

## THE OSTERMAN FILES THE AGE GAME

As horseplayers, some of us were once "young and stupid". As the weeks turned into months, then years, then decades, some of us have become just "stupid". Or at least, that's the way it may seem after bungling a day at the races where winners were picked and money was lost.

Age, however, is not a real factor for handicappers. This game can be played equally well no matter what one's true age may be. Age, however, is a factor with the horses which is why the first element of any condition has to do with the age and sex of the runners on the grounds that are eligible. Races are restricted to two-year-olds, three-year-olds, four-year-olds, four-year-olds and up and, eventually, in the spring of every year, to three-year-olds and up at all class levels.

As horses age and develop physically, they may become stronger and better, or they may fail to develop. The fast sophomore sprinter that once dominated against its peers in stakes races may fail to mature while needing to drop in class in order to be competitive. Other lightly-raced three-year-olds held out of competition in their developing years may have grown up and have no difficulty facing their elders with success. There is no rhyme nor reason to the process, it's all a case of individuality.

However, there are some rules of thumb that make a certain degree of sense.

1. In claiming races, three-year-olds are generally at a disadvantage facing older foes. The lower the class level, the stronger the age barrier. The theory being that young horses that have been in for a tag right along were never held in high regard by their connections while running at levels where "par" is often three or four lengths below that of older types competing for the same price.

2. In conditioned allowance races, the three-year-old may often hold the advantage over older. After all, a lightly-raced sophomore still has potential while an older horse that has failed multiple times in the NW1 or NW2 level must be considered somewhat suspect. The same is true in straight maiden events where bridesmaid types often will be forced to pack higher weight imposts than their younger opposition.

3. In optional claiming races at the \$62,500 level, or higher, three-year-olds in for the tag will generally lose but those entered for the allowance condition should be considered as equal to their elders. They may, however, be at a disadvantage to veteran performers entered for the claiming price that have piled up impressive win totals against salty fields during their careers.

4. Until they show they can run with the big boys from across the country, the sophomore set should be approached with some degree of caution in major stakes races, no matter how good they look on paper. Of course, there are degrees of difficulty in these added-money races, so individual analysis is the key here. The top-level three-year-olds have plenty of chances to race against their own age group through the summer until they make the move up in the fall. Some (Tiznow comes to mind) blossom when they face older while the group that survived the wear-and-tear of the Triple Crown chase need to be something special to beat true graded stakes winners later in the year.

The most glaring examples of age discrepancy in the spring come in low level claiming races like the ones often carded in the Bay Area. A perfect example showed up in the 2nd Race at Golden Gate Fields last Saturday.

This was a \$4k claiming sprint for fillies and mares that had never won two races during their undistinguished careers. It was open to three-year-olds and up. The favorite on the morning line was Maria's Posada, a sophomore filly who had been soundly beaten by her own age group in a string of races since being claimed for \$16k by Jerry Hollendorfer back in November. Unsuccessful for \$10k against open three-year-olds after the claim, she was rested until March but was still unable to keep up with others that had never won two races for \$12,500. Hollendorfer dropped her to the \$6,250 level April 29 where she finished a dull fourth against three-year-olds under Russell Baze.

A one-dimensional speed type who simply wasn't quick enough to make the lead against younger opponents, she was now entered against older foes which would make her task just that much tougher despite what appeared to be a class drop to the \$4k level. Even when Baze jumped off (he had no mount in the race), the public still thought she was a good thing and hammered her down to 4/5. They either ignored the age factor or missed it all together. Even the bad older company she was facing in this weak event had to be considered stronger than the three-year-old races she had been losing with conviction.

Her numbers did not even match up well against her six aged rivals but there she was, hanging up there at 4/5 just the same. When the public totally misreads the situation as they did in this otherwise nondescript event, it's time to spring into action.

The only two other entrants that seemed to merit attention were Festival of Fun (5/1 on the program) and Senorita Jazzy (4/1). The other four simply appeared to be too slow or too out of form to win a race of any sort. 'Fun was a speed type that might be quick enough to get the jump on her cheap rival and go wire-to-wire. Jazzy was a stalker that might be able to take advantage of a pace duel while enjoying a clean trip from the outside.

The latter scenario was the one that played out as Festival of Fun and Maria's Posada hooked up on the pace and faded badly in early stretch, Senorita Jazzy just sat back early, rallied by the worn-out leaders and widened to win a slow race by 3-1/2 lengths to the tune of \$13. Predictably, Maria's Posada finished out of the money.

Age plays like this will happen all the time when the County Fair circuit opens next month. At the fairs, they normally write lots of low-level claimers restricted to three and four-year-old company where the older entrants win the vast majority of the time, often at overlaid prices.

**FIRE NUMBER** - For over 25 years, Today's Racing Digest has been producing our Comprehensive Performance Rating, the CPR. While we, of course, are retaining the CPR as well as our other handicapping numbers, we are proud to introduce an all-new rating, our best yet, and we call it the FIRE number. It stands for **F**inal **R**ace **E**quation and it's a true speed rating that accounts for a horse's speed during the 'entire' race, not just his final time. We developed the FIRE number with every tool available to us. And, unlike the Beyer number, we'll highlight the projected FIRE number right next to each horse's comment. This is the figure to which we expect the horse to run TODAY! When using our new FIRE number, keep in mind that each two points represent approximately one length, regardless of distance or surface. A horse with a 96 FIRE is a half-length better than a horse with a 95 FIRE. A horse with a 97 FIRE is a full length better than a horse with a 95 FIRE. A horse with a 98 FIRE is one-and-a-half lengths better than a horse with a 95 FIRE and so on. It's just that simple. First-time starters and foreign horses will be marked with an 'X'; horses whose ratings are '0' exit very poor performances and lightly-raced horses who seem better than the **FIRE** number would suggest will get a '?', read this last symbol as 'capable of improvement'.