

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

Perhaps the most underrated element in successful handicapping is the individual philosophy. Nobody on this earth really thinks exactly alike yet the vast majority of people attempt to emulate success rather than discover it within themselves. True, it's possible to learn from others but once the basics have been mastered, it is necessary to mold them into your own individual approach to the game.

I received this letter the other day which provides a perfect illustration of someone who is on the right track: "I am a recreational horseplayer hobbyist. I'm known as "Bubblegum Ass" among my friends because of my disciplined approach to value investing in the pari-mutuel game. I've found that in the complex world of thoroughbred handicapping that it's financially rewarding to know a lot about a little rather than a little about a lot. My specialty is claiming races with seven to nine horses in the field. Six or less runners tend to offer little value potential while 10 or more feature potential traffic problems and the like. My strengths come in my 100% odds line and supreme patience to wait on contender overlays that satisfy my minimum edge. I bet to win only, no exotics. The tracks I invest in are Belmont, Gulfstream Park, Fair Grounds, Keeneland and Churchill Downs since their mutuel take is 17% or less. My three favorite books and authors are "Straight Place and Show" (Dowst, 1945), "The Handicappers Condition Book" (Quinn, 1981) and "Commonsense Betting" (Mitchell, 1995).

"Here is a magnificent quote that summarizes my pari-mutuel disposition:"

'Taking a chance is foolish at best but always is foolish if done without first making sure that all that all that can be known is known about the chance being taken.' -- Thorten W. Burgess

This letter from a Kentucky horseplayer is significant because he obviously has come to grips with the things that make him successful when he goes to the track. He prefers to invest rather than gamble. He does his homework before going and once there, he won't let his friends pressure him into making bets that fall outside his rather exclusive parameters. Yes, he seems to have discovered what works for him and he's sticking with it. Good for him.

There are three very significant parts to his well-thought-out strategy. First, limiting his research to fields of seven to nine claiming horses immediately cuts his potential work load, even if he is handicapping three tracks a day. Second, looking for tracks that offer the best "value" on the takeout gives him the best chance to find the kinds of overlays he seeks. Third, he bets overlays to win which is still the simplest way to beat the game long-term. With even moderate handicapping ability, he must be given an excellent chance to succeed.

This is not to say that his approach is the "only" way to win. What works for our friend may not work for those who feel the need to play many, if not all, races thrown their way. Those not inclined to strong discipline, need to discover methods that allow them to admit and satisfy this urge to be involved. Betting smaller amounts on horses with a larger element of inherent value is one way to go for players who like to gamble more than they like to invest.

Personally, as I've gotten older and the game has changed, I've found it necessary to adjust my approach as well. In the old days of single track betting, I restricted much of my play to the Pick Three where I would zero in on a single which had some value and attack the races where the favorites were vulnerable or downright false. When I had no other opinion other than the fact that the chalk was suspect, I would use everything else in a deep spread. At the end of the year, I usually found myself buried in IRS sign up forms which was all well and good.

California racing has changed, however. Small fields are common and more bad favorites seem to be winning by default. It's become tougher and tougher to zoom in on three consecutive races where I had a strong opinion about a particular horse and thought the favorites would lose the other two legs. So many races these days feature so many horses that simply can't win which makes the handicapping involved less demanding and the puzzle easier to solve for the vast majority in the

crowd. This, of course, leads to deflated payoffs that often aren't worth the risks involved. The IRS sign ups aren't as frequent anymore. For me, concentration on the rolling Daily Double at venues that offer such a wager has become a viable option.

With full-card simulcasting now available for two California cards, the work load is doubled with between 16 and 20 events run daily and that's not to mention any out-of-state races thrown into the mix for good measure. No one can handicap 20+ races on a day without taking the kind of shortcuts that increase the "chance" involved many times over. Management has opted to increase the "gambling" part of the game because they are interested in pumping money through the machines and believe, correctly so, that most people don't have the discipline to resist betting on bad fields of no-value bangtails.

On the positive side of the simulcast coin is the extended opportunity to wager on races that were never offered in the old days. There is "gold in them thar hills" but you have to know where to start looking.

Our Kentucky friend has decided to prospect fields with seven to nine runners. Others may opt to go with six or less since many longshots do surface in small fields where the favorites tend to be badly overbet. Others may go the opposite way and concentrate on large groups since the fear of traffic and bad racing luck is generally the same for the favorite as it is for a longshot. It's a case of whatever works for you that is the key here.

Of course, you may decide to limit your play based on factors than field size. Perhaps, you will concentrate on maiden races featuring lightly raced horses and lots of "x" factors. Maybe, it'll be on high-class allowance and stakes events where an eye for the potential improver and top class runners coming to form is your strength. Sticking strictly to turf or passing grass races entirely may suit your style best. In fact, when combining surface, sex, distance and claiming levels, the possible combinations are many.

Back in days gone by, everyone knew that you couldn't play EVERY race and that's when there were only nine a day. In the current scheme of things, there is no way you can bet 20 and expect to stay solvent. Zeroing in on what you do best is critical. For those unable to do that, then limiting play to races that meet some other criteria, like entrants in the field, seems a good alternative.

The major point, however, is that you need some kind of overall philosophy and plan that works for you. You can't scramble the Trifecta in one race and then switch to the Pick Three in the next without tempting mean old Mr. Fate. He can be extremely fickle and seems to relish in messing with the minds of handicappers, particularly when they are a bit dazed and confused before they even place their first bet.