

Choosing a Tipping Service

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Having read the articles on this site many of you may be looking to join a subscription tipping service but with so many options available, and so many sharp operators out there, it is difficult to know where to start. Welcome to the www.ProGambler.co.uk guide to getting started and finding a reliable service that chimes with your tastes and expectations.

When doing your initial research don't just plump for the tipster with the most persuasive adverts, ring a selection of services to get a feel for what's on offer out there and don't be afraid to ask some 'difficult' questions about results, projected profits and the kind of selections you can expect to be backing. Remember if you don't find the reassurance you are looking for move on, cross the said service off your list and call someone else.

Here are a few of the key themes you should use as a checklist when you are making your initial enquiries:

1. CONTACT

Contact, accountability and accessibility should be key considerations for anyone looking to join a betting service. If results are poor, or there is something you need clarified, then you need to know that you can contact someone easily and, that when you do, you'll get knowledgeable, reassuring answers rather than evasive flannel.

In this respect, the first few conversations you have over the phone are usually very instructive. Do you feel like you're being given the hard sell or does what you're being told sound like an honest assessment of what you might expect as a member? If it is difficult to get hold of an accountable person at the outset, whilst you are intending to give them money, imagine what it will be like once you have subscribed and - worst case scenario - things have not panned out as described?

2. PAST RESULTS

Ask for every service's results record in advance of signing up and also check their list of past winners account prices against both Starting Prices (S.P.) and opening price shows via archives on sites, such as The Racing Post and Sporting Life. If there is a consistently wide variance between the two prices quoted on the advised selections then it is very likely that you will be unable to get the account prices in the future on a sustainable basis. It may also be the case that something is very much amiss in the way your prospective service records its recommended bets. Obviously, unverifiable historical results should be treated with some caution. Past records are not always reliable as a guide to either future profits or the reality of the bets a service actually recommended on any given day, but if you can see discrepancies at this initial enquiry stage, it should ring warning bells for you and you should tread very carefully thereafter.

3. STAKING

Staking is a key issue that ties in specifically with both past results and how a service has created its alleged profits.

The larger the profit claims made by a service then the greater the likelihood that the stakes advised with the bets will be proportionally large too. Firstly, you must decide whether you would be able or are prepared to regularly risk such large amounts of capital or whether you're ideally looking to operate within a comfort zone of extremely restricted stakes. Once you've made that decision you should factor it into your plan so you can firstly, recoup your subscription fees and secondly, create a satisfactory return on your investment. Betting £20 level stakes, for example, you probably won't recoup the cost of a £1,000 subscription so you should choose your strategy and your service carefully at the outset. You should also consider how difficult it can be to get a big bet accepted when the bookmaker already has sizeable liabilities for the horse/team/player you're being asked to back. Anyone who has ever tried to get a bet on a Pricewise selection from The Racing Post, for example, will know that they invariably struggle to get the best price advised in the paper and/or will have their stakes restricted on any large bet they make. Ask yourself: is this a likely scenario for you with the service you are looking to join?

If your prospective service's profits are based on much larger prices than the S.P. and an expansive or arcane staking system, you will have a lot of trouble even getting anywhere close to their projected profit figures. Be sure to ask how the profits are recorded - £100 level stakes is the general industry standard - however, many services' adverts record profits to £100 per point advised. If that's the case, you need to know that in

advance. Do you have the required betting bank to be backing a series of 5 pt win bets at £100 per bet (ie £500 win singles). If not, can you still make a profit from this service using a more conservative staking plan? It's worth noting however that an unfamiliar or unusual approach to staking may not necessarily mean that a service is 'bad' or duplicitous in its claims, however, it may well mean that this level of complexity or capital exposure is not for you and you should aim to find a service appropriate to both your available investment capital and your personal betting psychology. Think in terms of issues such as strike rate, losing runs and the general prices of the selections you'll be backing – does what is on offer correspond to what you feel comfortable with?

For example, my preference is for backing selections in a range between 3/1 and 33/1, I don't like backing hyped favourites at odds on prices and I'm happy to accept that as a consequence, I will inevitably encounter losing runs. Other bettors however, prefer to follow the weight of money in the market assuming that the price offered represents a direct corollary of the horse's chances of winning on the day, losing runs make them nervous and they want a steady stream of winners – almost regardless of the prices offered. Basically, you have to honestly evaluate what kind of bettor you are and find a service that suits that profile. For example, there is no service anywhere that can demonstrate a long term strike rate of 80%+ backing horses priced at 7/2 and above. It just can't be done, and if anyone claims they can, swerve them quick-style.

4. GETTING THE BETS

There are a number of service 'quirks' that you should investigate in advance and avoid at all costs.

