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 Horse Racing - Today's Card
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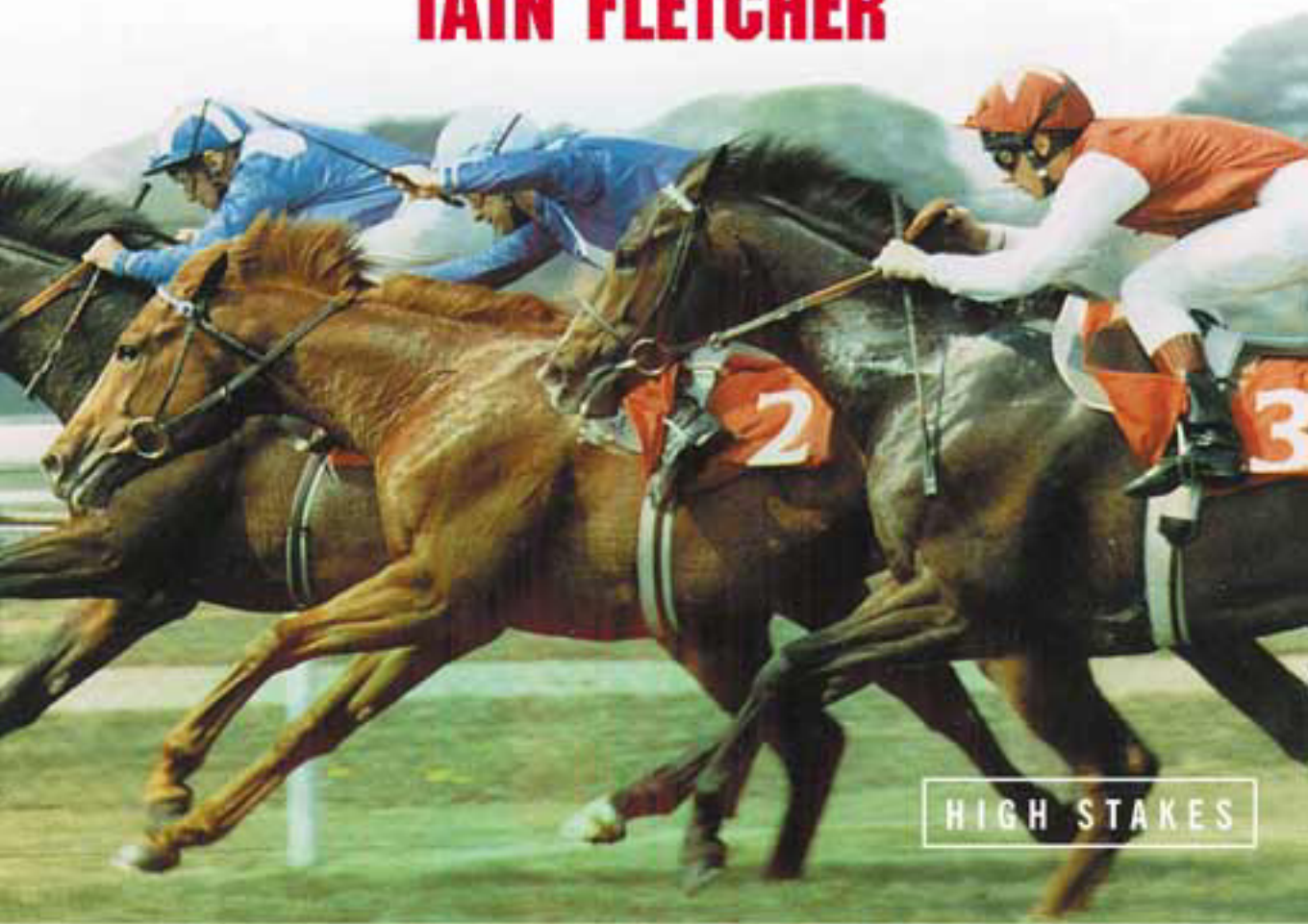
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Total selections: 20

		101%	BACK	LAY	99%	
1 Sporting Gesture	5.7 £194	5.8 £200	6.3 £499	6 £100	6.2 £1574	6.4 £1148
2 Gaelic Roulette	8.8 £51	7 £229	7.2 £34	7.4 £578	7.6 £381	8 £136
3 Sovereign Dreamer	13.5 £15	14.5 £93	15 £63	15.5 £5	16 £67	16.5 £45
4 Eton	18 £49	19 £238	19.5 £233	11 £57	11.5 £202	12 £130
5 Azur	16 £4	17 £22	18 £27	19.5 £27	20 £68	24 £12
6 Distant Cousin	14 £65	14.5 £40	15 £53	15.5 £63	16 £10	16.5 £21
7 Swynford Pleasure	17 £82	17.5 £11	18 £55	19 £99	20 £8	21 £22
8 Compton Aviator	20 £32	21 £25	22 £30	25 £30	26 £52	28 £27
9 Jeepstar	12 £54	12.5 £119	13 £121	13.5 £204	14 £156	14.5 £66
10 Spectroscope	22 £13	23 £13	24 £21	25 £41	26 £4	28 £7
11 Arnpoule	42 £14	44 £2	48 £4	55 £77	60 £8	65 £3
12 Wild Ang	36 £1	38 £1	40 £1	44 £1	46 £1	48 £1

