

HORSE RACING

Mike Elsass, a Dayton resident, will compete in the Daily Racing Form/National Thoroughbred Racing Association National Handicapping Championship. The competition takes place in Las Vegas. Staff photo by Ron Alvey

Calling it as he sees it

TOM ARCHDEACON
DAYTON DAILY NEWS



Art, they say, is in the eye of the beholder, but it's safe to say you could look

at Mike Elsass — as he stands Gibraltar-like in his paint-splattered white tux shirt surrounded by his abstract, acrylics-on-steel paintings at his Color of Energy gallery — and you'd never guess what else he has down to an art.

This weekend you won't find Elsass at his Brown Street gallery in the Oregon District. Instead, he's in Las Vegas competing at the \$1 million National Handicapping Championship.

From more than 100,000 participants who took part in qualifying tournaments around the nation, Elsass made the select field of 300 horse-racing handicappers invited to the two-day competition — sponsored by the Daily Racing Form and the National Thoroughbred Racing Association — that begins Friday, Jan. 29, at the Red Rock

Casino.

As it turns out, along with championing young and emerging talents on the downtown Dayton arts scene, Elsass also has a true eye for the ponies.

This is the fifth time in the past 11 years he's made it to the National Handicapping Championship, which he calls "the Super Bowl for horse players."

At the ESPN-televised 2005 event, he finished third and won \$33,000.

"I think there's a direct connection between painting and the handicapping (competition)," he

said. "There's a chaos there with all the races and all the horses you're choosing from, and that's similar to abstract art in that you act, then react. When I paint, I try to keep the brush in front of the brain, and that brings a certain freedom to it.

"And if you're going to handicap horses, you can't think inside the box. You've got to see things other people might not."

It's that eye of the beholder thing.

» Elsass likely to fare well again Article on B6

Odds are he'll fare well again

TOM ARCHDEACON
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The daily routine for Mike Elsass goes

something like this:

Before dawn, he slips one of his trademark, ribbed-in-the-front, paint-splattered, white tuxedo shirts over his Rick Majerus-like girth — "I get those shirts for four bucks at Big and Fatties," he chuckled before clarifying, "Herle's (Big and Tall)" — then he heads to his Front Street studio.

He paints — "brush-before-brain" abstract acrylics on rusted, weathered sheets of steel — until late morning.

"Then I take a little nap — that way I can start again with some fresh eyes," Elsass said before shrugging. "Or — with the flat screen I've got there and DirecTV — I might just go watch a few races."

For the colorful downtown Dayton arts figure — who also owns the Color of Energy gallery on Brown Street in the Oregon District and has become a champion of young artists in the area — watching horse racing isn't so much a diversion or distraction, as it is delving into another thing he has



Mike Elsass

come down to a bit of an art. While his paintings are on display in some two dozen galleries across the globe — from Singapore to San Francisco, Sante Fe, Sedona, Chicago and Cincinnati — the ponies have taken him to Las Vegas this weekend for the \$1 million National Handicapping Championship.

From more than 100,000 participants who took part in qualifying tournaments around the nation, Elsass made the select field of 300 handicappers invited to the two-day competition — sponsored by the Daily Racing Form and the National Thoroughbred Racing Association — that begins Friday, Jan. 29, at the Red Rock Casino.

This is the fifth time in the past 11 years he's qualified for the event — he calls it "the Super Bowl for horse players" — where competitors build mythical bankrolls from \$2 win and \$2 place wagers on 15 different races (eight mandatory, seven self-selected) from various tracks around the country.

In 2005 — in front of ESPN cameras and a Vegas crowd that included his three grown sons — Elsass finished third and won \$33,000. "I was third coming into that last race," he said. "I knew I should take the favorite, but if I did, there'd be no way I could win the tournament. I just wouldn't make enough."

"Besides, with my boys there and the TV cameras rolling, I didn't want to look like I was only playing it safe. So I went with a different horse, but, like I expected, the favorite wins. If I would have stayed with it, I would have finished second and made 80-grand. ... But I just didn't want to look like a wuss."

He's not a wuss

When you think of Elsass, you get many images, though wuss is not one of them. Back in Botkins — the Shelby County town where he grew up — he was a high school basketball player and catcher on the Trojans baseball team. At Ohio University, he caught on the Bob Wren-coached team that featured Mike Schmidt,

the future big-league hall-of-famer from Dayton.

"I couldn't hit a curveball," Elsass said of the sports career that gave way to a degree in journalism, then a career selling insurance until a partner bought him out in 1997.

"I traveled after that, bet a few horses and chased women," the 62-year-old Elsass said with a laugh, "but I couldn't seem to do any good. ... About eight or nine years ago I was introduced to art."

"My mentor, Roger Sayre, painted on steel, and the next thing I knew I was making art, painting out of the back of my truck."

The steel he works on comes from scrap yards and a fabricator from Anna breaks the edges so it looks and hangs like a canvas. Some of his textured pieces have 40 coats of paint.

He paints live at Blind Bob's on certain Tuesdays while Dale Walton's band plays. Elsass still works out of a barn in Anna, too. And over the years, he's set up on Florida Panhandle beaches, in a Louisiana swamp — "I got a series called Crawfish and Lipstick; it's inspired by Cajun music and Cajun women" — and, especially, along the rail at racetracks such as Keeneland and River Downs early in the morning.

"The horses are working out. You hear the sound of hooves pounding on the track. People are drinking coffee. The fog is lifting. There's the anticipation that your horse is gonna run well that day. ... To me it's magical," he said. "I find energy in that."

As Elsass was rhapsodizing the other day, his friend Pat Barlage — a retired art teacher from Marion Local High School who's also from Botkins — overheard, shook his head and laughed:

"I think he got into art so he could meet more women."

Elsass smiled: "Well, it is a hell of a lot better than insurance."

'Dirty shirt' wager

Over the years, Elsass and Neal Allread from Centerville have owned some claimers they raced in the tri-state area and in Tampa, Fla.

As for the National Handicapping Championships, Elsass likes the circus-like atmosphere: "You've got a sports book full of professionals, recreationists, lifers, characters, 100-some TV screens, maybe 700 horses you might be looking at and a million theories."

He's got certain things he considers when he bets a horse, but because it's crucial to build your bankroll with some longer odds picks, he said he looks for what he calls "dirty shirt" things.

In racetrack parlance, a dirty shirt is a long shot most other people would not consider. Elsass said a dirty shirt bet — on a long odds winner at Hawthorne — helped get him to Vegas this year.

Should he make any money this weekend, he said part of his winnings will go toward scholarships for Summer Space, a program that gives 10 emerging artists a chance to have their own studio space in the Excelsior building on East Sixth Street, network in the local arts community and work alongside him.

Unless, of course, he's slipped off to watch a race or two.

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