

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

WHEN THE GODS SMILE

Handicapping is a humbling game. You can go days, weeks and even months without doing anything worth a diddy and then, from out of the blue, you get one right. Those who survive long enough in these difficult environs learn not to boast or brag about their accomplishments. To do so could bring on the wrath of the horseplaying gods who might just make it their business to see to it that you don't cash another decent wager for years, if ever. It's simply not wise to mess with Mother Nature or any other unworldly being that you know for a fact exists.

What follows, then, is not something I do in order to pat myself on the back, build my self-esteem or try to convince others that I never lose when I go to the races. (Sometimes, the evil gods will let you slide if you put in a disclaimer of this sort.) It is simply offered as an educational tool from which the reader may benefit.

That being said, lets' move on to Saturday's 7th Race at Santa Anita. Originally carded for the downhill turf course at 6 1/2 furlongs, this \$80k Optional Claimer for older colts and geldings was moved to the main track on Friday which meant handicappers were privy to the six scratches and the surface switch well in advance of the race. After scratches, here's how the field lined up on Osterman's Fast Figs published in Today's Racing Digest:

<u>HORSE</u>	<u>FF</u>	<u>ML</u>	<u>FIN.</u> <u>ODDS</u>	<u>FINIS</u> <u>H</u>
IRISHEYESAREFLYING	136	15/1	19/1	1ST
EXPLICIT	133	2/1	3/5	3RD
MILK WOOD	131	5/1	12/1	4TH
BLACK SILK	131	10/1	22/1	2ND
CEEBAND	129	8/1	10/1	-----
FRIENDLY WAGER	127	10/1	11/1	-----
DAHLBERG	126	6/1	9/1	-----
COUNT YOUR CARDS	123	8/1	11/1	-----
RAIL MAN	XX	12/1	10/1	-----

The Fast Figs are just numbers put out there to be used or dismissed by the reader as they see fit. To my way of thinking, they can present a more clear picture of the situation because they are simply not raw speed figures representing one race a la Beyer Ratings. The speed component (performance rating) is included but it is modified by a class figure based on the strength of the race each horse exits (which, in turn, has been modified by how other horses coming out of the same race have performed). It is generally the class part of the equation that leads to the all-important value element. Everybody has speed figures of one sort or another but not many handicappers consider the caliber of competition in which they were earned. Five points is the rule of thumb when judging the most prominent contenders in any given event. Let's look at the four in this field that qualified from that standpoint, noting their plusses and minuses.

IRISHEYESAREFLYING--On the sheer strength of his Fast Fig and the high value potential, this was an interesting horse. Although unraced for three months, the 5-year-old had shown extreme versatility during his career. In his last four starts, Irish had managed to finish in-the-money on turf going both 5 1/2 furlongs AND 1 3/8 miles, not something you see every day. He had been reclaimed by the high-percentage John Dolan barn for \$50k on May 12 after they lost him for \$40k in his previous start (March 26). Bred more for dirt (Flying Continental) than turf, two of his three career victories had come on a "fast" main track to suggest the surface switch would help him more than hurt him. The visiting Pat Day was named to ride him but when he was unavailable, Dolan went to another top-line rider in Kent Desormeaux who had been aboard Irish in his most recent two starts.

The power in his Fast Fig came about due to a competitive effort (beaten less than three lengths) in the highly-rated Cal Cup Mile. The only negatives on this one seemed to be the layoff (even though he had run well fresh in the past) and the fact that he wasn't known for sprinting on dirt. Still, when the top figure horse is going off at nearly 20/1, you should be inclined to overlook minor flaws of this sort.

EXPLICIT--The change in surface and diluted nature of the field made this 4-year-old the obvious favorite. He had run head-and-head with the very quick Caller One in the Grade I Malibu Stakes December 26 and looked like he'd clear this rather paceless field effortlessly. The Malibu, however, had yet to be a productive race and the favorite was breaking from the rail post which meant he would need to start sharply from an intimidating box going 6 1/2 furlongs. Saddled by Ian Jory, the barn had managed just one win in 20 starts at the session with just 20% of those runners finishing in-the-money. Although he was the logical horse, a bad post and a cool barn were two strong factors to suggest this colt was not exactly a lock at 3/5. His Fast Fig indicated he was no cinch as well.

MILK WOOD--A useful horse on turf, but even on his best surface he had been unable to win in eight starts despite being favored three times. His barn (Julio Canani) has also been in an uncharacteristic slump while just 1/17 at Santa Anita since opening day. Milk Wood had run reasonably well on the Del Mar main track going a mile but didn't have sprinter quickness. The move to the dirt was not in his favor, although he was certainly a contender for the Trifecta.

BLACK SILK--A puzzler, to be sure. The English-bred gelding had never run on dirt in the past but had trained well on the surface for Eduardo Inda before making his US debut in a downhill dash January 1 when finishing fast to be beaten 1 1/2 lengths at 32/1 by Impressive Grades. His number came up in the ballpark, his price was right and perhaps he could be an off-the-pace player at healthy odds. None of the four contenders were without chinks in the armor but then they rarely are. If it's not class, it's pace or, perhaps, value potential, surface, connections or current form. Still, Irisheysareflying seemed to have the fewest knocks at the highest price. When a 19/1 shot looks the "key", all sorts of options open up. A win bet is essential, of course, but secondary play in the exotics with the other contenders is also permissible. A Quinella with the favorite was obvious since Explicit certainly had to be accepted as a more-likely winner in the race. A couple of small Exacta box bets with Milk Wood and Black Silk would not be unreasonable either and a Trifecta box with the four wasn't out of line.

As we all know, some races simply don't go as diagrammed on the chalk board. In this one, Explicit didn't break well from the rail and Irisheysareflying flashed more front speed than he ever had in the past. He made the lead, fought off the recovered favorite on the front end and drew well clear to run the race of his life. Black Silk rallied late to be 2nd while Explicit just did hold off the charging Milk Wood to be 3rd. The winner paid a way-out-of-line \$40.60, the \$1 Exacta returned \$306.40 and the Trifecta \$946.30. Of course, the Tri would have paid lots more if Milk Wood had won the show photo by a nose instead of lost it by a nose but such are the whims of the gods. Those going for the throat in the Super Tri caught a \$7,036.20 payday. I, alas, was not one of them.

All of these hefty returns hinged on a realistic horse that was not treated with the proper respect. He "figured" (Fast Figwise, anyway) and "figure" horses don't have to pay \$3.20.