

# The Horse Racing/Oxford English Dictionary Exacta

By Bennett Liebman

Who benefits from the sport of horse racing? Many would say that there are significant economic benefits; horse racing and breeding can create thousands of jobs. Others might say that the main benefits of horse racing are entertainment and amusement. For much of the Twentieth Century, horse racing was probably the leading spectator sport in the nation.

Yet, a look at the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) should tell us that the chief beneficiary of horse racing is the English language. The words, phrases and the idioms of horse racing are the language of America. The language of denizens are in Damon Runyon's short stories. It is not confined to the tracks and gamblers. It is everywhere.

Take a look at the words: There is "workout," which was "originally: a practice run for a racehorse." There is "dead heat," meaning a tie that was used for horse racing as early as 1796. There's a "dark horse" "of whom or which nothing is generally known," which derives from a description of a horse race in a novel by Benjamin Disraeli in 1831. There is "running mate," used in harness racing from the 1850s. There is "first string," which was originally "the best or fastest racehorse belonging to a specified owner or trainer." The term "hands down," meaning with little effort, derives from horse racing, "with reference to a jockey dropping the hands, and so relaxing his or her hold on the reins, when victory appears certain." A "turf war"—signifying a fight over territory—started as a dispute involving horse racing or horse racing organizations.

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There are also numerous gambling terms derived from horse racing that have made their way into general usage. These include morning line, pari-mutuel, parlay, trifecta, tipster, hot tip, daily double, quinella, triactor, across the board, exacta, out of the money,<sup>1</sup> form book, and off the board.<sup>2</sup>

There are words included in descriptions of races that have filtered their way into the language as well. They include: armchair ride, fast track, match race, homestretch, backstretch, wire-to-wire, at the wire, under the wire, no hoper, post time,<sup>3</sup> photo finish, rank outsider, mudders,

walkover, in the running,<sup>4</sup> also ran, run for one's money, and Garrison finish.<sup>5</sup>

Terms involving weight also had their origin in horse racing. These ranged from heavyweight to featherweight and lightweight.

In addition, there are descriptions of racing, including steeplechase, turfdom and point-to-point. There are also terms that originated with people associated with horse racing, like clockers, hot walkers, and tipsters.

Other terms of racing origin include hippodrome, now used as a name for theaters, which began life as a course for horse racing. The word ascot, signifying a specific tie, is derived from the clothing worn at the fashionable Ascot racing meet. The English Derby ended up the basis for the felt hat known as a derby. The phrase "all ages," meaning an event open to everyone, regardless of age, started off as a racing term referring to races that were open to all horses, no matter their ages.

Much of the most recent usage of horse racing terminology in America comes in journalistic coverage of political elections, when the media collectively has been faulted for so-called horse race coverage of elections. The media has been criticized for focusing on tactics, strategy, gaffes, appearances, and whoever is the leader in the polls. The horse race coverage avoids focus on important and actual substantive factual position on issues.

Media coverage tends to thrive on the use of horse racing terminology. The late political commentator Tim Russert loved calling any trio of states or issues a trifecta. During the 2000 presidential election, he regularly advised that Al Gore needed to win the trifecta of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Florida.<sup>6</sup> Since then, American political commentary has been awash in trifectas.

While Donald Trump may have started off as a dark horse, he soon emerged as a first-string candidate. There were numerous Republican no hoppers, such as Lindsey Graham, George Pataki, Rick Santorum, Bobby Jindal and Mike Huckabee. They all finished off the board and out of the money, while Hillary Clinton led wire to wire in the Democratic primaries. At one point political pundit Chris Matthews found that "Senator Bernie Sanders suddenly looks headed for the daily double in American politics in Iowa and New Hampshire."<sup>7</sup> By the spring, "the odds-on favorites won; the Trump-Clinton daily double finished double-digit lengths ahead of their rivals."<sup>8</sup> The candidates chose their running mates and engaged essentially in a match race, where they contended that their opponents were mudders, and Trump was the winner following a photo finish at the wire. Trump's win, along with the Republican majority in the House

and Senate, assured a Republican trifecta in the federal government.<sup>9</sup> There were similar trifectas in state governments, as a growing number of states elected Republican governors and majorities in both legislative houses.<sup>10</sup> The stock market even hit a superfecta after the Trump victory.<sup>11</sup>

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Perhaps the start to ending horse race journalism would be to prevent journalists from using horse racing terms in describing elections.

### Non-Racing Phrases

Oddly enough, there are some racing-style phrases that did not originate in racing. The sport of kings was not originally racing. It was hunting and war.

While the term “jockey” has been used for professional race riders since the Seventeenth Century, it started as a diminutive or familiar by-form of the name Jock or John. The term “ringers,” signifying fraudulent substitutes, had its origin as a general term for counterfeiters, well before being applied to horse racing. The *Phrase Finder*, however, suggests that the phrase “dead ringer,” meaning an exact duplicate, does stem from horse racing.<sup>12</sup> The word “handicaps”, while in use as a phrase in horse racing since 1751, was first applied as a type of general game in the seventeenth Century. A railbird was a tropical American cuckoo long well before it was used to describe a racing enthusiast. In addition, “at the gate,” meaning close at hand, was in use before organized horse racing began.

“Simulcasting” started off as a term to describe shows aired both on television and radio. It later referred to shows aired on more than one television network, before it had any application to horse racing. A “teletheater” was not initially a location—other than the actual race track—that showed televised horse races. It was originally a television series consisting of several self-contained dramas.

“Long shot” initially referred to long-barrel guns, and the furthest distance at which a shot fired from a weapon can reach. “The triple crown” referred to the papal tiara, centuries before there was a potential triple crown in English or American racing.

