

# TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

## **FRESH-AND-READY CLAIMERS**

Everybody loves to pick a price horse. The "rush" is something special when you walk to the window, bet on a 15/1 shot and watch it win like it should have been 2/1.

Some longshots, of course, simply can't be picked by a traditional handicapping approach. If they didn't appear to be flawed on the surface, these winners wouldn't be going off at long odds. Most, however, do show subtle signs of impending improvement but they go unnoticed by the crowd in their rush to 'pick a winner'. They flock to the obvious horse(s) who come off good races, have the highest last-out speed figure, are proven at the class/distance/surface, have top jockey/trainer connections and are picked by every public handicapper sitting in the press box. It requires imagination to come up with winning price plays as well as the strength of conviction to go against the flow.

Certain types of races provide the seeker of price with better opportunities than others. Today's Racing Digest will give you hints with their stats detailing the performance of favorites under various conditions, but the most fertile territory for longshots are claiming events for older horses. These races feature runners that have been around awhile, know what it's all about and are often raced into shape while showing an improving pattern in their recent efforts. Let's consider a "longshot" to be any horse going off at odds as high or higher than the number of horses in the field. In a '10'-horse lineup, then 10/1 is a longshot, etc.

Here's a sample of races from 1998 at Santa Anita and Golden Gate Fields, when they ran a total of 25 races for "open" claimers (conditioned events up north, races for 3-year-olds and Starter or Optional Claimers were not considered) and six of them were won by longshots. Did these winners have anything in common? Yes, lots. They were fresh, they were in form and they had won a race without going too far back in their past performance lines. Here they are:

**APR. 1(2ND/SA) - QUEEN GEN (\$18.80):** This mare was 7/1 in a six-horse field of \$40k claimers going six furlongs. After being off for more than 10 months, she had run 2nd against \$32k sellers Mar. 6, so she was fresh and in good form. She had won seven of 32 lifetimes starts, including her fifth start back.

**APR. 1(6TH/SA) - AGATE (\$32.20):** In a race for 4-year-olds only, he was dropping out of a pair of Cal-bred Allowance events and into a \$20k seller. He had raced five times after a two-month layoff in the fall (fresh), had been in the hunt for six furlongs of his last race going seven panels (in form) and had broken his Maiden in his third race back.

**APR. 1 (3RD/GGF) - RAPID STREAM (\$17.80):** A \$10k router where Dr. Giggles opened at 4/5 coming off two breezing wins at Bay Meadows, Rapid Stream was a legit alternative in the seven-horse field. He was in the fifth start of a comeback for Larry Ross after being off 3-1/2 months, ran a solid 2nd in his last effort and had won a conditioned \$12.5 race three starts back.

**APR. 1 (5TH-GGF) - THREE NO (\$35.60):** A nine horse field of \$16k sprinters. Three No had one race after being off nearly two months and ran a solid 3rd in that race for the same tag as today's price. Although not known for winning races, he had scored in his fifth start back, so he was 'in form' and had a recent victory.

**APR. 4(4TH-SA) - KEEPSCRATCHING (\$24.20):** An 11-horse field down the hill for \$62,500 claimers. Keeps scratching was in the fifth start of his current form cycle after coming in from back east, had won a \$50k event at 21/1 odds Feb. 4 before running 3rd for \$80k Feb. 26 and suffering a nightmare trip six days earlier on the dirt. He was another contender who was 'fresh', 'in form' and offered a winning history.

**APR. 5(4TH-SA) - MEGAWING (\$30.40):** Ten-horse turf event for \$80k claimers. Megawing was making his fifth start in his form cycle after two months off in the winter, had run a good 4th in an Allowance race over the course in his last start (beaten about two lengths) and had a Feb. 14 win in his second start back (plus an 11/1 victory on the SA grass at Oak Tree Oct 3) going in. Remember, you're not trying to 'get lucky', you're trying to be good.

The profile for these possible improvers is pretty clear:

- (1) - They ran in claiming races for older horses.
- (2) - They had raced five or fewer times in their current form cycle (A "form cycle" begins after a horse has had a layoff of 45 days or more).
- (3) - They had been competitive (or had legit excuses) in their most recent races.
- (4) - They had a win in at least one of their previous five starts.
- (5) - They were offered at 'longshot' odds.

Handicappers have a choice when they go to the track. They can try and pick winners with the rest of the competition or they can look for races that seem contentious and/or feature favorites that may not be as strong as they look on paper. When those events come up (and come up, they will), it's time to shop for a price. Following these simple guidelines will lead to successful price plays that actually make you feel you do have that all-important edge over the crowd.