

THE OSTERMAN FILES THE PERFECT BET

The surfer seeks the "perfect wave". The meteorologist the "perfect storm". Husbands want the "perfect wife" and vice versa. Handicappers are forever looking for the "perfect bet".

It's not enough to pick winners in this game anymore. In order to ensure success, you need to make the right bet at the right time. And that's no easy chore with the plethora of exotic options to mull over.

OK, so you like a horse. Should you bet to win only, win/place, across the board or key the horse in the Double, the Pick Three, the Pick Four or the Pick Six? How about the Exacta, the Quinella, the Trifecta or the Super Tri???? So few ways to win, so many ways to lose.

The vast majority of bettors are all over the board. They zig zag through a day at the races, playing a Pick Three here, a Trifecta there and on and on, often getting caught in the traps that this sort of willy-nilly approach invites. Some players have taken this decision out of the equation by becoming specialists. They bet every horse the same way and let it go at that. Other more analytical types, study each situation as it comes around and attempt to make the right call based on which approach offers the best value potential should everything work out to perfection.

Sometimes it happens. As evidence of this, I offer the second race for Sunday at Hollywood Park.

To my way of thinking, Slew is King was the horse to beat in this grass miler for a \$50k claiming tag. He was the sharpest horse in the field, having won a pair of main track route races in wire-to-wire fashion since being brought to California by Mike Mitchell after Gulfstream Park closed its doors. Opening the 5/2 second choice on the morning line in this six-horse field, Slew is King was far from a lock. After all, he had never raced on grass and was accustomed to running on the front end. In this one, there was a speedy sprinter (Rock N Rosh) who would almost certainly take the early lead. How Slew is King would react to the pace and the surface switch was nothing more than a guess.

A straight win bet seemed out of the question for someone like myself who rarely takes less than 4/1 on the front end. There would be no value in the Exacta or Trifecta with just five rivals and the size of the field took the Super out of the equation as well. That left the "horizontal" wagers (Double, Pick Three, Pick Four) to consider. How to bet would be determined by the strength of my opinions in the First, Third and Fourth races.

RACE ONE -- Six distaff straight maidens in a six furlong heat. The favorite would certainly be Teresita who opened at 8/5. She was yet another pricey yearling purchase for the Baffert barn having cost the deep-pocketed Bob and Beverly Lewis \$700k at Keeneland in September 2003. She had the normal flashy Baffert workouts, was drawn outside and figured to have at least some speed over a surface that had been playing kindly to the front-runners going short for weeks. Still, we see many of these well-bred maidens get pounded and lose their debuts. She seemed worth betting against at odds-on for no other reason than that. The other five didn't impress on paper, so my only opinion here was that the big favorite would be over bet and might be vulnerable.

RACE THREE -- A sorry crew of seven bottom-level maiden claimers going two turns. The first three in the field all opened at 30/1 on the line and seemed to have zero chance. Sea Kris (2/1 on the program), a plodder type with nine previous losses, had finished a chasing second as the 2/1 favorite the first time he had tried \$25k company. He didn't have to win this one either. Edge Out (5/1) was also a nine-time loser with the last four coming at this level. Ugh. That left Gassan Pine (5/2) and Nicola Tropez (4/1). The former had been a disappointment for the Frankel barn but he had never tried this level while coming off a dismal race for \$40k when off at 5/2. In trouble early, he never ran a lick that day. Still, anything that has yet to fail at the bottom level merits respect. Nicola Tropez had shown speed going seven furlongs and ended up third in his first try for \$25k. There wasn't much pace in the field, so perhaps he could make the lead and go wire-to-wire over the other slugs. It was worth a look. The best opinion I could muster here was that there was a good chance that either Gassan Pine or Nicola Tropez could beat Sea Kris.

RACE FOUR -- I didn't have a clue who would win this seven-panel starter allowance heat for fillies and mares. Fresh Squeezed had had no excuses for running a non-threatening third as the 8/5 favorite the first time she tried the level. Rainbow Girl (3/1) was coming off an easy maiden win following a Mullins' claim but had been uncontested at any point and had not run very fast. The other four in the group were a combined 4/65 during their unspectacular careers. My opinion was that either of the two favorites could succeed but did not have to win.

Basically, I had two races where my opinions were of the negative variety and two races where they were positive, but hardly written in stone.

The Pick Three seemed the weakest of my horizontal options since the fields were small and I had short-priced contenders in two of the legs. The Double might work since I could just play Slew is King in the second to Gassan Pine and Nicola Tropez in the third.

The Pick Four held some interest. After all, the fields were small which would lead to a manageable ticket and if Terasita got beat in the opener, there should be some value to be had.

I chose to take a shot and wheeled the first and the fourth in the Pick Four. I then singled Slew is King in the second and used both contenders in the third. The ticket cost \$72 (6x1x2x6).

After the first was won by impossible longshot Bright Design (\$93.80), I knew I had made the right bet. But would it be the "perfect bet"? Slew is King adjusted nicely, stalked the pacesetter, took over into the lane and refused to lose while battling to the wire to edge the favorite by a head as a \$9 overlay. Gassan Pine outclassed Sea Kris to draw off in the lane at \$5.60 and my bet was won. Since the fourth was wheeled, all that remained was to see how much the payoff

would be in the Pick Four. The lowest return was around \$2,500 to Fresh Squeezed. If anything else won, it would return more than \$5,000. Runawayskye (\$14.40) ended up beating tough-luck Gentle Charmer (10/1).

I invested \$72 and got back \$6,993.20 in the Pick Four.

If I bet \$72 to win on Slew is King, the return would have been \$295.20. If I had played two \$36 Doubles in the second/third, it would have been \$475.20. If I had wheeled the first in the Pick Three and then used a single with two in the next two legs (a \$12 ticket played six times for \$72) would have brought back "only" \$4,924.20.

No, I had made the "perfect bet", this time anyway. The lesson here is that it is necessary to factor in all your opinions before making a final decision about just how to approach a horse you do happen to like.