways. A few:

Closely matched contenders can sometimes be separated at the paddock. If one looks particularly sharp, and the odds beckon, the bet makes sense. These horses not only are overlays and figure well enough on fundamentals, they look like winners in the flesh. In this special context, handicappers prosper by inspecting horses for positive signs of fitness and readiness.

Dramatically improved form together with dramatically improved appearance equals a potentially sweet bet.

Of horses that appear dull or hurting, only those that have won previously when in comparable condition can be considered a potential play.

The most debilitating and negative experience for a young horse is the stumble or actual fall. As Ledbetter tells, for a horse, loss of balance is perceived as a threat to survival.

If a horse's behavior deteriorates as soon as the jockey climbs aboard, and the jockey has lost with the horse while others have won, handicappers can fairly assume incompatibility between horse and rider. They should not expect a triumphal return.

More than ever before, handicappers can prepare themselves to benefit from the body language of horses. The language is not learned quickly. Familiarity and practice make the difference. The study of horses' body language moves from Ledbetter and Ainslie to the paddock, walking ring, and post parade, and back again, numerous times a season.