SEEDS OF A BIAS

The best handicappers have a bit of Hercule Poirot, Sam Spade and Sherlock Holmes in them. They are always looking for clues, motives and evidence that can help them make their case. No part of the handicapping mystery lends itself more to the powers of detection than track bias.

It can be so invisible that some still refuse to believe it exists, though this group is not as large as it once was.

It can be so subjective that even excellent ‘trip’ handicappers may disagree on the bias on a day-to-day disposition. It really can’t be quantified, so computers can’t be programmed to figure its affects into the equation. It is one of the final frontiers where iconoclasts can still be free thinkers and profit from their own opinions. When a bias hits, handicappers who don't follow what happens every day at a particular racetrack are generally lost. Those that do often find themselves in a position to make money the old fashioned way--they earn it.

Unlike their cousins to the North where powerful bias situations come and go on a regular basis, Southern California tracks have basically been free of bias over the last few years. Oh, there are days when the outside seems a bit better than the inside or the speed holds on a bit better than normal but long-lasting advantages are relatively infrequent. Such was not the case at Santa Anita last week when the rail provided a pathway to profits.

The seeds were planted on Wednesday when the surface was Wet-Fast and the results were there for all to see. This was not a day for making big bucks as all eight of the races were taken by horses paying $9 or less. However, a quick study of the charts revealed a strong pro-speed bias with six wire-to-wire winners and one more who held the rail all the way and was clearly in front after four furlongs of a one mile event.

Even when the bias is obvious on one day, a good trip handicapper doesn't go off halfcocked on the next card. Evidence is necessary to confirm the situation remains the same.

On Thursday at Santa Anita when the track was listed Muddy, it didn't take long to determine that the rail was still the place to be. Frontrunners continued to do well (normal with an inside bias) and those horses that did win from off the pace made their moves along the fence. The odds went up to some degree on the winners, which is often a positive indicator of a bias. Four of the first five races on the card went to horses at $13, $32.20, $13.60 and $18.80, all of whom did much of their running inside. In their preparation for the Friday card, most trip handicappers tilted their selections to horses that figured to have early speed and get position along the wood.

Now labeled "Good", the first main-track race was taken by odds-on favorite Silver Magic who skimmed the rail into the lane and drew off to an easy victory. The key horse here, however, was Blue Chip Charmer who was dispatched at 35/1 after spitting the bit to finish far back in all three of her spaced-out career starts. This time, 'Charmer had speed from the rail and managed to finish 2nd. In the 4th, La Luz Del Sol (17/1) set the pace inside and held together for the place money after Aussie Girl dropped far back early, rallied boldly inside on the far turn and took over for the easiest of victories. On a normal track, it was unlikely that 'Charmer or 'Sol would have finished in the money, much less 2nd. The 5th went to Lucky Sandman (5/2) who rallied inside on the far turn and swung out for room to win easily over rail-tripping price horse Glowing Idea (9/1). In the 6th it was Nsynctoo (3/1) outdueling Sea Victory (8/1 from the #1 post) early and winning in all-out fashion. By this point,
most bias detectives were convinced. In the final dirt race on the program, speedy Julietas Bolger had the rail at 7/1 and looked a primary candidate for a bias-aided victory.

Playing horses strictly because of the bias is a dicey proposition. It's a good starting place, though, and handicappers who sought out other positives in Julietas Bolger's record would have found them. He was making his first start for the hot Jack Carava barn who had already won one race on the card with Nysnctoo on a first-out claim. The horse also exited a 'key race' that had produced three subsequent winners since being run January 31. It didn't hurt that the race was carded for a speed-favoring 5 1/2-furlong trip or that the gelding had broken his maiden by seven in fast time at that distance way back in August of 1999. In a race where the favorite (Venus Genus) was taking a suspicious drop in class and had a style that was all wrong, Julietas Bolger loomed a strong bias play. He won at $17.80 with C Merrill Run and Awesome Daze completing the 1-2-3 Trifecta at $191.

