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“This town isn’t New York or Newark... there are far more pigeons here,” says Heavy Benny, on the job at Hollypark

CONFESSIONS OF AN L.A. BOOKIE

By Al Stump

Gambler: “I can’t pay you today, Benny. I left my money in the pocket of my other pants.”

Benny: “I didn’t know you still had two pairs of pants.”

Bookmakers are the ultimate social anomaly. It is as if they held some special right to levy taxes—the privilege of skimming the public purse—while being exempt from filing even a nickel of income with the IRS. Locally, among the busiest of these anomalies is Benny—known to his friends as Heavy Benny—who has a round, ruddy and innocent face.

No one can say that life hasn’t treated him well, although Heavy Benny is more abused than a public washroom—and the gaming section of administrative vice at the LAPD has a file on him thicker than a pile of 50 scratch sheets. “Bookies are always blamed for something they didn’t create,” lamented Benny as he drove into Hollywood Park one morning last month. “My best customers look down on me. They’d come to my funeral only to celebrate.”

Most gamblers consider a bookie a baracuda with no license to be a human being, but this day at Hollypark, Benny, wearing a fine cashmere jacket, matching

cap and carrying Swiss binoculars, handed \$20 to the car-park boy while telling him, “On a smoggy day like today, put your money on a gray horse with yellow silks.” Moving toward a track gate, he explained, “That way nobody can see what your jock’s doing to the other riders on the backstretch.”

Formerly of Asbury Park, New Jersey, 46-year-old, five-foot-ten, 260-pound Benny is a cynic and a \$200,000-a-year success. Long ago he was able to afford his own 24-hour bail bondsman, and he now goes about in \$125 lizard boots and with a bulging belly courtesy of food at L’Escofier. Ask him how his girlfriend is doing and Benny replies, “She’s humpbacked from the jewelry I give her.”

Illegal as an embezzler, he lives in a shadowed world of “cash rooms,” “relays,” “moving the line,” “dime units,” “chopping the pot,” “junk action,” “vig- orish” and “connected people.” He is a full-service operator, combining sports bookmaking—football, baseball, fights, hockey, basketball—with handling play on “flats,” or Thoroughbred racing.

Geographically, Benny’s a chameleon. If he has a front office, taking phone or drop-in bets in Van Nuys, he also maintains a back room far away in the San Gabriel Valley. His front room quotes the

day’s odds or point spreads to players who call in (they use coded I.D. numbers, never their names); his back room records, processes and balances out the action. Linking the two is a relay, or information-transfer system.

“It’s a blind split,” explained Benny as he comfortably spread himself out in his Hollypark clubhouse seat. “If the cops hit the front room, they get some anonymous bet slips and pricemaking paperwork. But they could pull a gun on the guys there and demand the location of the back-room bookkeepers, and it’d do them no good. Because the front guys don’t know the back guys. Never met them. Don’t even know what county they’re in. Maybe they’re in Big Bear, hey? Or down around La Costa.”

I was at Hollypark with Benny (not his real name—in fact, Benny is a composite of two well-known L.A. bookies) to pry into the covert life of an L.A. bet taker, who may be to civilization what the remora is to the shark but who, nevertheless, is needed. It’s been argued that without the bookie, life would be hollow. Compared with the dull stock market or a real-estate venture, getting down on an NFL, NBA or NCAA game or a hot horse is the stuff of adventure, of soul. “Gamblers feel romantic,” Benny put it, “but they’re ac-





ROW 1 SEC 2

ROGERS

“...Benny’s daytime vehicle is a plain black Ford; at night he drives a flashy XJ12 Jag, for which he paid cash...”

tually mental cases. They keep conning themselves. If they go broke at Book A and Book B, they’ll go to Book C and bet for credit. Walter Matthau, who ought to know, once said a compulsive player is a total moral degenerate. He’s right. A compulsive will steal from his own family to keep his play alive.”

