

Sports of The Times

Sex and the Standardbred



Dieter Klotzer and Chris Vincel, picked by computer as the ideal couple at Roosevelt Raceway on Tuesday.

By ROBERT LIPSYTE

THE saga of American horse racing is said to have begun in 1666 when the Governor of New York, a breed-improver, sanctioned the first stakes race on land that is now Garden City, L. I. About 150 years later, the importance of the sport in American life was fixed forever when a man named Wilson tipped a man named Jackson to a rigged race. Jackson bet the rent money, so the story goes, and won big. Years later, as President of the United States, Jackson was able to repay his tout. He saved Wilson from the gallows after a mail-coach robbery.

The third significant moment in the history of American horse racing occurred the other night at Roosevelt Raceway, a harness track not far from the site of that first stakes race. Through the facilities of Operation Match, Inc., a computerized dating service, Roosevelt offered single persons over 18 years of age a list of potential dates and a chance to meet them during a night at the track for \$3. In the closed society of sports promotions, in which Ladies Days are still considered slightly advanced, Roosevelt's date night had unusual relevancy.

The Race of Life

Each participant filled out the standard Operation Match questionnaire, which ranged from "absolute factors" such as size, education, religion and race through "attitudes" ("Which of the following questions do you find most interesting to think about? 1, Who am I? 2, What will I be like in 10 years? 3, Should I get married in the next few years? 4, What is the meaning of life?") and "situations" ("Imagine yourself facing three doors. Behind the first door is \$20. Behind the second door is either \$5 or \$30. Behind the third door is either \$40 or someone ready to throw a pail of water. You may open any door but you must face the consequences. Which do you open?").

At the track, as 1,024 enrollees (of the original 2,814) checked in, he or she was given a computer readout with the names of several men or women adjudged compatible. The participants, wearing nameplates, looked for their dates in a specially reserved section of the clubhouse decorated with hot-pink hearts.

The average age was 33. Men and women were about evenly matched, and there were a number of middle-aged people, including at least two widows who had entered the lists with their daughters. One widow said she came because her late husband had frequently taken her to the track. Her 23-year-old daughter, who had been to a track only once before, said she was attracted by the chance to meet a man in an atmosphere less "desperate" than that of a singles weekend at a resort or a Friday night dance.

Bet Without Fear

The-Operation Match participants Tuesday night were, in general, considerably more attractive, courteous and better dressed than the average run of horse-park patrons. They tended to fumble a bit at the ticket-seller's windows, but in their special section the police had an unusually easy night. A few might have found mates, but more important to the track, many had been painlessly introduced to harness racing.

Behind the dating game, of course, is the problem of fan attrition now threatening several sports, most notably baseball and horse racing. The New York Yankees are reportedly interested in running a similar promotion, and with good reason. Recent surveys have indicated that baseball is annually declining in its appeal to Americans under 25.

Racing, which is more dependent than baseball on live attendance, has created a profile of the mythical \$2 bettor that bodes ill for the sport: he is middle-aged, his education ended in high school, he is likely to be a clerk, barber or small-store manager, and what motivated him to come to the track does not motivate his suburban, college-educated, professional son.

Thus the need for Operation Match and anything that will bring fresh money for the future. Ultimately, after the race track has matched and mated its young fans, it can offer them escape from each other. One survey commissioned for Roosevelt some years ago discovered that many so-called happily married couples who came to the track for an evening of pari-mutuel pleasure split at the entrance gate and did not talk again until after the last race.