

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

THE "WHAT IF" STRATEGY

Everything is not always as it may seem on the surface, especially at the races. Horses that "figure" to win often get beat, even in the biggest events featuring the best of the breed.

When faced with what appears to be a dominating horse in a major stakes race, many value-oriented handicappers (myself included) get lazy and, more or less, concede the contest to the chalk without first asking some very significant questions. I call this the "What If" strategy. Recent examples at Del Mar include Silver Charm in the San Diego Handicap July 25, Fiji in the Ramona Handicap Aug 1 and, to a lesser extent, Hawksley Hill and Labeeb in the Eddie Read Aug 2.

Handicappers should always employ this approach in rich stakes races featuring a much-ballyhooed and talented runner that figures to go to the post a strong, odds-on favorite. Any time the "hype" horse fails to measure up on even one of the following questions, players may want to consider how they would play the race on the "*What if this horse wasn't in the field*" basis. First, the questions to ask about the favorite----

- (1)--Is the horse coming off a subpar effort that might suggest he's tailing off from the rigors of a campaign that initially earned that big 'rep' ?
- (2)--Is the horse proven over today's surface, whether it be the main track or the turf course?
- (3)--Is the horse in for a prep designed to leg it up for bigger, more-important confrontations down the road?
- (4)--Will this horse be disadvantaged by today's likely pace scenario?
- (5)--Is this horse trying a new distance significantly different from what it's been running?
- (6)--Has this horse been unjustifiably been crowned a future star by the media?

Any horse entering a major stakes race off an unexpected loss might get a "yes" for question #1. Silver Charm's defeat at 2/5 odds in The Stephen Foster Stakes at Churchill Downs just prior to his poor effort in the San Diego is a case in point. After getting the lead into the lane that day, the grey drifted in noticeably and didn't finish at all in his traditional 'straight-and-strong' manner. That grueling trip to Dubai and his all-out finish to win the race may well have knocked him off his feet and left him vulnerable against top-class stakes company down the road.

Unless, horses have run well over today's surface, there is always a lingering doubt about how they will adjust which would earn a "yes" for question #2. There was no denying the power of Fiji's performances at Santa Anita and Hollywood Park prior to the Ramona but she had never tried the quite-different Del Mar turf course and was being asked to win by her backers at 2/5 while having gone seven weeks without running. Pretty much the same scenario existed the next day with Hawksley Hill and Labeeb (who was scratched for one of his windings at the gate).

No horse wins EVERY race and top horsemen don't really ask them to go all out to win 'minor' events. Even top-class runners may be "given" a race in added-money company, though they may win without doing their best work. That's generally the stable's hope but, basically, they are looking for a performance that will gear their runner up for bigger races on its schedule. That's question #3.

Marquee stars are regularly expected to overcome negative pace situations but often can't because they are facing tough competition. Speed types expected to encounter severe pace pressure or fast-finishing closers catching paceless fields become vulnerable in question #4. A poor post position may also be a factor here.

Two-year-olds that run fast sprints in major events and become the "new" heir-apparents to Secretariat may falter when asked to carry their speed around two turns at eight or eight-and-a-half furlongs. Running style and pedigree analysis are crucial in this area. Then, of course, there's always that question about getting 10 furlongs, the distance that has sunk so many in the Kentucky Derby. However, it's just as tough a puzzle when handicapping longer events on turf or dirt for established older runners. A "yes" answer in question #5 runs up a red flag.

The racing media tend to fall in love with potential stars faster than the public but after reading article after article about a certain "great" horse before it has earned that praise can sway the typical player into believing what they read. These stories will be filled with backstretch quotes about the awesome talents of the horse in question, generally from trainers, jockeys and exercise riders who "want" it to be true more than anything else. Remember, that "greatness" is earned on the track and cannot be bestowed by a press boxer with a lap top. Unless, this horse has done it and done it with abandon, the answer to question #6 may again be 'yes'.

Once these questions have been addressed, you will have a better idea of exactly how these horses truly stack up. Again, if you get even one positive response, you may want to handicap the race as if the favorite is not in the

field and see what you come up with. One thing is certain, you will be dealing with some strong contenders at very high odds.

In the recent cases of Fiji and Silver Charm, they did turn out to be suspect at the prices which opened the door for some big payoffs. The Mud Route/Hal's Pal Exacta paid \$116.80 in a five-horse San Diego Hcp. field. The See You Soon/Sonja's Faith Exacta returned \$410.60 when Fiji didn't have the best of trips. Unexpected bad luck is something else the favorite may have to deal with to win which leads to yet another question--"What if so-and-so has a lousy trip they can't overcome". That one's not included in our list because it can't be answered before the race. Still, it's a legit concern and enough of one that should cause handicappers to think a long, long time before investing at 40 cents on the dollar.

Superstars don't always lose, of course. On the other hand, you don't have to go back all that long to remember Cigar at Del Mar or Gentlemen finishing up the track in the Santa Anita Handicap and wondering how you would have bet the other contenders in race if those horses hadn't been entered. It can be damn hard to pull the trigger against these icons but, on the other hand, you don't have a chance to hit the bullseye if you don't shoot the gun.