

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

FORMULATING A GAME PLAN

The San Francisco Forty-Niners have become famous in the NFL for "scripting" their first 20-some plays every weekend. They have a "game plan" based on the opponent they are facing and what they think they can do successfully against them. As a horseplayer, you should have one, too.

"Opportunity" is the biggest change of all in the racing world. In the old days, you just got into your car, drove to whatever track was open in your area and dealt with the nine races that were on the menu that day. If the card didn't look promising, you just stayed home. If there was no track operational around home or you lived in a state without "live" racing, you didn't play unless you happened to be connected with a friendly bookie willing to take on the "high risk" downside of racing action.

Things are considerably different nowadays. Virtually all operating emporiums feature full-card simulcasting on at least one other track and many across the country offer anything and everything they can get their hands on. Instead of just nine betting opportunities every day, there may be 20, 40, 100, or more. Gone are the days when you could walk into the track, buy a Form and a program and sit down to handicap the races as they are run. Let's face it, you gotta have a game plan and it has to be in place and ready to go before you even start the motor and leave your driveway.

Even in this computer-driven era, nobody can thoroughly handicap even 20 races a day and do a good job on all of them. These are decisions that should be made BEFORE walking through those pearly gates of equine investing:

(1) Decide what track(s) to play. Stick with what you know. Nothing is more difficult than picking up a set of past performances featuring full fields of strange horses saddled by unknown trainers and ridden by jocks with names you can't pronounce. The ovals that have provided past success are probably the best venues for any individual. If a new track is offered via simulcast and it seems to have promise, play around with it for awhile before investing real money. "Paper trade" as the Wall Street crowd calls it. This may appear obvious on the surface but you'd be surprised at how much money is lost by players dabbling in the unknown.

(2) Select the races on the card you feel most comfortable with and that seem to offer the best potential value. If you are a traditionalist, the best way to determine this is to keep records of your bets. If your primary past success has come with older claiming sprinters, stick with those races. If it's been with maiden claiming routers, so be it. If you concentrate on 'angles', whether they be trainer-spot plays or recent claims or solo pace situations, seek the events that offer the strongest moves within your specialty. Limit yourself to 10 possible wagering situations and play only when the value is truly available at post time. If you plan to attack the Pick Six at a certain track, you have already determined 60% of your effective workload.

(3) Do your homework before "going to school". After identifying and investigating your designated events, employ your methods and attempt to visualize how each of these races will be run. Which horse(s) will be in front early, which will be stalking and moving into the lane and which will be trying to fly from off the pace. Construct your "betting line" and envision the logical underlays and probable overlays. Decide beforehand which of them figure to provide the best value in the Win Pool, in the Exacta/Trifectas or in a Pick Three situation. Be flexible enough to adjust if the betting proves to be unexpected or if late scratches change the pace scenario or if a strong bias appears out of the blue. If things get too hectic, just pass.

(4) Decide if you are going to the races to play seriously or to have a good time. It's hard to do both. If you're going to play for real, stay away from people that have track records for upsetting your mental stability, either by offering unwanted opinions or by having the sort of personality that makes clear thinking difficult. If you're going to hang out at the bar and socialize or talk business over lunch, limit your bankroll to what you can afford

to lose with a smile. Consider it as part of the price of doing business or enjoying yourself. In the later case, keep your plan as simple as possible. Know when you're trying to be professional and when you're just an amateur looking to get lucky.

(5) Stick with the plan but don't go against the flow. If an obvious bias favoring outside closers shows up, for instance, you may want to pass on those inside-speed plays unless the price is just too big to ignore. Even then, you should downsize your investment accordingly. Don't get sucked into betting on races you decided to pass the night before.

(6) Never press when things are going badly. "Chasing" lost wagers with forced bets is the easiest way to get yourself on the road to Tap City, not a pretty place to visit.

(7) Believe in yourself and your skills. You won't win every day and you don't want to give the money away on Saturday that will make you a big winner on Sunday. Breaking even or keeping losses to a minimum isn't a bad thing for any player. As Scarlet O'Hara once said on the big screen, "Tomorrow is another day!!" Remember, also, that it's never bad to take your profit and leave early rather than risk it on races you hadn't planned to play in the first place.

There's a fine line between being aggressive and being stupid and having a game plan in place before venturing to the track is one way to avoid going home feeling like a jackass.