

## THE OSTERMAN FILES DAMAGED GOODS

If locating false and vulnerable favorites is the best way to succeed at the races, and it is, then Fairplex Park is probably a good place to lose your caboose.

After all, after four days of competition in 2006, the chalk has scored in no fewer than 22 of the first 41 events, an inflated 54% success rate. Only a handful of winners have returned 6/1 or more to suggest those looking for wagering value are probably looking in the wrong place.

Often the races come up light on truly competitive entrants, a guy like Martin Pedroza jumps on the best horse and the fans wager accordingly. You would think that maiden claiming races might yield a price or two but they've run 11 so far and seven went to the favorite, generally at puny odds. And it's not as if they chalk hounds limp into the pot, they jump in with rubber bands off the bankroll. In the 41 races to date, a mere three had a favorite at 2/1 or better (all of them were beaten). In fact, the betting choice was NEVER higher than 2/1. On the other hand, there have been 14 winners that paid even money or less.

These are daunting numbers indeed. However, there is one area where seekers of price do have some sort of chance to survive--in claiming events that feature a suicide class dropper.

Horses, like everything else in this life, wear out. The rigors of racing eventually knock them out, physically, mentally or both. Once the Del Mar session concludes, trainers tend to use the fair as a dumping ground looking to squeeze one more good race out of a horse but, more importantly, trying to lose it for more than it's probably worth.

Damaged goods are damaged goods and bettors are offered lots of the stuff at Fairplex. Even so, because they appear to out-class the opposition, these runners are generally bet well below their chances of winning. The clues are often quite easy to read and, if there is an underlaid favorite in the race, that means there are overlays to be found. Here are a couple of examples from the current session:

FRIDAY, SEPT. 8 (10TH)--Espresso Love opened as the 3/5 favorite here despite being dropped from \$50k to \$25k after winning back-to-back races in good time at Del Mar. Trainer Bill Bainum probably felt he could win with this Grand Slam colt but he was also begging for a claim. On paper, Espresso Love towered over his field but did he really deserve to be 2/5 carrying that huge red flag? Hardly.

Espresso Love was hard ridden from the start, dueled with Li Bien and was outfinished after failing to maintain a straight course down the lane and bumping repeatedly with his foe. In essence, the favorite had no excuses at 40 cents on the dollar and was not claimed. Li Bien returned 3/1.

SATURDAY, SEPT. 9 (9TH)--Talking to John ran in five stakes races as a three-year-old but when he returned to action as a 4YO this summer, Steve Knapp had him in for \$32k. He was nowhere that day, then ran 2nd for \$25k August 6 and, then, was dropped again to \$20k August 23 when he ran last. Obviously, something was amiss and when he surfaced in a bottom-level \$5k dash at FPX, all sorts of sirens should have been going off in a handicapper's head.

Talking to John opened as the modest 5/2 favorite but was hammered down to even money by chalk players thinking he would mop them up for some free money. The favorite had a good trip near the lead but came up empty late and was beaten by 13/1-outsider Flashavenue without excuses. Knapp did manage to lose this one to Mark Glatt.

SUNDAY, SEPT. 10 (8TH)--June's Prince had not won a race since he took a two-furlong debut heat at Santa Anita in March of 2005. He subsequently ran in three stakes without success before going to the sidelines for nearly a full year. Cliff Sise brought him back against \$16k sophomores at Del Mar where he showed speed and spit the bit and then pulled the plug to enter his horse for \$5k against NW2 lifetime. A conservative 3/1 favorite on the morning line, "class" players sent him off at 3/5.

Sent along while a bit rank early, the favorite was part of the pace under Pedroza but fizzled down the lane to end up fourth. Winner Flashy Boy was the second choice on the line at 7/2 but returned 9/1 since all the June's Prince money skewed the board.

MONDAY, SEPT. 11 (4TH)--Daywood had failed to finish first or second in 10 starts this year while racing over his head for low-profile trainer John Meairs. Juan Garcia thought he could do better with this four-year-old gelding and dropped in a claim slip for \$16k August 9. Apparently, he could not and immediately entered his purchase for a mere \$5k at the fair. None of this discouraged devotees of "class" as they made him 4/5 despite the ultra negative pattern.

Daywood had a clean trip stalking the pace but lacked any sort of finish down the lane and ended up third behind 12/1-upsetter Noble Kinsman. Daywood was claimed by Joe Glorioso.

The point here is not whether one was able to come up with the eventual winner in any of these races. The point is that when the favorite looks like damaged goods, you will be wanting to bet against it and not on it. There should be plenty of more opportunities to do just that before this meeting comes to a close.