

# TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

## BACKSTRETCH BUZZ

Anyone who has ever spent much time around any racetrack in the morning realizes what a frenetic place it can be. Horses are streaming on to the track for their morning exercises, trainers are studying the opposition in search of potential claims, grooms and exercise riders are buzzing around and opinions are flying like machine gun bullets on Omaha Beach.

For the handicapper who exists solely in the paper world of Past Performances, it is generally difficult to assess and process the flesh and blood aspect of the game. When, for example, should handicappers alter their take on a race after they hear (usually from a 2ndary source) that a trainer or a groom or an exercise rider loves their horse when its form looks awful?

After all, there is lots of "wishing and hoping" that goes on along the backstretch but precious little actual "knowing". While it's true that those associated closely with a particular steed may know that their horse is feeling good and is ready to run well, they have no way of knowing how many others in the field may be feeling the same way. Horse people are notoriously bad handicappers and handicappers are notoriously bad horse people. That's just the way it is.

For the most part, then, individuals confident in their own handicapping abilities should stick with their opinions, more often than not. However, there are times when those who live inside the PPs can read between the lines and come out a winner. Reading stable intentions can be as significant as understanding class, pace, speed figures, et al. Let's look at the 2nd Race run at Golden Gate Fields on last Saturday.

This was a nothing-special one-mile event for seven \$6,250 claimers that had never won two races during their unspectacular careers. The favorite on the program was a Chuck Jenda-trainee named Speed Demon at 2/1. This four-year-old gelding required 12 starts before finally breaking his maiden in a bottom-level \$8k claimer, a day he was favored for the fourth consecutive time. After squeezing out that victory by a head, Speed Demon was 7/2 racing against conditioned \$6,250 claimers nearly three weeks later. Ridden by Russell Baze for the sixth consecutive time, he tried to rally inside (against a bias) and once again settled for 2nd money.

Listed as 2nd choice in the race was Pittsburgh Star, a five-year-old gelding who had been beaten a combined total of about 42 lengths in his most recent three starts, including his last when dropped to the \$6,250 level for the first time and finishing 19 lengths behind Speed Demon. Why, then, was Pittsburgh Star a mere 7/2 on the program? And, even more significant, why was Mr. Baze jumping off the favorite to ride him???????

There are three possible scenarios for this monumental jock switch:

(1) Bill McLean, Pittsburgh Star's trainer, might have gone to Ray Harris, Baze's long-time agent, and told him that he thought he had figured out why his horse had been running so poorly and had him ready for a good one.

(2) Harris had gone to McLean and said he thought that 'Star needed to be in front to run well and that his man would put him on the lead and let him ramble.

(3) Chuck Jenda was upset with how Baze had been riding Speed Demon and chose to replace him with Frank Alvarado. Baze, then, came open for the race and with Kevin Krigger on yet another suspension, McLean just grabbed him up as the most suitable replacement in the low-level event.

Only a few people know the answer to which scenario really took place but in all likelihood it was number one or two since few trainers have the guts to "fire" Baze.

There aren't many "on paper" players who are going to back a horse that was just beaten (without visible excuses) by another in the field by 19 lengths, particularly when they'd lost their previous two starts by a country mile as well. True, most serious players would wonder out loud about the jockey switch but not many would have had the guts to bet that Pittsburgh Star would turn

the tables on Speed Demon in this situation, not even if Eddie Arcaro came back from the dead to ride the gelding.

It was hardly surprising, then, when Speed Demon went off the 8/5 favorite and Pittsburgh Star's price rose from 7/2 on the line to 6/1 at post time. Star promptly was put on the front end by Baze, cruised on an uncontested pace and won at \$14 while his adversary could only chase him home to run 2nd yet again.

Results like this drive the "on paper" crowd crazy. How could a horse just beaten 19 lengths by another horse improve 22 lengths to beat that rival by three this time around? Certainly Baze isn't that good, is he??? Some might even scream that Pittsburgh Star had been stiffed three consecutive times in order to set up a betting coup of some type. If that was the case, it's highly unlikely the price gouging Baze would have been brought along for the ride. After all, if the horse paid \$14 with Baze, he probably would have paid \$22 with anybody else.

Players with a more reasonable attitude, would have reinvestigated the truth of the matter which, simply put, is that Pittsburgh Star is a better horse than Speed Demon. Before going into his three-race funk, he'd been beaten a nose for \$12,500 while Speed Demon was busting his butt to get by \$8k maiden claimers. They would have surmised that Baze could well make a difference with this horse in this situation and that he rarely rides anything that isn't at least "well meant". They would have chastised themselves for missing the opportunity and not cried foul. They would have understood that everything is not always as it seems on the surface and gone on to the next race.

In essence, then, this was a situation where the "buzz" could have led to a nice cash for those who chose to read between the lines.