Big Cap Day loomed with a dazzling 11-race program on tap. With big fields, plenty of value opportunities might surface if the inside bias held. After just one race, it seemed that it had. The opener went to a modest maiden filly, Mamselle Nanette, at $18.80. Never far back, she scooted through on the fence to draw off with the rail chaser Off the Charts along for second money. In the 3rd, Lester's Boy shook loose up front while securing the rail for an easy victory while 25/1-outsider Dig For It held the fence all the way to be 2nd. In the 4th, Englebert dueled inside on the pace and motored away for a big win. Favored Unlimited Value took the 5th while dueling outside but anyone could see that rail-running Impressive Grades was best. That one had to be swung out in mid stretch after being hopelessly blocked and would have won for fun if room had developed inside.

The Grade II San Rafael Stakes turned out to be a showcase for the much-hyped and very-talented Crafty C.T. He was quickest early, rated well while allowing Palmeiro to have the fence and motored away in fast time. A bias won't always get the best horse beat and on this day, Crafty C.T. was clearly best. If trainer Howard Zucker sticks to his guns about not going to the Kentucky Derby, it's possible this race will still produce a viable candidate to win the Roses in Early Flyer. He had a terrible trip that may not get the sort of notice it deserves. After breaking in the air, 'Flyer was parked very wide, rallied into contention into the lane and then was obviously bogging down in the deep going. He should have been 2nd easily and over a fair surface, might have given the winner a run for the money. He's a bias play next time out, no matter where he may run for Ron McAnally.

The last two main track races on the card both went wire-to-wire from the rail with Setareh an easily playable winner at $17.20 since he figured to be on the pace all the way (and was). Comic Genius ($12.20) was tougher to get since the second-time starter hadn't shown early foot when beaten by Crafty C.T. in a swift debut race. Once he was put on the lead by Eddie Delahoussaye, however, this one was also in the books. What a powerful debut performance by Alotta Numbers as this one was far back early, rallied very wide and finished like a rocket against the double bias. He was clearly the most impressive anti-bias performer of the week but, unfortunately, will offer zero value down the road.

Would the bias hold on Sunday? That answer came quickly when War Ribbons went wire-to-wire from the inside in the first main-track race of the day while paying $19.80 while odds-on Lady Grace struggled with a wide trip. Mega Gift followed with a rail run to win the 3rd at $6.40 which made the 4th a very interesting proposition. This maiden event for fillies had been switched from the turf and the favorites were drawn outside. Prestigious Prize, an expensive Lukas filly with three previous starts, was stretching out for the first time from the two hole. She looked quickest early, was overlooked at 10/1 and you could make an excellent case for her taking them wire-to-wire with the bias. Everything went like clockwork as she did establish the lead and fought off odds-on Reine de Romance at the 1/4 pole. Jockey Corey Nakatani made a mistake by allowing room along the rail.
and longshot Campaign Andover made a menacing move with the bias in the lane before being repulsed in the final furlong. Those tuned into the bias caught a nice $23.40 winner.

Part of the problem with being a bias handicapper is getting riders to do what they should do. In the San Carlos Handicap, Kona Gold seemed vulnerable at 1/5. After all, he was stuck outside under 125 pounds, hadn't been out since his impressive Breeders' Cup tally and might be had over this track by a horse that could secure the rail and open a clear early lead. Blade Prospector seemed just such a horse. He looked like the speed, was coming off a sharp effort in the Palos Verdes when taken out of his game and forced to chase the quick Freespool early. Jockey Omar Berrio got him in stride early but then took hold and allowed Son of a Pistol to get the rail. Once he disposed of that one, Berrio made no effort to move to the wood which gave Kona Gold a huge hole to rally inside as he burst away in the lane. I'm not saying Blade Prospector would have won the race (even with the bias) but Berrio erased all hope when he failed to give his horse that extra advantage which he dearly needed.

A strong bias of the sort we had last week at Santa Anita is the gift that keeps on giving. Remember the dates February 28-March 4 and watch for horses that managed to make up any significant ground while racing wide on these days. Their races are much better than they look on paper and many of them will come back to succeed in the near future at nice odds. Trust me on this one.