

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Eclectics. Contrarians. Lone Wolves. Mad Dogs.

Call them what you want, it's the "alternative" handicappers that win at the game while their more traditional, conservative brethren die an ugly death, buried in an avalanche of red ink caused by short-priced losers, takeout and frustration. For this group, just betting on a horse going off at 18/1 represents heresy of sorts since they are totally devoted to black-and-white handicapping theory that requires current form, proven ability and high numbers to be in their corner before investing. Of course, if such a horse doesn't exist in a given field this does not preclude them from guessing on which of the favorites may win and wagering accordingly.

Most races simply don't offer horses that stand out over their opposition and when they do, the prices are so tiny that no one can turn a respectable long-term profit. Often, the most interesting horses in a field are the first ones the traditional players will throw out while their more freethinking brothers and sisters, on the other hand, are attracted to these "x" factor anomalies. Let's look at a couple from last Friday's card at Hollywood Park.

5TH RACE--Straight maidens going nine furlongs on the turf, just the kind of race that "form" players hate (or should hate). The percentage of winning favorites in races of this sort at Hollypark (according to the Digest) is a mere 24.3%, far below normal. This fact alone made success for the morning-line favorites (Rasby at 8/5, Distant Venture at 5/2 and Calypso Poet at 3/1) seem unlikely and sent the contrarian crowd into action. None of the favorites was certain to improve. Rasby and Poet had raced OK in their turf debuts May 16 but neither had run well enough to top the Fractional Charting while clocking in at times slower than par for the class level. Distant Venture was trying turf and two turns for the first time after two so-so sprints while bred only moderately for the new surface. Four of the longshots in the field were Aleyon (off three months and from a barn winless for 1998), Hovdey (a 17-time loser), Runaway Kidd (another from a low-profile barn with a low-percentage rider) and Inwood (didn't run a step at 47/1 in his debut under these conditions).

The only remaining entrant in the field was Northern Truce (8/1 on the line). The 4-year-old gelding had finished well back in five previous dirt starts at various distances and was beaten 11 1/2 lengths by \$32k maiden claimers sprinting on dirt April 1, his most-recent race. At first glance, he didn't belong in the race. However, the first question to ask in these situations is, "What is this horse doing here?" From that point on, the positives started to add up. Northern Truce had been claimed by a good trainer (Doug Peterson), had been off for two months and was still being raised in class. He was by a solid grass sire (Truce Maker), was related to a classy turf winner (full brother to classy Southern Truce with earnings of more than \$850,000) and was being ridden by Corey Nakatani, the current kingpin of the jock's room with 30% winners at the meet. By his placement of the horse, the trainer was telling all who would listen that he had made a good claim. The new surface made it easy to overlook the negative dirt form, especially when the pedigree backed up that way of thinking. Nakatani's presence boosted the confidence level and the positive value element was obvious given the suspect nature of the opposition.

If Northern Truce had attracted undue attention in the betting, he would have been an easy "pass". However, he hovered around his morning line price and went off at 8/1 in the eight-horse field. I can't remember an easier turf winner as he stalked Calypso Poet early, sailed by him easily into the lane with Nakatani maintaining a stout hold and breezed to the wire by 3 1/2 lengths over Distant Venture at \$18. Both Rasby (6/5) and Calypso Poet (7/2) were off the board.

7TH RACE--A 5 1/2-furlong turf sprint for allowance horses, more fertile territory for seekers of price. The percentage of winning favorites: 21.7%, again far below the norm. The morning-line favorites were Bello Beau at 2/1, Dinner at the Derby at 5/2 and Meadow Prayer at 3/1. Beau had run OK over the course in two tries while

in traffic trouble both times. However, he figured five ticks below par for the level in the Fractional Charting, was ridden by a struggling Corey Black (3% at the meet) for a barn also having a sluggish season (Martin Jones, 1/12). Dinnerat the Derby hadn't sprinted in more than 13 months, had never gone short on the lawn and had faded badly in an April 25 grass miler after setting the pace in his first start in nearly nine months. Meadow Prayer was unraced since Aug. 20 at Del Mar and was making his turf debut. Again, there were no 'locks' among the chalk.

The horse that made you ask "why" in the field was Pennysenyen. He hadn't run since debuting at Golden Gate Fields Nov. 21 for Jerry Hollendorfer when running away from a lowly field of \$8.5 maiden claimers in the mud at 8/5. Since moved to the top-flight Randy Bradshaw barn, he surfaced here against SoCal allowance horses, a class jump of seemingly monumental proportions. Forming class opinions based on one successful race is a difficult proposition and, again, it seemed wise to side with the new trainer's optimism. The colt was training smartly and might have matured dramatically during the 6 1/2-month layoff during his two and three-year-old seasons. The Digest showed Bradshaw and jock Rene Douglass had combined for seven wins and 19 in-the-money finishes from 27 starts since Nov. 25 and the risk at 18/1 in a seven-horse field? Damn right, even if he didn't win. Win he did, however, blowing by the leaders in powerful fashion into the lane and romping home at \$39.60.

Isolating price plays of this sort can be done on a fairly-regular basis. Look for events with vulnerable favorites run over conditions where form traditionally doesn't stand up. Look for mystery horses with more than one improvement factor; a move to a productive barn, a switch in surface or distance, good works after layoffs, equipment changes, new Lasix, jock changes. And most of all, look for 'value'.

By doing things differently than the majority of people going to the windows, you can become an Eclectic, a Contrarian, a Lone Wolf or a Mad Dog. Hey, it's lots of fun.