

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

CATCHING THE BIG ONE

Although animal rights' groups may take offense at the analogy, there are many ways to skin a cat at the track.

Traditional handicapping where the player compares strengths/weaknesses in various categories between entrants is fine. Occasionally, using these time-honored concepts will even turn up an overlay like **Big Find** in the 3rd at Santa Anita Jan. 14. He was the fastest horse via numbers, he was fresh, he was coming off a bad trip, he was handled by a top rider (Stevens), he drew the perfect post, was proven at the level and figured to beat his six rivals in that bottom-level allowance sprint at 6-1/2 furlongs. Personally, I made him 6/5 on my betting line and an overlay at 8/5. He won by two and paid nearly \$9.80.

Obviously, not everyone saw the horse in the same light I did. It doesn't matter. Every decent handicapper comes across a 'Big Find' every so often--a horse that just seems like it's going to win, does and pays a nice price. It's just not always that easy.

My guess is that only about 40% of the races offered around the country on any given day can actually be handicapped. Some are too hard, others are too easy. A good handicapper should be able to correctly pick about 33% of those races, but those winners will often be the favorite or a short-priced second choice yielding underlay results. It takes true patience and self-control to wait around for horses like **Big Find**, and then courage to back them with the conviction required to make all the waiting worthwhile. There are still a few pros around who can sit on their hands all day at the track and pass all 16, 18 or 20 races offered in a dual simulcast situation, but not many.

'Action' drives the rest of us, for better or worse.

Employing handicapping angles isn't a bad way to go should traditional methods lead you into a blind alley. The best time to pull out the angles is when you have no strong opinion in a race other than the favorite looking 'false' or 'vulnerable'. Keeping in mind that angles should only be used when the price is right (6/1 or more is a good guideline), here are some of my favorites;

1. THE SPECIALIST -- Look for horses that have MULTIPLE wins at today's track AND today's distance. Any runner that has posted a 15% success ratio over its career in both categories can be dangerous, no matter what its current form. A recent example: **Danebo Stampede** (1st/SA/Jan. 8). He was 4/23 (17%) at SA and was 7/19 (37%) at a flat mile. He paid \$43.60 in a 10-horse scramble for bottom-level claimers.

2. PROFESSIONAL LONGSHOTS -- Some horses simply have a way of confounding the wagering public while running best when least expected and vice versa. A runner with two longshot wins in its current PPs qualifies. I use 6/1 or higher as my criteria for a 'longshot'. For example, **Adoracion** (5th/SA/Jan. 17) had scored at 6/1 Dec. 30 and at 9/1 Nov. 2. She returned to the claiming ranks to win easily over \$20k sellers at \$17.

3. THE PREPPED HORSE -- It's no secret that the majority of horses tend to begin positive form cycles in their 3rd through 6th start following a layoff of 45 days or more. The shorter the rest, the quicker they may be ready to pop. Look for signs of improvement in the most recent races (early speed or a good finish) combined with a distance/surface switch and, perhaps, a class drop to seal the deal. **White Hot** (7th/SA/Jan. 17) fit the pattern nicely when making his 4th start back after being off from May 10 to Nov. 19. He ran a solid 2nd on dirt Jan. 3, was moving back to his preferred turf footing and was dropping from \$80k to \$62.5k. He won at \$33.60 against a competitive field of grass horses.

4. THE SUPERIOR WORKOUT -- An exceptional work going five furlongs or longer within seven days of a race is often a very positive sign. I consider an 'exceptional' work to be in the top 10% of the drills for the distance on the day's tab. Although he didn't win, **Tryumphant** (6th/SA/Jan. 18) qualified. He worked 1:13.4h (2nd fastest of 39 moves) six days before he ran and nearly upset heavy-favorite **Moonlight Meeting** at 50/1 odds before settling for 2nd at \$17.20 to place. A horse like **Fearless Pirate** (4th/SA/Jan. 18) could have been considered on this angle after drilling a brisk 46.4h (1/10) bullet five days before his downhill turf start. He returned \$44.60.

5. STRANGER DANGER -- Shippers from out of state making their California debuts are often worth a long look. Basically, they are 'x' factors in the handicapping puzzle and are generally overlooked by 'blood-and-guts' players who prefer to have a 'look see' at the newcomers before taking them seriously. By then, it's often too late. **Ms. Forte** (2nd/SA/Jan. 19) came in from New York to win at \$15 while **Shot MD** (5th/SA/Jan. 15) ventured west from Iowa to post a \$43.20 surprise. In the latter's case, the public opted for Turf Paradise shipper **Allwish** (9/5) since he had been running close to subsequent So Cal stakes winner **Rio De Oro** in Arizona. He was badly beaten in another case of the 'obvious' losing to something more subtle.

6. SECOND-TIME-STARTERS -- Many firsters are simply not prepared for the craziness that goes on at the gate and race poorly in their debuts. However, when they drop in class second time around, better things happen. Look for horses that were well beaten but face easier and get an equipment change and/or Lasix second time out. If they flashed some speed or were well backed (10/1 or less), so much the better. **Satire** (5th/SA/Jan. 14) was a perfect example. He was 'no factor' debuting with straight maidens Dec. 21 but dropped to \$32k and added blinks for start #2 (and even had the highest Fast Fig in the field). He returned a healthy \$30.80.

Angles like these simply give the action-seeking handicapper an effective way to kill time between their 'Big Finds'. Investments should be kept minimal, but sometimes they return maximum-type results.