Spreading himself comfortably over a seat looking down on the teeming Inglewood-track mob, Benny drolly commented that he fully subscribes to a Damon Runyon aphorism.

“You mean the one about all horse-

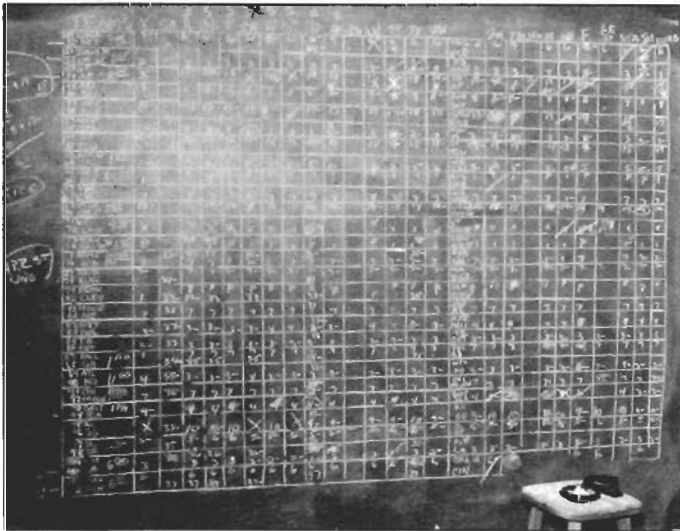
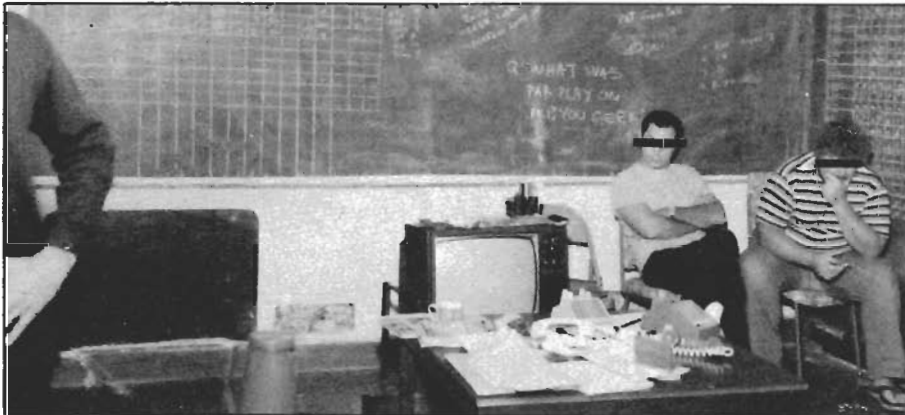
players dying broke?” I inquired.

“Nah, that’s not quite true. Runyon wrote, ‘As regards the human race, it’s nine to five against.’ Truest thing ever said.”

Keeping Benny and roughly 1,500 other area hand books, cash rooms, wire services and tout outfits in diamonds is a private-wagering volume here that may be the highest per capita in the country. Ten years ago, L.A. district attorney Evelle Younger moaned that local bookies raked in \$700,000 daily. In 1978, the official estimate was \$1.8 billion laid out annually. And recently, Lieutenant Runo Lemming, one of the top bookie busters of the LAPD, rolled his eyes and reported, “It’s wild. In the past, a single sport book here would do \$100,000 per week on various team games. Now when we make an arrest, we find \$800,000 to close to \$1 million grossed in a week in *one shop* on only *one sport*—football. Overall, we figure \$4 billion is gambled on games and another billion or so on off-track horse bets in Los Angeles County.”

The L.A. city budget for fiscal 1980, including proprietary interests, is \$3.4 billion.

“Fyodor Dostoyevsky could have written a hell of a novel about Los Angeles



A bookie gets raided: Blackboards keep track of the action, phone-answering machines take bets the impersonal way, and a teletype machine brings in the important info—which horse came in first.



gaming,” I told Benny. “Remember his character who had one coin left in his pocket for food, and he bet and lost it?”

