

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

The art of handicapping as we know it today sort of evolved unto itself. They've run horse races, of course, for time immemorial but only in the 20th Century did people start trying to figure out how or why they were won or lost.

Most of the ideas and theories, both the genuine and the bogus, originated no one knows where and were either perpetuated in print or passed on from generation to generation like family heirlooms. Even in today's modern "information age", no single theory or group of principles has been able to totally unlock the mystery of thoroughbred racing. No matter what some people would have you believe, the millions of variables involved in any given race make it impossible for any one to do so, either now or anywhere in the future. It's not much different from trying to understand the human brain which science admits they're something like 90% in the dark about.

Over the last 100 years, some theories have taken hold and become rooted in the minds of the majority of handicappers despite the fact that they have never been proven by anyone. Accepting these common misconceptions at face value will often lead you down the wrong road. Things like:

A SLOW PACE WILL HURT OFF-THE-PACE TYPES--Well, it might if the leader is allowed to coast along and control the tempo of the race without any undue pressure which was the case when Cat Blade went 24-and-change for the first quarter in Sunday's 2nd Race at Santa Anita. However, when the pace is slow AND contested as in Saturday's 2nd Race at Anita, the tepid splits will help, and not hurt, a closer type like Elio Monti who finds himself that much nearer to the early action without having to be asked to keep up. It's simply easier to make up two lengths from the quarter pole home than to make up eight lengths.

PACE CALLS ARE ACCURATE--Don't kid yourself on this one. The only truly "accurate" call in any race is the finish, all other calls are approximations at best. Few dedicated pace players understand that all points of call referenced in the PPs are simply the best guesses of one person up in the press box. As the horses near a certain pole, this individual looks through the binoculars and immediately yells out, "three by a neck, eight by 2 1/2, five by a head, one by a neck, seven by two, ten by 3 1/2, eight by five, four by a half and six". These judgments must be made in a split second with horses traveling at full tilt and waiting for no one. In a sprint, this procedure happens twice, in longer races more than that. The chances of these calls being 100% accurate (even among the most gifted of chart callers) is zero, yet when they appear in the PPs, handicappers accept them as such. The further back a horse is early in the race, the more "off" the actual lengths behind at each call is likely to be. In a game where times are now measured in hundredths of a second, this creates a huge margin for error. Only the finish call, which is photographed, is accurate and until racetracks put cameras at each pole during the race, that will continue to be the case.

ALL HORSES WILL RUN TO THEIR SPEED FIGURES--Hardly. A speed figure can only measure how a horse performed last time out. If the rating was earned under optimum pace and class conditions, it's unlikely the number will be repeated or improved upon next time around. If the rating was earned under negative conditions, it may be improved upon if today's conditions are more favorable. Some horses simply run to the level of their competition and get "sucked along" to earn high figures when they chase better horses and then regress to lower figures when they are chasing slower horses. These "Runaround Sams" and "Runaround Sues" are often easily identified by the lack of winning races in their history with career-type maidens being the worst offenders.

MAIDENS THAT RAN WELL FIRST TIME OUT ARE LIKELY TO IMPROVE SECOND TIME OUT--Nope. Some of the worst bets in racing are horses that ran second or third in their debuts. They get pounded in the betting second time out but many run worse instead of better, particularly in low-level maiden claiming races. Lots of inexperienced maidens run out of fear in their debuts. They go as fast as they can for as far as they can, then tire but often finish close up by default. The second

time out, they know what's coming and many find it easier to drop back through the pack to the rear than to run fast to the front. The wise handicapper looks for inexperienced maidens that finish well rather than those that were part of the early pace action and then faded, even if they still managed to finish in-the-money.

PUBLIC HANDICAPPERS PUT THEIR TOP CHOICE ON TOP--Public handicappers are more interested in putting the "most likely winner" on top rather than the horse they're most likely to bet on. These individuals identify themselves when they select the likely favorite in a race and then use their commentary to explain why the horse may be vulnerable and not win. This way they have themselves covered. If the phony favorite wins, they can claim it as a winner. If the phony favorite loses, they can take comfort in the fact that they warned their reading public not to bet on it.

WEIGHT MATTERS--Despite the cries of agony from trainers when the weight assignments for a particular big handicap event come out, the imposts rarely mean anything. The old adage that "weight can stop a truck" has some merit if they put 150 tons of weight on a vehicle designed to carry only 100 tons. Horses weigh in the neighborhood of 1,100 pounds (give or take), so it's highly unlikely their performance will be significantly altered whether they hoist 120 pounds or 125 pounds. Of course, if the others in the field are of near equal ability and carry only 110 pounds, then the 10 or 15 pounds might make a difference. On the other hand, horses generally must "earn" high weight imposts, meaning they've probably been running hard races right along and, maybe, the hard races (more than the high weight) will combine to put them into a tail-off mode. All things being equal, though, a horse will run the same race carrying 125 pounds as it does with 120 pounds.

JOCKEYS/AGENTS ALWAYS KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING--Let's see. In Sunday's Baldwin Stakes, Chris McCarron had ridden both Shuffling Kid and Holdthehelm to victory in their last starts. He rode Holdthehelm at 5/1 and Shuffling Kid won with Pat Valenzuela at \$26.20. In the finale from Golden Gate that day, Jason Lumpkins got off Cantil to ride The Chang and Cantil won at \$38 with Ben Russell while The Chang ran last at 6/1. Good handicapping cases could have been made for both Shuffling Kid and Cantil but you have to think that many players were led astray by the jockey moves, hence the overlays.

OLD HORSES "NEED" A RACE--Most of the time but not always. Fit for a King, returning as nine-year-old, had been off for more than eight months when entered in a dicey \$62,500 downhill event on Sunday. When he came back as an eight-year-old some 358 days previous, he had won a dicey \$62,500 downhill event at Santa Anita while paying a nice \$23.40. Opened at 7/2 on the line, he was 10/1 during the post parade before going off at nearly 7/1. He won again, this time at \$15.60. When horses win as often as Fit for a King (now 12 for 25 lifetime), it's wise not to undersell them, no matter how long they've been gone.

Of course, you can come up with scads of examples that "go against" the situations mentioned above but that won't change the truth: races are won or lost for more reasons than anyone (or any computer) can quantify. Pace often makes the race, but not always. The race may go to the highest figure horse, or it may not. Proven "class" might rule, or the race may be won by the improving upstart. Each race must be approached as a totally different puzzle and each entrant in the race must be looked at as an entirely different piece of that puzzle. Sometimes the pieces will come together perfectly but most times they will not. That my friends, is handicapping.