

# TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

## TRUTH AND TRAINING

Talk is cheap and nowhere is the "patter" less meaningful than around any racetrack in America. Somebody always has "the horse right here" and his name ain't Paul Revere.

With the Kentucky Derby "only" three months away, handicappers across the land should prepare themselves for endless trainer quotes regarding their hopefuls' chances for the roses. It's that time of year where every expensive, well-bred colt that wins a maiden race impressively causes a stampede to the Future Book betting windows in Las Vegas. Nobody wants to be left behind when the next Secretariat shows himself, even if it takes another 27 years.

Egged on by the racing media, trainers often get carried away with themselves and speak with their hearts instead of their heads. Most of the nonsense that is printed is just that--nonsense. Generally speaking, trainers play the wishful thinking game as good or better than anyone on God's earth. They think they have a good horse but they're never sure just how good the other fellow's horse may be. They want to look like experts because that's how they make their living but they understand the game well enough to know that, well, you just never know. The bottom line for handicappers is simply that you can't believe what you read. Ever.

Take the case of Captain Steve entering the Santa Catalina Stakes back on January 30. Bob Baffert, always reliable for a quote, told Brad Free in Daily Racing Form that, "I didn't crank him up like it's a must-must win, but he's cranked up enough". After Captain Steve was beaten 6 1/2 lengths at a princely 50 cents on the dollar, Jay Privman quoted Baffert as saying, "I didn't do enough with him. It's my fault." He went on to say, "When I saw him in the paddock, he looked way too heavy".

So, did Captain Steve gain 200 pounds going from the barn to the paddock or hadn't Baffert bothered to look at him lately? Of course, losing the Santa Catalina hardly makes Captain Steve a non-player in the Derby. No horse wins them all and as Baffert said, it wasn't a must-must win.

On the other side of the coin, there was Jenine Sahadi and The Deputy. Before the Santa Catalina--"It's obviously just an experiment (running on dirt). I don't want to run against Captain Steve." After the Santa Catalina (to Jay Hovdey)--"I know that he's a talented horse and that he's got a ton of class. But that's all I can say with certainty." That piece concluded with Sahadi saying, "I like to let a horse speak for himself." At least that's refreshing, if not particularly helpful.

Handicappers that bothered to read this stuff before the race had to feel Captain Steve was a lock and The Deputy had little hope. He paid \$11.80.

The lesson here, obviously, is that you're betting your money so you had better come to your own conclusions.

There has been other evidence of trainers misleading the public lately, albeit unintentionally for the most part.

Before running Puerto Madero in the January 16 San Pasqual Handicap, Daily Racing Form had this front-page screamer on January 14--"Mandella solves mystery". The story went on to detail the discovery of "some bad ulcers" that had been treated and cleared up, leading the reader to the conclusion that Puerto Madero was going to run much, much better. He ran worse--beaten 13 lengths and finishing last.

Back on opening day at Santa Anita, D. Wayne Lukas, never short of the words, countered the "fluke" claim about Cat Thief's Breeders' Cup Classic win by saying, "He was just the best horse that day. I don't think the track had anything to do with it. I think we got him right on the right day." Since then, Cat Thief has lost the Malibu, the San Fernando and the San Antonio to run his career record to four wins and 18 defeats while finishing 2nd/3rd in 14 of his 22 lifetime starts. Cat Thief has talent but he's also smart enough to take care of himself and, more often than not, doesn't overdo it nearing the wire. When he does win, IT IS a fluke.

Most trainers are not good handicappers. Some aren't even good horsemen. Most, however, are pretty good at spreading the blarney. They need to in order to placate owners and stay on top in a very, very competitive business where somebody is always out to "submarine" the operation and upgrade their own stables. Honest trainers are about as common as honest politicians. They're out there but the nature of the game simply does not reward honesty.

For every good horseman (Neil Drysdale, Bobby Frankel, Paco Gonazlez), there are scores of others who think first about themselves, second about their horses and never about the wagering public.

This isn't meant to run down an entire profession. It's simply meant to alert those who play the ponies seriously, that they need to know as much as they can about any horse they're considering betting seriously as the trainer and vastly more about the horses that are running against it. Every time you make a bet, you're purchasing stock in that horse and need to proceed accordingly. Trainers aren't geniuses. They aren't "horse whisperers". Most are just hired hands trying to get lucky in a difficult game.