

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

WHEN A BARGAIN IS NOT A BARGAIN

Although they may not come equipped with government-mandated health warnings, many race horses should be stamped: **BETTING ON THIS ANIMAL COULD BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR FINANCIAL HEALTH.**

Of course, such warnings don't stop millions of Americans from smoking and it's unlikely that they'd keep the handicapping public from betting on horses like Prospectors Bay either. The subject of this week's sermon, my friends, is the negative class drop.

You know the type: claimed for \$16,000 August 13, unraced since and now entered for \$10,000. What to do, what to do? If the horse runs its race, it's no contest. But will it run its race? Sometimes, they do, sometimes they don't but they are always bad bets whether they get their picture taken or get taken off in the meat wagon instead.

One of the first bromides forced down the throats of fledgling handicappers is "that they don't give anything away at the racetrack" and that it's buyer beware time (whether claiming or wagering) when a horse is entered for a price tag that doesn't make sense. Even in this day and age of bad horses running for good purses, this bit of wisdom still holds true. Yet, suspicious droppers are continually picked by public handicappers afraid to miss a "sure winner" and bet down to favoritism by players who can't wait to lose (or collect a minimal return).

Getting back to Prospectors Bay, entered in Monday's 5th Race at Oak Tree. The 5-year-old gelding had returned from more than 15 months on the shelf at Bay Meadows September 2 when Jerry Hollendorfer dropped him from \$32k to \$16k. He was made 5/2 with Baze (big surprise) despite the lengthy layoff and big drop, showed some of his normal speed and then spit the bit and finished last. Hollendorfer had acquired the horse from the Ron Anson outfit for \$20k in January '99 and promptly won a couple of allowance races with him over the next six weeks. However, the sprinter then tailed off in three subsequent starts and was turned out with what was apparently a very serious problem. When he came back, Anson promptly took him back for the \$16k, hoping that the Dorf was trying to steal one and that the horse was OK. Five weeks later, Prospectors Bay was in for \$10k.

Now, it's quite possible that the new (old) barn was trying to steal a pot with hopes that the horse would be taken by some star struck neophyte. A win and a claim would have added up to \$16,600 and a profit of \$600 (minus training expenses and taxes) on the transaction, hardly a princely sum.

Handicappers evaluating the 2/1 Morning Line favorite only needed to look at the pros and cons. The "pros" were that the gelding had been taken back by its previous owner and that he was facing horses he would have murdered nearly two years ago. The "cons" were that he was a short price, was taking a suspicious drop in class, came off a terrible race that suggested unsoundness and hadn't run well since February '99. Despite the strong weight on the negatives, Prospectors Bay went to the post at 8/5 and after flashing quarter mile speed, stopped to a walk and finished last.

Anson, by the way, had a couple of others run in California on Monday that looked just as bad. There was Ragtimecowboyjoe in the 2nd Race at Santa Anita who was claimed for \$16k August 13 at Del Mar, had been idle since and was now in for \$10k. He went off at 2/1 and never ran a lick. There was also Raise A Storm in the 6th at Bay Meadows. He'd been claimed for \$25k at Del Mar August 3, had run a decent 3rd in a fast \$32k maiden heat September 7 and now surfaced for \$12,500 up north. This one was never prominent at even money.

Now, we're not picking on Anson, a formidable talent in the claiming game who has many, many successes to his credit. He just happened to make some bad claims (everybody does) and they were all entered on the same day. None, by the way, were claimed and will simply be added to the debit column in Anson's ledger.

When handicappers run into these 'red flag' favorites, their eyes should immediately open wide because old Mr. Opportunity is knocking. Let's give Prospectors Bay the benefit of the doubt and say that he should have been 4/1, instead of 8/5. That simply meant that others in the race had to be going off at odds higher than they should be and that the public was backing a horse that had an 80% chance to lose.

In this situation, eventual winner Prized Match didn't seem particularly appealing either. However, if you're going to bet on unappealing horses, it's better to bet on one that's 12/1 rather than 8/5. Lacking a viable option to the favorite, most serious handicappers are simply going to pass the race. If, on the other hand, they like something strongly, they're going to bet, and bet hard. If the shaky chalk beats them, so be it, but they understand that they have the percentages working on their side and that's what this game is all about.

Most amateur horseplayers fail because they often take things at face value. "A horse that was once worth \$40k is going to beat a field of \$10k claimers", they say. They fail (or refuse) to ask, "What the hell is this horse doing in for \$10k, if its worth \$40k". They just go with the crowd, bet the favorite and then keep their fingers crossed and HOPE the animal will hold together. More often than not, they don't.

This is a hard game to beat. To do so, you have to think like a winner and take advantage of these situations, they come up all the time.