

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

THE FIRST-TIME STARTER PUZZLE

Understanding human nature is one of those subtle talents that helps savvy handicappers win.

After all, horse players are people, too, and hence they are subject to the limitations that keep the majority from succeeding in life while the minority learns to exploit these weaknesses and capitalize on them.

In the racing game, nothing bugs the masses like first-time starters. No information, they moan. "How can I compare entrants and make legitimate decisions based on no factual evidence," they cry.

Many serious players subscribe to workout information services (particularly on the California circuit) and pin their hopes on the observation of professional clockers. Today's Racing Digest offers excellent workout info via Bruno De Julio and his staff and Handicapper's Report has been churning out terrific stuff for some 20 years. Both offer the serious player viable options in this area. There is a downside to the professional clocker approach, however. They can't comment on all horses, they aren't always right in their analysis and, worst of all, lots of people use and bet on their opinions which often kills the value potential of these new faces. It can be very tough to lay off an overbet firster when the money rolls in and not all of them win.

Personally, I prefer a more subjective approach when it comes to analyzing these "x" factors. There are six factors to consider: connections, medication, workouts, pedigree, quality of competition and value potential for the following reasons:

(1) **CONNECTIONS**--Successful stables win with debut horses, low-profile barns generally don't. Simple as that. A high-profile rider is a major plus.

(2) **MEDICATION**--Lasix is critically important in maiden claiming races but less so when dealing with the kind of quality stock you find in Southern California straight maiden events. In cheaper events, the Lasix is construed to be proof of positive intentions while its absence can indicate a lack of interest by the connections. When dealing with better horses, Lasix is not as reliable an indicator.

(3) **WORKOUTS**--Fast works are fine but you don't want too many bullets looking you in the face. The pattern of the most-recent drills is very significant with a mix of speed and stamina-building moves are preferred.

(4) **PEDIGREE**--Many sires pass on speed to their get while others don't. Learning the good ones can be a very worthwhile bit of research.

(5) **QUALITY OF COMPETITION**--If everything else in the field is on the slow side, a first-timer that can run a little bit often wins by default. This happens all the time in maiden races for a tag. It's tougher to win a straight maiden event against horses that have already demonstrated talent against potentially topnotch runners.

(6) **VALUE POTENTIAL**--As mentioned earlier, well-bet firsters are a losing proposition long term. Horses that open at 3/1 or less on the morning line are the kind you try and beat. Horses that are included among the top three selections by more than a few public handicappers should be downgraded. Your looking for the sneaky ones, not the obvious ones.

Let's examine a single week of rookie winners.

JANUARY 5

SA (2ND) -- NINE EAST (\$8.60): Trainer James Cassidy saddled this Exemplary Leader filly against \$32k sellers with a modest 7/2 program price. Although Cassidy is not a top-ten trainer, he does acceptable local work and signing up the very hot Kent Desormeaux gave this one a 'live' look. She would debut on Lasix and had some useful drills. A half mile in 47.3hg (3rd fastest of 39 half-mile moves that a.m.) Dec. 15 caught the eye and the newly-turned 3-year-old had two six furlong works and a five-furlong spin among its most recent five morning outings. Exemplary Leader is considered an acceptable debut sire in cheaper events. The favorites in the race figured to be **HIGH WIRE RED (5/2)** and **PRETTY NICOLE (3/1)**, two fillies that were proven losers at the level while consistently losing ground in the lane, never a good sign for a maiden claimer. The value potential was modest due to the obviously inept nature of the rest of those entered but was still acceptable on a pre-race basis. At 3/1 going to the gate, **NINE EAST** was a viable contender and won by three lengths.

JANUARY 5

SA (6TH) -- WILD CONCEPT (\$10.80): High percentage barn with Craig Dollase and solid jock in Garrett Gomez. Lasix on and a steady stream of five and six furlong works, always in the top 25% for the day's tab. A gelded son of fine sire Wild Again, this one opened at 5/1 on the line while facing a likely odds-on favorite in **FUN PARTY (8/5)**. The latter had finished 3rd in all three starts while going off at less than even money each time, including his first try against maiden claimers Dec. 16. No published works since that race added to this one's overall negativity. The biggest knock on **WILD CONCEPT** was that he cost \$150,000 at a 1997 sale and was starting his career for \$25,000. Still, he was a strong contender and outdueled the favorite down the lane to score at first asking.