Other terms we associate with racing that did not have a racing origin include mount, pinhook, paddock, outrider, tout, and stayer. The use of the word upset, for an unexpected or surprise winner (rather than for a revolt or tipping over), did not come as a result of the horse named Upset, who in 1919 became the only horse to

defeat Man o’ War.<sup>13</sup> There are numerous examples of the word upset signifying a surprise victory in the Nineteenth Century.

### Possible Racing Terms

Finally, there are familiar phrases that may have come from horse racing. “Hat trick”—referring to a set of three successes in a match—probably had its origins in cricket.<sup>14</sup> It was, however, used in racing for a rider winning three races in a meet,<sup>15</sup> well before it was first utilized in ice hockey for a player scoring three goals in a game.

While the OED does not find that “charley horse,” meaning stiffness or a cramp, comes from horse racing, the *Online Etymology Dictionary* suggests that the term derives “probably from somebody’s long-forgotten lame racehorse.”<sup>16</sup> The term “wild goose chase” may have its origins in racing. It was first used in 1602, as “a kind of horse-race or sport in which the second or any succeeding horse had to follow accurately the course of the leader (at a definite interval), like a flight of wild geese.” The *Online Etymology Dictionary* finds that it was first used in “Romeo and Juliet” in the 1590s, “where it evidently is a figurative use of an earlier (but unrecorded) literal sense in reference to a kind of follow-the-leader steeplechase.”<sup>17</sup>

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The use of the term “Big Apple” as a reference to New York City arguably stems from horse racing. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* claims that it derives from jazz musicians calling any city, especially a Northern City, as the “Big Apple.” Yet, it was also used as early as 1921, “to refer to [the] New York racing circuit, considered as the pre-eminent one.” *Word Origins* states, “[t]his name for New York City was originally horse-racing slang that made its way into the vernacular.”<sup>18</sup> The *Phrase Finder* writes: “Probably the strongest contender is that it was coined in the horse racing community in the southern USA.”<sup>19</sup>

The *Online Etymology Dictionary* finds that the term “give and take,” as of 1769, was “originally in horse-racing, referring to races in which bigger horses were given more weight to carry, lighter ones less.”<sup>20</sup> The OED suggests, however, that the term was in use as early as the Sixteenth Century to denote exchanging repartee and blows.

If not for horse racing, the English language would be far less rich and interesting. Hands down, from the perspective of the dictionary, horse racing’s linguistic contributions triumph over all other sports in a walkover.

## Endnotes

1. The OED now uses “out of the money” principally for the pricing of puts and calls.
2. “Off the board” has the same general meaning as “out of the money,” referring to contestants that do not finish in the top three. It is not referred to in the OED but is in general usage.
3. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/post%20time>.
4. “10 Phrases That Come from Horse Racing” (May 1, 2014), available at <http://blog.wordnik.com/10-phrases-that-come-from-horse-racing>.
5. The term is not referred to in the OED but can be found at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Garrison%20finish>. It refers to a come-from-behind victory and is named after the Nineteenth Century American jockey Snapper Garrison, who was noted for his rallying finishes.
6. Peter Marks, “The 2000 Elections: The Media; A Flawed Call Adds to High Drama,” *NEW YORK TIMES* (Nov. 8, 2000).
7. Chris Matthews, *Hardball with Chris Mathews* for January 21, 2016, MSNBC.
8. Joe Dowd, “A Political Circus, Come and Gone,” *LONG ISLAND BUSINESS NEWS* (April 25, 2016).
9. Steve Kornacki, *Hardball with Chris Matthews* for December 29, 2016, MSNBC.
10. Andrew Malcolm, “Hillary Clinton Wasn’t the Only Big Election Loser,” *CHICAGO TRIBUNE* (Nov. 16, 2016).
11. Adam Shell, “Stocks Hit Superfecta Driven by Trump Win,” *MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL* (Nov. 22, 2016).
12. <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/dead-ringer.html>.
13. *Sports Legend Revealed: Did the Term ‘Upset’ in Sports Derive from a Horse Named Upset Defeating Man o’ War?* *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, (May 10, 2011), available at [http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/sports\\_blog/2011/05/sports-legend-revealed-did-the-term-upset-in-sports-derive-from-a-horse-named-upset-defeating-man-o-.html](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/sports_blog/2011/05/sports-legend-revealed-did-the-term-upset-in-sports-derive-from-a-horse-named-upset-defeating-man-o-.html).
14. Besides the OED, see [http://www.wordorigins.org/index.php/site/hat\\_trick/](http://www.wordorigins.org/index.php/site/hat_trick/).
15. Per the OED, it was utilized in racing as of 1893.
16. [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=charley+horse&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=charley+horse&allowed_in_frame=0); see also [http://www.wordorigins.org/index.php/site/comments/charley\\_horse/](http://www.wordorigins.org/index.php/site/comments/charley_horse/) and “10 Phrases That Come from Horse Racing,” *supra* note 4.
17. [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=wild+goose+chase](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=wild+goose+chase); see also <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/dead-ringer.html> on the equine origins of the “wild goose chase.”
18. [http://www.wordorigins.org/index.php/site/big\\_apple/](http://www.wordorigins.org/index.php/site/big_apple/).
19. <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/64200.html>.
20. [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=give-and-take&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=give-and-take&allowed_in_frame=0); see also “10 Phrases That Come from Horse Racing,” *supra* note 4.

**Bennett Liebman is a Government Lawyer in Residence at the Government Law Center of Albany Law School. He previously served as the Deputy Secretary for Gaming and Racing in the Governor’s Office and as executive director of the Government Law Center.**

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