GAME, SET AND MATCHED

IAIN FLETCHER



HIGH STAKES

Other books by the same author
On Tilt

Game, Set and Matched

Iain Fletcher

High Stakes

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Dedication

Without wishing to be morbid, I would like to dedicate this book to a friend who died in 1996. I met Christian Berglund in my first week at Loughborough University in 1990.

Our shared interests, cricket, golf and ale mostly, made friendship easy as did his ability to make me laugh. Usually intentional, occasionally not, he was one of the funniest men I've ever met. He must have been because to this day I still think of him and chuckle.

Of those still polluting the earth I must make special mention of one, a chap universally known as Spiller. Good luck to Kirsty, a delightful young lady who actually was keen to marry him, much to the surprise of his friends.

And lastly I would not get served again in my local hostelry if I did not mention the charming, incredibly attractive young ladies who work behind the bar.

Stephanie Hunt, Victoria Pope, Jessica Denny and Emma Pryke. Four beauties destined to cause chaos with the male population.

PS: Well batted Keysy, bloody marvelous.

Fletch July 2004

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All On – April 24th 2004

It's all on. The lot. Every pound left in the account – £2644 on Warrington Wolves.

I've never bet every last penny before and I'm not sure I like it. If the Wolves – oh Warrington, don't you dare let me down – win, which the recent form and statistics suggest they should do and reasonably comfortably, then I win just short of a grand.

Why am I doing this? Why don't I just trade the game like every other televised match? Why do I want, no, need to risk so much?

Simple, I knew the prices were massively wrong. This was not some twisted desire to lose, a quest to punish myself. I was desperate for the money and when I saw Warrington were around 1.35 to back I knew my money was on. At that moment, even before I had filled out the required boxes with figures and clicked the submit button, the cash was in the poker pot – no longer mine. Could they lose? Of course they could – sport can and does, provide upsets but they should not lose 35 times in 100. I put it more like about 20, which meant they should be 1.2 or 1/5 in old-fashioned betting parlance.

Salford, newly promoted Salford, had only one win in the league and that was in the very first week when they beat the Widnes Vikings.

After that, seven consecutive defeats and the latest couple of them had been maulings, 40 points by St Helens and another 40 by Leeds Rhinos. Admittedly these are two of the top sides but confidence had to be low and the earlier games which they had narrowly lost, the 4 to 10 point defeats, suggested they lacked the strength and stamina to compete for the full 80 minutes.

How were they going to beat Warrington who days before had thrown away a wonderful chance to beat Wigan Warriors, one of the 'big guns', in the cup? One club was bursting with energy and resentment at a wasted opportunity; the other was shell-shocked. No, they wouldn't win. My money was riding on it.

Can you believe I was calm? All my gambling bankroll – and this was my money, not some gifted stake or inheritance to waste, but my own hard-earned cash without which I would not be punting for some while – was riding on a mid-table rugby

GAME SET AND MATCHED

league team and I felt totally relaxed.

Rugby League for Christ's sake! A game from up north that soft southern shandy drinkers like me 'know bugger all about'.

But I had karma – peace that I only usually feel near the sea, or in picturesque open spaces where nature's beauty and rhythms soothe me.

Then the game started.

The settled feeling left me instantly, replaced by adrenalin and I, eyes out on stalks, watched the screen with the same unblinking intensity that a snake does a rodent.

I shall spare your blushes and not repeat my early gloating as the Warrington forwards powered through, over and round their Salford counterparts, or as the backs, led by the supremely talented Lee Briers, broken finger notwithstanding, threw expansive, ambitious passes.

It was brilliant to watch. Sixty minutes of that and the game would be over and the money as good as in the bank. So dominant did they appear that 40 minutes might suffice.

Except a certain try was bombed when a long miss pass missed the winger, Richard Varkulis.

'Com'n you bloody idiots!'

And they did in the 16th minute. First try, converted and the ball back in Warrington's hands from the restart.

More tackles for the Salford forwards to make, more energy sapping chasing back and more chance of them running out of puff in the last quarter which is when I really felt the Warrington side would win the game.

Another try on 28 minutes and a 70-yard dash for the line by Nathan Wood and that should have been the game. At 0–12 up and completely dominant in all areas of the field, Warrington had done everything to make my money safe.