JANUARY 6

SA (6TH) -- WOLFWITHINTEGRITY (\$13.80): John Sadler barn with Gomez again in the boot. Lasix on the Mr. Integrity (acceptable debut sire) at 7/2 on the program. A nice 5F move in 1:00.2h (9/40) back on Dec. 13 followed by three six furlong works on a six-day pattern prior to the debut. The favorite looked like **RUFF N RESTLESS (5/2)**, a no-early-speed type with three previous defeats at today's \$32k level. If the public backed off (and they did at nearly 6/1), this one was very playable and rallied in the lane to win drawing away.

JANUARY 7

SA (8TH) -- TRYING TY (\$12.20): Nothing works all the time and this filly turned out to be a hidden good thing out of San Luis Rey Downs. She started without Lasix for the unknown Kevin Cochrane (0/6 in 1999) but did have Corey Nakatani up. The drills were quick at the training center but that plus the jock were not enough reason to back this daughter of Moscow Ballet (an OK, but not great, debut sire). She pulverized her \$32K foes despite breaking from the rail but was a non-contender in my book.

JANUARY 8

SA (6TH) -- KID ROCKS (\$41.60): Anything by Bertrando is worth a look first time out as they all seem to be pretty quick and most of them run big first time out. This one debuted in a straight maiden event for trainer Martin Jones and had Victor Espinoza up. Not great connections but not horrible either and 8/1 was the line price. The work pattern was solid and the Lasix was there. The program favorites were **COLONIAL WARRIOR (5/2)**, who had shinbucked at 6/5 in a slow May 1 "baby race" and hadn't been seen since, and **GAELIC HOPE**, a troubled 3rd in his debut with every right to improve second time out. **KID ROCKS** was a contender based on his sire, if nothing else, and when the price drifted to near 20/1, he became an excellent longshot play. Close all the way, he dug in gamely late to edge **'HOPE** at a huge price.

JANUARY 9

SA (6TH) -- ARLUCEA (\$33.40): This Broad Brush miss has a royal pedigree. Not only is 'Brush a developing sire but this filly is out of the champion mare Bayakoa and was being saddled by Ron McAnally with Alex Solis up. She had a bullet drill in 1:00.4hg (1/26) at Hollywood Park four days prior to her debut to suggest she was on edge after a string of slowish 7-furlong moves. Based on her mommy and her connections, you'd think this one would get action but she opened at 10/1 and drifted up to 15/1 at post time. McAnally isn't one to use Lasix on everything and he started this filly without the medication against an iffy field that featured two stranger dangers from back east, three recent runners exiting a slow turf sprint and a well-meant firster in **CLASSIC LADY** (Wally Dollase/Nakatani/Dehere/strong works).

Personally, I didn't include **ARLUCEA** among my contenders in this affair but I wish I had as she rumbled from last to beat **CLASSIC LADY** and is sure to attract considerable media attention now.

JANUARY 9

GGF (6TH) -- BATUR (\$24.80): The only winning firster for the week up north, this young colt could have been played. Saddled by Steve Specht and ridden by the scalding Jose Alferez, this colt is by NoCal's best local sire (Battonier) who does well enough with firsters. Lasix was on and the work pattern was good, though the times weren't overly impressive. Opening at 15/1, Batur had plenty of value potential considering the connections and breeding against a bunch of previous starters that had yet to make any noise. It really wasn't surprising when debut types ran 1-2-3 from the barns of Specht, Hollendorfer and Sherman for a \$678 Trifecta in this bottom-level event.

Handicapping first-time-starters is no easy business and it's not for the faint of heart. Sometimes, you look like an idiot when a seeming contender runs terrible but, as some of the above winners indicate, there is value to be had here, if you know what to look for.