Look out for:

- Expensive call charges. Let's face it, you're already being asked to fork out for an expensive subscription, being hit with an expensive list of premium rate call charges too just isn't on.
- Be wary of repeated daily call backs that will make the membership a millstone over time. It may be fine to make three or four calls per day to ascertain the recommended bets if you work from home but for most people, holding down a job, it is potentially an administrative nightmare and an impractical and frustrating way to enjoy your hobby.
- Make sure and ask what alternatives, if any, the service offers in terms of accessing the daily bets. For example, are they offered by email, a text or on a secure website as an alternative to a daily phonecall. Convenience is a key to getting the most from your betting.
- Be very suspicious of services operating under an umbrella of different services because if you are struggling to recoup your outlays as a member of 'Joe Bloggs Tipping's Daily service', you can rest assured that his Gold Service, Exclusive Service and Senior Service will inevitably be being marketed to all and sundry as 'going great guns'. Be aware that services with multiple arms and entities may often also play up their big winners in adverts without divulging exactly which service they've come from. It's a good ruse: after all if you operate seven services, offering up 50 tips a week between them, then it stands to reason that you'll regularly find some big priced winners. Whether you could back all these selections, pay seven lots of fees and still turn a profit, however, is highly unlikely.
- Another common ploy is to advertise that members can expect to back selections at average odds of 5/1 or more. What the adverts won't tell you, however, is that the average odds figures are maintained by occasionally backing triple figure priced no-hopers to augment the steady flow of short priced favourites. Technically they are telling the truth, of course but, as a legitimate marketing practice, it sucks. See also: services recommending backing short-priced selections each way as a means of boosting strike rate or length of winning run stats. The recording of winning bets at prices that would never have been freely available to ordinary service members betting with mainstream bookmakers is another common bugbear.

FREE TRIAL

Ask for a free trial of some kind. Any service worth their salt should be happy to give you even one day's access to the service's selections. This may not sound like much, yet even a day will tell you a lot about the way the service works irrespective of results. You can tell a lot about the integrity of a service from the tone, content and insights of a message. Just because you had a 10/1 winner on your free day or a loser, it does not mean that every day brings 10/1 winners or you will always get losers and you should factor that into your expectations. However, if the message amounts to little more than some inside info 'hocus pocus', the name of your selection and the time and meeting it is racing at then beware – especially, if the advised horse is a hotly tipped odds on favourite. The chances are your tipster is picking his selections from his daily paper or following the money on betfair – just like you would do. Another alternative to a free trial is a nominal first month's fee when you sign up (£10-£20, say) with an option to cancel your subscription to subsequent month's at the full terms if you are less than satisfied with results after 30 days.

Remember, above all else it is important that the service suits your requirements. As my end of year essay for The Observer Tipster Project illustrates (see link on front page), there are as many services as there are individual bettors temperaments and expectations. Personally speaking, I'd say a good service should allow you to improve your own betting as a result of the knowledge its experts pass on. Such knowledge will stand you well over your long term betting career. Where services give little more than a selection and no reasoning of why the bet is being made it is both very difficult to evaluate the quality of information you are receiving and also be reassured that you've made an informed choice. Is your tipster's winning run simply the result of a lucky streak or conversely, is a losing spell perfectly explainable and likely to be reversed very soon? Only open exposure to a tipster's methods will allow you to answer that question satisfactorily.

Given a choice between two equally profitable services, I'd personally always opt for the one that will educate me and enhance my enjoyment of my betting rather than simply spoon feed me names of horses without any accompanying rationale. Of the services I've personally monitored to date, the impressively friendly forum on The Mathematician's website www.mathematician-betting.co.uk is an extension of that philosophy based around a community ideal. Alternatively, Steve Lewis Hamilton's service broadcasts a weekly message that deals with questions arising from subscribers' enquiries and looks back in detail over the previous week's bets.

Lastly, there is one particular option that you'd be well advised to avoid at all costs. That is unsolicited glossy mailshots that come your way via direct mail campaigns.

In this instance, the tipsters' jazzy brochures will offer up all sorts of inducements from access to the most privileged stable intelligence to entry into every kind of sting, coup and scam imaginable - all for a never to be repeated cut price fee. In general, these offers, emanating from tipsters nobody has ever heard of, are little more than fishing expeditions hoping to snare a £100 or so from a constituency of desperate punters looking to transform their fortunes on the cheap. These scamsters enter into their campaign full in the knowledge that no-one will stay with them long enough to require re-subscription at their advertised full fee rates. These services are fly by night, superficial and unprofitable and over a period of time you'll see the same offers and claims played out over a number of different mailshot formats as the conmen reinvent themselves under a succession of aliases. Another dubious tactic of the mail-shot brigade, especially if they've just tipped a winning selection, is to make follow up calls to their clients asking for additional fees to join an inner circle of members with access to 'a stream of guaranteed winners' or a hush hush coup that skirts the bounds of legality. These slick skilled operators will adopt all the boiler room tactics of hardselling and manipulation that will be familiar to anyone who has seen the movie *Glengarry Glenross*. My advice, if you've just joined a service and you get that call, is put the phone down and don't entertain them, however much you're tempted by the sales pitch.