I even relaxed, sat back in the chair and opened a beer. What was I thinking of? There were still 50 minutes left. My life has never been that easy.

Half an hour, two scores and £1000 – I'm not that lucky.

It started to go wonderbra (tits-up) almost immediately. Varkulis dropped the ball over the try-line a minute later – a score

that really would have killed the game – and from that error Salford went the length of the field and scored.

It was only six points and Warrington were still in the lead but I felt distraught – disgusted even. It was a 12 point swing because Varkulis only had to put the bloody egg down and it would have been 0–16 or 0–18; now it was 6–12 and a visibly flagging Salford side were suddenly charging into tackles and spinning the ball round the field like the Harlem Globetrotters. The money that I had mentally chalked back into my account was, like the PoWs in the Great Escape, trying to find Charlie Tunnel.

The way it was going it looked like being an even match at half-time, Salford were camped on the Warrington line and kept forcing another set of six tackles – in short they were retaining the ball and surely going to score.

As the seconds ticked down to the half-time hooter Salford passed the ball wide to the left and Gavin Clinch popped a flat pass for the runner, *but he wasn't there!*

Well he was but after Briers who intercepted the ball and started a 90 metre chase to the Salford end.

'YEESSSSS! RUN, YOU BEAUTIFUL TUBBY BASTARD. RUUUU-UNNNNNN.'

Briers is a talent, an absolute skills man but he is not the swiftest sprinter, but did he need to be – after all he had a 10-yard head-start?

It was like Smokey and the Bandit as he charged down field, white shirted chasers catching up with him but never quite quickly enough.

As he dived over in the corner I collapsed on a beanbag and exhaled long and hard. I was more knackered from cheering him and celebrating than if I had run the 90 metres myself with the hordes of hell in pursuit.

And over went the conversion to restore the 12-point lead. Thirty seconds before it looked like it would be 12–12 at half time and Fletch a nervous, neurotic wreck. But, and how apt is this, a gamble by Briers had made mine look a damned sight safer.

I don't think they heard me during the interval but I did conduct a half-time team-talk for their benefit.

GAME SET AND MATCHED

'Well done lads – good stuff. What we need now is a steady, disciplined first 20 minutes. No penalties, give them no easy yards and keep pressuring them through the forwards. When Danny (Lima) hits their defensive line let's see if we can get someone in support for an off-load and remember, a hard 20 here and the game is won. NO COMPLACENCY!'

It might not be Henry V but it covered the main issues I felt and more importantly if they heeded it, would almost guarantee victory.

For 10 minutes they did as I asked and then Salford started a good spell of play, justly rewarded with a score in the 55th minute: 18–12 to Warrington.

With a 12 point lead I had been quite happy with every scoreless minute but now the momentum was certainly with the home side and would you credit it – Briers, the sneaky thief of earlier was robbed himself and in exactly the same circumstances.

Warrington looked set to kill the game with a score and the pass was intercepted – the chase, unsuccessful again, was 95 metres. Bloody hell – 18–18 and 20 minutes left.

This final quarter was when I had felt Warrington should win the game but now I was worried. How had this happened? Apart from about 10 minutes they had completely controlled the match and yet ... my money was going to the wire. I couldn't even bottle out of the bet because my computer was switched off and I was compelled to see it through to the end – good or bad.

What a cliché but the next score *really* was crucial.

I was standing, rocking from foot to foot, shifting balance, unwittingly mimicking the movements on the pitch.

*'KNOCK-ON – THAT'S A F*****G KNOCK-ON! OH WELL DONE REF – WELL SPOTTED.'*

The tension was starting to show in Acacia Avenue.

Suddenly Warrington were on fire again. From the scrum they moved the ball well and made 50 yards to score. I leaped in the air and urged them to concentrate – this was the game now – this next 10 minutes.

From lethargic they became animated and when Danny Lima

returned, they started to hammer the Salford forwards again.

Down the Salford end once more and a drop-goal one pointer by Briers.

‘Good thinking’ said the commentator, Stevo on the box.

‘Good thinking’ said the gambler, Fletch in his lounge.

‘Two scores needed now by Salford and Warrington get the ball back,’ said Stevo.

‘Seven points in the lead now and we get the ball back,’ said Fletch.

Once more I was happy. Seven points may not seem that much, and they are not, but Warrington were wide awake and Salford were knackered.

So much so that the final 10 minutes brought two more scores for Warrington and a flattering 19-point winning margin.

Not that I cared. Lots of smackers were all that concerned me and I had them, although I had been made to work for them and had lost a pound or two in sweat. Down the pub I went, Saturday night in the local, to banter with the men and flirt with the daughters.

‘Done much Fletch?’

‘Nah, not really.’

Well, how would you explain it to those that live in the normal world?