

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

Maiden Second-Time Starters

Here's a racing truism for you--the longer a horse stays a maiden, the less chance it will ever become a winner.

For that reason, handicappers should spend more time looking for reasons why a lightly-raced non-winner might graduate and less time making excuses for those that have tried and failed, especially in races run at distances of 6-1/2 furlongs and less.

Last week, Santa Anita carded a total of 11 maiden races at less than seven panels. First-timers won three and second-timers won six. The other two were taken by horses with two and three previous races. Admittedly, many of these events were dominated by lightly-raced runners, or non starters, but this is still a significant stat.

The truth of the matter is that the second-time starter is one of the best, yet most overlooked, plays in the game, especially if you know what to look for. Here's a quick glance at the six that succeeded during one week:

RACE--HORSE	ML ODDS	FINAL ODDS	DEBUT ODDS	FINISH/ BTN LGTHS	CLASS LEVEL	COMMENT
WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 30						
6th - REAL TV	4/1	7/2	6/1	4-10 1/4	SAME	4-wide
THURSDAY, OCT. 1						
5th - WARM APRIL	7/2	8/5	14/1	5-8	DOWN	Broke slow
8th - BECOMING	9/5	3/5	5/2*	5-6 3/4	DOWN	Dueled/tired
SATURDAY, OCT. 3						
6th - SMART CRACK	20/1	30/1	8/1	6-8 3/4	SAME	Broke slow
10th - KING EXCESS	2/1	4/5	6/5*	2-1/2	SAME	5-wide
SUNDAY, OCT. 4						
2nd - ACUT ABOVE THEREST	20/1	25/1	30/1	8-23	DOWN	No threat

Some key items to look for:

1. A morning line of 3/1 or higher. The intriguing second-timers do not go off favored. It didn't take much figuring to recognize both Becoming and King Excess as likely winners in their encounters. They were favored first time around and would be well backed again. Pass on the short prices, as always.
2. Action first time out. Any firster going off at 10/1 or less in their debut is capable of improving second time around, especially if they had excuses.
3. An out of the money finish. Nothing drives up the price quicker on a maiden than an off-the-board effort first time out. Look for horses that flashed some speed before giving way or made some headway down the stretch, particularly if they didn't break cleanly.
4. Significant trouble. Many firsters break slowly because they really don't know what to expect in a race situation. The bell rings, the jocks start screaming, basically all hell breaks loose. Once things go badly from the start, the riders will generally not abuse the horse and just let him run around the track, leading to the deceptively bad performance mentioned in #3. Many horses are quick learners, however, and they are ready for the tumult next time around while giving a truer account of themselves.
5. A class drop. Acut Above Therest had debuted in a very strong straight maiden race at Del Mar and, not surprisingly, ran up the track behind quick winner Mr. Insanity. In against modest \$32k Cal-breds next time, he could be viewed as a first-timer in this race. Columns 3 & 4 of the Digest provides a quick reference point for horses taking significant drops in class for today's race. Use it.
6. The addition of Lasix and/or a blinker change (on/off). First timers (especially maiden claimers) that debut without Lasix are generally not well meant. They are entered for experience and a "look see" by the connections to find out what kind of talent level they may, or may not, have. Blinker changes often bring quick turnarounds in young horses whether they be added or removed. Personally, blinkers off is the stronger of the two since some young types are befuddled by wearing them in their debuts.

Candidates that fulfill three or more of the above criteria are worth a look as possible upsetters. Smart Crack, for instance, was a big price on the program (20/1), had received some support in his debut (8/1), and had run out of the money after a terrible start but did show enough gumption to split the field. He won his race like a 3/5 shot rather than a 30/1 outsider.