“Don’t bring up Russians,” replied Benny. “It reminds me that only Russian spies are more unpopular here than an honest guy in my line.”

When he drops in at Hollypark, Del Mar or Santa Anita, Benny isn’t present just to lay a few knowledgeable bob himself, but to boost business. Not everyone—particularly not owners and trainers—wants to go against the cutthroat 15¼ per cent takeout by the track and the state from the pari-mutuel handle. Owners and trainers are not such suckers. Many prefer to invest with free-lance bet brokers. They not only extend credit,

BAIL BONDSMAN TO THE BOOKIES

"In writing bail bonds, bookies rate among the best of risks," states Joey Barnum, a lean man in dark shades. "You don't find them skipping town and becoming fugitives, like so many people charged with a crime."

"Jailhouse Joey" Barnum specializes in furnishing release bonds for arrested bookmakers—several hundred per year. The LAPD and the county sheriff's department report more than 2,000 annual bookie collars, part of a perennial attempt to hold down booming illegal gambling. Bail is usually set at \$500 to \$1,500. "Courts here in L.A. County are lenient, much more so than in Orange and Ventura counties," say vice-squad sources. "You might put a book out of business for a few months, but he'll pop up again. You can bet on that."

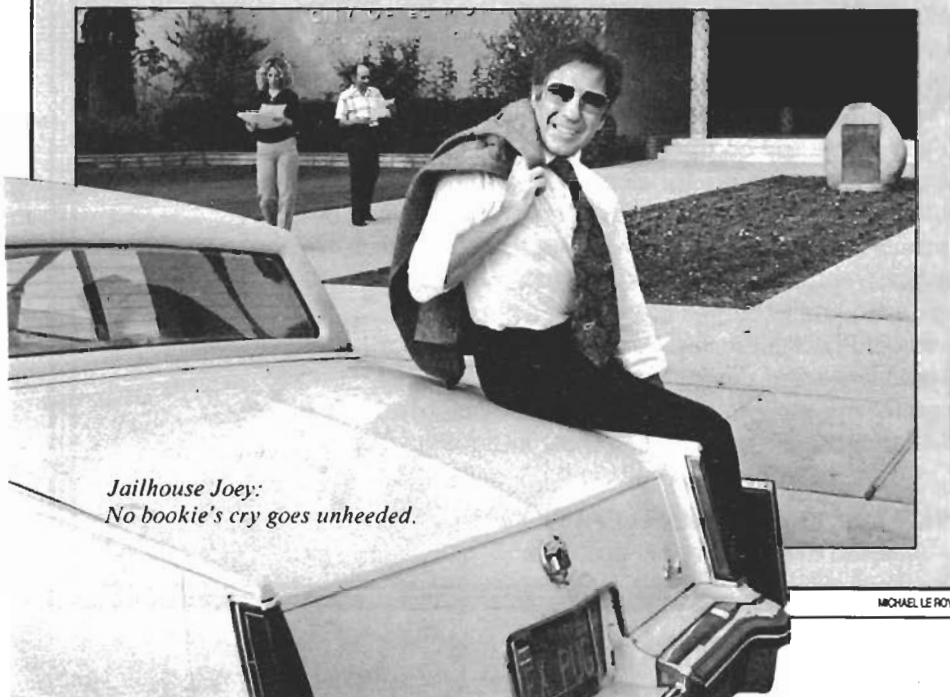
Meanwhile, Jailhouse Joey speeds to the rescue. Southern California's bet-processing mills dislike losing valuable time away from the old grindstone; therefore, their first reaction after an arrest is a distress phone call to Joey Barnum or another bondsman. "I carry a beeper, wherever I go," says Barnum, who is headquartered in El Monte and downtown L.A., "so that no bookie's cry goes unheeded." On a \$1,000 surety bond, his commission under law is \$100.

