

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

THE CART AND THE HORSE

In a literal case of truly putting the cart before the horse, many occasional and first-time racegoers will opt to bet their money on the jockey rather than the thing that's under the rider. In many ways, of course, this is nonsense since no 110-pound human being can carry a 1,000-pound thoroughbred beast for six furlongs, not to mention eight, 10 or 12. On the other hand, people with few handicapping skills can do worse than backing a top rider on the blind rather than attempting to unravel the mysteries of the past performance lines on their own.

At the most literal level, the question is certainly rhetorical, at best. Obviously, no rider can win without a horse and no horse can win without a rider. It's a partnership thing and certainly no revelation to say that if you put the best horse together with a top rider that you've probably got something.

In the natural progression of handicapping development, once the amateur develops "novice" status this is a fact that they tend to forget. Gone are the days of taking Pincay or Bailey or Day or Baze on the blind in favor of delving into the performance histories of the horses involved in an attempt to establish which is best and wagering accordingly. It may not matter to these folks that their selection is off at 5/2 odds while ridden by a jock that has been visiting the winner's circle with about 7% of his starts. Let's see, taking a horse at 5/2 would suggest that it has a 28.57 chance of winning. Betting a jock at 7% would suggest this rider has an overall 12/1 chance of winning. Even a math simpleton can see that this combination does not compute favorably.

If the novice survives long enough to reach "professional" status, they have learned this lesson. In a game where a split second can mean the difference between financial success or disaster, jockeys do matter. If they didn't, you wouldn't see the same bunch dominate the standings meet after meet, year after year. The pros have come to grips with the fact that if they intend to take a short price (less than 4/1), they need a top-line jock. If they intend to bet a price, they may be able to accept a second-line rider and get away with it often enough to show a profit.

Let's look at Sunday's results from Santa Anita and see what we can see. Santa Anita, of course, is home to many of the best in the world and a track where second-line riders could go to inferior circuits and challenge for top jock honors. For the bettor, it's far better to have a group of good riders to choose from rather than being where one or two jocks dominate, ala Northern California.

1ST RACE--Medinacelli (\$19.20) upsets down the hill in an unusual coupling of Barry Abrams and David Flores. Unplaced under Matt Garcia, Victor Espinoza and Corey Nakatani in her first three starts, the Irish-bred miss either responds to the new rider and/or the new layout while coming down the dip for the first time. In reality, it's probably both changes that make the difference. LESSON: Beware when a decent barn reaches outside of his normal stable of riders to get a top-class jock who's been on a positive roll (Flores at 17% for Santa Anita), particularly at appetizing odds.

2ND RACE--Class of Glass (\$5.20) gets up as the favorite under Laffit Pincay for Bob Baffert. Pincay hasn't won 9,500+ races by being unable to ride any sort of horse, but he's always been extra good at getting cheap ones home with physical strength. He carried this filly to the wire and willed her to win the race in the final jump. LESSON: The powerful Baffert barn rarely, if ever, used Pincay in the past but since the jock has enjoyed his late-career renaissance, he's worked his way into the stable, if not on their best stock (yet).

3RD RACE--Belleski (\$3.60) validates form with an odds-on win for Espinoza. It was the third straight success for this horse/rider team going back to April of last year when she broke her maiden at 5/1. Coming off a layoff, she popped impressively at 14/1 January 19 in her hillside debut. LESSON: If you're thinking about taking a very short number (or singling in a sequence), it's essential to have a jock that clearly gets along with the horse.

4TH RACE--Boomslang (\$8) rallies wide for Alex Solis to win by daylight. Going from Anthony Lavato to Solis back on January 2, they had teamed to win for \$25k at 6/1. Solis stayed when Jenine Sahadi jumped the gelding to \$32k February 5 and wasn't moving when he was returned to his recent win level. LESSON: If you liked Boomslang, the rider wasn't going to get you off. In the same race, runner-up Gobi Dan was piloted by Danny Sorenson (currently 2% at the meeting on a horse offering a mere 4/1 on the board). That's a 20% "to win" horse with a 2% rider. Not good.

5TH RACE--Timber Cruiser (\$22.60) rings the bell again with Matt Garcia while fresh from a 29/1 maiden score under the same rider. Garcia is 12% at the meeting while rarely riding a favorite and has one of the more favorable R.O.I's currently in the room at SA. LESSON: Offered at 10/1 off a successful venture, Garcia was riding at a 7/1 "to win" clip overall. This is a good match up for value even if the horse was going 12 furlongs and facing winners for the first time.

6TH RACE--Heaven's Treat (\$18.20) goes wire-to-wire for Patrick Valenzuela. It's no secret that P. Val is at his best on a freewheeling front-runner and this one figured to make an easy lead in his first start off a Gary Stute claim. Once you combined the rider with the fact that the gelding was 3/7 in previous one mile races, was getting a positive barn switch and had drilled 33.1h two days before the race, it all made perfect sense. LESSON: When other handicapping factors combine with a move to the leading rider at a square price, take note.

7TH RACE--Surprisingly (\$10) enjoys a gorgeous trip stalking the pace outside under Flores and beats Danceoftheflags by a neck. This was the fourth consecutive teaming of horse/rider for Julio Canani and each was better than the last. After being outrun at odds of 13/1 and 29/1, they had missed by a half-length at 17/1 in their most recent partnership. Flores had to feel that the filly was getting close and it paid off. LESSON: When top riders stick with horses being sent off at high odds, there is probably a reason.

8TH RACE--Buddy Gil (\$55.40) not only wins the Grade III Baldwin Stakes at big odds but does it in style for the actor-turned-jockey Gary Stevens. This gelding had shown fast-track promise up north for Chuck Jenda but had then raced poorly in two wet-track stakes encounters. His turf pedigree was obscure but there was that move from a good NoCal stable into a red-hot local one (Jeff Mullins). LESSON: Buddy Gil may have been hard to find based on traditional handicapping factors, but if you're going to take a 25/1 flyer, it's nice to have a rider that has won multiple Eclipse Awards in the boot.

9TH RACE--Suspicious Caper (\$27.20) lands some hefty bets in his debut with sub-rider Isisas Enriquez taking over for scheduled Omar Berrio. The filly is 25/1 on the board with three minutes to go, drops to 16/1 with one minute left and then gets hit again to 12/1 near the gate. This sort of betting activity is highly unusual and when Suspicious Caper wins and pays a massive \$24.20 to place, you know the A.C. Avila stable put over a true coup. It's no secret that Berrio is Avila's "man" but when he was unavailable, they made sure to sign up a low-profile rider to protect the odds. LESSON: Low-percentage riders can be played when they are engaged by betting outfits but only when the odds are high.

The overall lesson is simple. You can't put the cart before the horse but if the cart and the horse fit together at an appropriate price, they make a playable team.