

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

DOES THE TOTEBOARD REALLY SPEAK??

Riddle time. I'm big. I'm green. I flash like something out of Star Wars. I'm totally alien to the vast majority of Americans. What am I?

Answer: A racetrack toteboard, of course.

Is it just a glorified calculator adding up cold sums of money thrown into the race kitty by the informed and the uninformed alike??? Or is it truly a "tout" board that can alert bettors to potential winning plays and steer them away from potential losers?

Whatever the answer, being able to read the board a little bit is never a bad thing as long as handicappers first understand that it does them no good to watch the betting action unless they have a reasonable opinion as to what is going to happen in the race which includes their own idea of the probable post-time odds.

Despite what you may have read in unsolicited mail pitching radical "new" discoveries into crushing the races through the power of the toteboard, nobody has ever come up with a method of play that beats the races consistently based on how money is bet. It just can't be done.

This doesn't mean that what happens on the board shouldn't impact on the decision-making process at the races. Here are some areas worthy of discussion.

EARLY ACTION---A horse is 10/1 on the morning line and opens at 8/5. Is this a good sign, a bad sign or totally insignificant?

It all depends on varying factors. Was 10/1 a legit price to begin with or did the pricemaker just blow it? After opening 'short' does the horse then drift up steadily to go off near the 10/1 price by post time? Does the horse continue to attract steady play throughout the wagering despite the line seeming reasonable?

Good handicappers hate to see the linemaker lay a too-high price on a horse they like and know will be attracting some degree of support. When you see 15/1 on a legit contender that should have opened at 6/1, you can pretty much forget about it. When the inevitable "correction" shows up, many bettors will think they've located some stable secret and jump on the bandwagon. Personally, if my betting line is 8/1 on a horse, I want to see the linemaker make it 6/1, 8/1 or 10/1, not 15/1 or 20/1.

Early action isn't as easy to read as it once was. In the old days, betting stables liked to wager early since most believed that it would later be hidden as the general public got into the game. Besides, they had things to do nearing post time, like saddle the horse.

Nowadays, however, the money comes in from all over the country (much of it wagered hours before post time), so the first flash may be meaningless. Also, the win odds on the toteboard now change at first flash whereas in the past, the track would wait for a substantial amount of money to be bet before the prices were changed from the morning line. This can make for a very distorted picture in the early going.

If the price doesn't drift up on an early betdown before post, the handicapper may get stuck in a tough spot. Take the 2nd Race at Golden Gate Fields on Monday when Swoonyridge was 20/1 on the program against rock-bottom \$5k claiming mares. The morning line didn't seem all that out of line since the filly was shipping in from tiny Portland Meadows and had been beaten 19+ lengths for a lesser tag in her most recent start. However, handicappers going into the situation on a more detailed basis unearthed a speedy sort that had surfaced in a hot

barn (R.L. Martin) off a claim, was taking blinkers off, had trained well over the track and figured to benefit from a very strong inside/speed bias while breaking from the two hole.

Swoonyridge was an excellent win bet at 8/1, a price she never saw. She was 4/1 on the first flash right into the face of the Hollendorfer/Baze odds-on chalk, went down as low as 3/1 and never went any higher than 9/2 before settling in at \$4.30/1. Handicappers who had correctly sniffed her out beforehand had to be encouraged by the support but they also had to be discouraged by the fact they weren't getting the price required to make a serious win bet. The old rock-and-a-hard-place. They either had to pass and hope they were wrong on their original opinion, take the underlay or find some more creative way to wager on the filly in the exotics with the full knowledge that she could win and they could still lose. Personally, I took the coward's way out and just bet a single/all/all Pick Three for \$1 (a \$35 investment). Since the next two fields were small, but competitive, and since I was trying to beat a 3/5 shot in the first leg, the thinking was that I could get more than 4/1 on the horse with this approach (if she won). Swoonyridge did win and the eventual Pick Three returned \$564.10 despite the next two legs being taken by horses that paid only \$12.60 and \$8.40. A \$35 win bet would have netted only \$185.50 which means the 4/1 winner was turned into a 15/1 winner.

LATE ACTION---The horses come on the track and your contender is 6/1. With six minutes to go, it's 9/2. With two minutes to go it's 3/1. At post time, it's 2/1 and dropping. Good sign, bad sign or insignificant??

Bad, bad, bad and a great argument for waiting to bet until as near post time as you dare. If you took the 9/2 at six minutes to go and you end up at 2/1, you lose money, even if the horse wins the race.

They call them "snowballs" are they're the worst bets in racing despite the wild frenzy at the windows with all the johnny-come-latelies trying to get down on this hot horse. Most of the time these snowballs lose anyway.

Bay Area bettors, in particular, should be very careful about getting too excited about early overlays. Most serious handicappers (the kind that move the line significantly) don't start wagering on the next race at Golden Gate or Bay Meadows until the last race is over/official in Southern California. The important action takes place after the horses come on the track and the board tends to even out.

NO ACTION---The morning line favorite at 5/2 is 6/1 after the horses come on the track. It then gets bet down to 7/2. Good, bad or indifferent?

This is a good sign for those who had already decided the favorite was vulnerable or false because this sort of lobster generally doesn't run well.

UP/DOWN ACTION---A horse opens at 8/1. He drops down to 5/1 early, drifts back up to 8/1 during the post parade, drops to 6/1 with five minutes to go and drifts back to 8/1 at post time. Good, bad or indifferent????

Pretty good. This type of play often indicates a 'live' horse receiving rather large support that isn't immediately tipped off to the general public.

That doesn't mean you should run up and bet on something just because it's getting this type of action. But, if you liked the horse to begin with, you might like it just a little bit more.

Winning horseplayers don't like to follow the crowd but, then, even the best of them get a little bit antsy if there is absolutely no support for their horse.