One night he refused to write bail for a bookie because the culprit couldn't put up collateral on a \$2,000 bond, such as real property, stocks or bonds. "As I was leaving the jail," Barnum tells it, "the fella said, 'I understand that you can't trust me. So, at least, let me give you a horse at Santa Anita that will win.' He then tipped me to a 15-to-one long shot. Just for the hell of it, I bet him pretty heavy on the nose.

"The tip won and paid me \$1,600, and I rushed back to his cell and bailed out the guy at no charge. Matter of fact, I took him to dinner that night at the best restaurant in town."

Leading his list of preferred bail-out risks are bookmakers, gays and prostitutes—"all of whom have territory or other connections to protect and are dependable." And there's another reason why Barnum's bailees seldom run out on his guarantee that they'll duly appear in court: in the 1940s and '50s, he was the world's third-ranked lightweight, winner of 93 of 110 pro fights, including a victory over welterweight champ Johnny Bratton. Desilu *Playhouse* once produced "Killer Instinct," starring Rory Calhoun—the story of Barnum's fistic career. Today his Cadillac carries the license plates EX PUG.

Jailhouse Joey, who did \$2 million worth of business last year, attests that bookmakers live by a code of honor. They do not reveal the names of their customers to the district attorney, even when facing sentence. This is understood and lived up to with few exceptions. "It's vital," Barnum says, "because the customer might be a bank president, a name politician or even a judge."



Jailhouse Joey:
No bookie's cry goes unheeded.

MICHAEL LE ROY

"...My best customers look down on me. They'd come to my funeral only to celebrate..."

which the mutuels do not, but will allow seven days of "straightening-up time" in which their losers can pay them. Of course, independent bookies can't afford to pay off winners at track odds. But their maximums of 15-to-one, six-to-one and three-to-one payout on win, place and show aren't all that bad. And you don't need to queue up to be accommodated.

"Excuse me," murmured Benny, leaving his seat and wandering off into the mezzanine-level crowd. He paused here and there a few feet away from a well-dressed customer. Barely moving his mouth, he can quote his odds and accept a wager in a few seconds of murmured conversation. And that's what he was doing in broad daylight at a track where security guards are always watching for invading bookies, who bleed off big money from the establishment—an estimated \$1 million per meeting. Back in his seat a half-hour later, Benny pointed out his Robin Hood-esque ethics: "The difference between me and the mutuels is that they take from the many—the poor—and I take from a few—the rich. Even the jockeys send agents around to get down with me."

One of his competitors, called the Owl, has been thrown off California tracks more than 30 times, which amuses Benny. "I don't stay long and don't come often," he said, dismissing such foolishness. "In a crowd of 50,000, I'm just another fat guy with a copy of the *Racing Form*."

It is near the affluent Arcadia area that he supervises his main organization: a front-and-back-office staff of eight to 10. Benny himself works out of a third station, a cheap, rented apartment somewhere south of Olympic Boulevard. Every few months he changes his address. Once a week his losing clients are visited by Benny's "runners," who collect in cash. They do it in a bar, on the street, even at the loser's place of business. "On payouts to winners, you got to go carefully," said Benny. "Maybe you start up a school of the dance. Or a school of bridge instruction. You print checks on the schools' bank accounts. Then you mail a check to your client."

What about the cops bugging his battery of phones? "Absolutely no way they

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BOOKIE

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can do that today," he smiled. "The Cahan Law and federal regulations have blocked the vice squad. One time I was raided at a West Hollywood spot. The cops had a legal warrant to break in. But it took them 45 minutes to get through a reinforced door. They used rams, and when that didn't do it, they called the fire department for automatic jacks. The thing went on for 45 minutes until, finally, the goddamn door went down, crash.

"And standing there in an almost-empty room was a little guy about 90 years old.

"Were you knocking?" he asked the policemen."

After the fourth race at Hollypark, Benny departed, heading his car toward Studio City, where he was to pick up his dinner date—a lady bartender. "She helps me out, brings in business," he said. "The older johns who hang around girlie bars want to make time with the girls. So she hustles them a little, and they go for a chance on a ball game. Or make bets like exactas or five-horse parlays, where they got as much chance as a Cuban swimming side stroke to Miami."

So as not to arouse the curiosity of roving LAPD patrols, Benny's daytime vehicle is a plain black '78 Ford. Away from the job, he drives a flashy Jaguar XJ12, for which he paid cash. He drinks only Glenfiddich malt Scotch. He sleeps crosswise in a 10-foot-long custom-made bed. In one week he's done \$600,000 total volume, laying off about one-third of this to larger bookmaking emporiums in the event his patrons get lucky in a bunch. In so "chopping the pot," he loses some profit, but he gives himself an essential safety hedge.

"Of 100 average bettors, how many are consistent winners?" I asked.

"Eight to 10 per cent on ball games, a little more than that on the ponies," he answered. "This town isn't New York or Newark. Far more pigeons here."

The players' demented logic is easily demonstrated: "Right now, I've got an actor's agent who's always in over his head. He lost 16 straight times on pro basketball. He can't realize that you can't handicap this game, what with all the overpaid athletes in it who blow hot and cold. So after losing 16 in a row, he phoned to make a 17th bet. I told him there was no basketball action scheduled for that day, but we'd accommodate him on Forum hockey.

"The goof got mad. 'Don't be silly!' he yelled. 'I don't know anything about hockey.'"

It's amazing, mused Benny, the way highly intelligent executives delude themselves that their pickmanship will beat the price-setting professionals of Las Vegas,

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New York and Miami, such as the Reno Line and Bob Martin's Union Plaza Sports Book in Vegas. Not only does Benny receive these guidelines for \$200 per week each Monday, he adapts them to his special needs by creating a "moving line." In midweek or late in the week, he changes the point spread or odds, according to where and in what amounts money is coming in. For each pro bet, he diligently tries to "level" it with a con bet. Should he not balance his accounts, he is, in effect, wagering on a game's outcome. And no shrewd operator takes sides or strays outside the "hazard"—the amount of cash set aside to pay off winners.

Many football books have a policy of moving or leveling the line by a half point for every \$10,000 laid in excess on any one team over its opponent. It's like the stock market—buy orders on one ledger side, sell orders on the other. To win \$100 on sports, you put up \$110. The difference is the 10 per cent commission to the house. After expenses, it runs in the 7 per cent range. On horse races, it runs 15 per cent and up.

As a young guy back in Asbury Park, Heavy Benny worked as a junior accountant. "I'd bet other employees on how long the various big shots in the firm would last in their jobs," he related. "When my department head found out I was giving three-to-one he wouldn't last a year, he fired me. So I came west and right away gained 52 pounds." As for "inside information," he soon learned that L.A. gamblers are pathetically short on it. Example: Benny one day accepted a "dime," or \$1,000 wager, on Loyola University of Chicago to lose in basketball. Later the customer confessed he'd been tipped that Loyola was about to suffer player ineligibilities. But Loyola easily beat Wisconsin. "Turned out that it was Loyola of New Orleans that had lost the players," said Benny, "which every bookmaker in L.A. had known about for 48 hours."

It's not surprising that well-to-do local bettors have traveled to Monte Carlo just to touch the knee joint of a bronze horse standing outside the Hôtel de Paris, which has legendary "lucky" powers. And it figures that Gamblers Anonymous was founded in Los Angeles in 1957 at the Mayfair Hotel. Nowadays, GA is a worldwide body, including an auxiliary for ladies who've reformed and sworn never again to buy a football card or daily double. But many GAs backslide. "Not many can kick it," claimed Benny. "Their motto is Bet Something Every Day; or, You'll Never Know When You Might Hit a Big One. We call them poorhouse optimists."

Later in the day, pulling his Ford into a Studio City parking lot where his date awaited him, he spoke of "rating" the city for values: "One Brentwood or Bel-Air player is worth a dozen South L.A. ones. A \$500-a-day habit is ordinary on the Westside. There's one owner of a chain of clothing stores who lays, I swear, \$1 mil-



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