TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

A BAD DAY AT THE OFFICE

It's the least written about, discussed or even thought about aspect of the handicapping puzzle yet it's probably the most important--knowing how to lose. Any regular horseplayer is going to have far more losing days at the races than winning ones. It's the nature of the beast. Yet, very few individuals give much attention to how they act and react when their selections and wagers are being flushed down the pair-mutual toilet.

I had a losing day on Sunday. It was hardly the first and it's certain not to be the last. Still, all-in-all, I considered myself a winner (of sorts) after it was over because I didn't play like some sort of deranged maniac. There are times when you have to settle for that.

Doing business out of The Palms, I arrived early, read the articles in Daily Racing Form and paid semi-attention to the uneventful racing across the country. Dealing, of course, with both Santa Anita and Golden Gate Fields, my homework was done, my pre-race opinions formulated and I was ready for action.

The opener from Arcadia featured $12.5 claimers where favorites Morning Wine and The Denver Dream seemed very weak and vulnerable. My selection was Azure Ciel, a veteran with a definite preference for doing his running outside horses. In his last effort, he had been gunned prematurely from the inside to challenge into the far turn by Omar Berrio and had backed up quickly while trying to lug out in an uncomfortable position. Now he was drawn outside against suspect foes, figured to get "his" trip while benefiting from the ongoing outside bias at Santa Anita and was clearly in as good of form as anything else in the race. I made him an overlay at 3/1 and when his price drifted up to 5/1 in the final minutes of wagering, I made a "max" win bet. Ridden for the first time by Felipe Martinez, the jock took the gelding inside (that's bad) on the backstretch, outside (that's good) on the far turn and then between horses (that's bad) for his bid into the stretch. Azure Ciel challenged but didn't go on late and faded to third. I was stuck.

Turning my attention to Golden Gate, I had already identified the first three races (short fields on a 'good' surface) as clear-cut pass situations and returned to the second at SA.

This one looked like a win spot for heavily-favored Logician who went about his business to beat a soft bunch of maidens by 6-1/2 at $3. The third, however, was interesting. It featured two about-equal favorites in American System and Hombre Rapido who might hook up early and open the door for a wide-running closer down the lane. The candidate was Ride and Shine, a late-running sprinter with a longshot history. Ignored at 13/1 in a six-horse field, I bet him to win with half my money and split the rest on Q's with the two favorites. Ride and Shine ran well but Hombre Rapid ran two lengths better in a swift wire to wire romp while my horse chased him home. I did make enough cash on the $38.60 Q to wipe out my first race deficit and, in fact, showed a minor profit for the day.

There was no reason to panic. I approached the fourth where I liked Way to the Top coming down the hill quite a bit. Although I respected course professional Islander, I still thought he was vulnerable at 8/5 in his first start since June 30. I believed strongly that Way to the Top would run well, made him a play at 7/2 and went to the window when he was sent off at 5/1. Another "max" win bet and another disappointment when Islander came back loaded for Ruben Cardenas and proved uncatchable late despite a bold rally from my selection who was clearly second best. Stuck again.

There is always a bit of a depressed feeling when you get beat betting on a good horse that ran a good race but I shook off Way to the Top's defeat and moved on. I didn't like the price (3/1) on my top choice in the fourth at GGF (Wild Celebration) and passed as he ran on a bit late and finished a no-threat third.

I had a big circle around the fifth at Santa Anita because odds-on Charmer Baron looked weak with an inside draw and nothing-special credentials in a wide-open field of 12. I liked two horses in

the race and both figured to qualify as overlays. Shuttlin (a play at 7/2) had just beaten a maiden claiming field that had produced four next-out winners while Windscore (a play at 6/1) was making a positive barn switch to Cardenas off a claim and was drawn far outside where he could exploit the bias. With both Shuttlin and 'Score offered at 11/1, I decided to split a "max" win bet on them and then play a "go-for-the-throat" Exacta box. Score made the lead from the outside, looked to be traveling well into the lane with Shuttlin moving up to challenge at the 1/4 pole. Dreams of big money started to go through my head as they looked prepared to fight it out to the wire. One would win at 11/1 and one run second to produce a big Exacta. Then, disaster reared it's ugly head. 'Score moved to the dead rail and Shuttlin suddenly pulled up in distress. Here came a wall of horses at all kinds of crazy prices and I was dead meat. Julie Krone won it by a whisker at 22/1 over the favorite in a desperate five-horse photo and I know she has arrived because the guy next to me muttered: "That Krone, I bet on her and she loses and I bet against her and she wins." When you hear this, you realize that a jock is a major player.

For me, a certain dead feeling had taken over my psyche. I had gone from a potential big winner turning for home to a wipe out in the final furlong and was double stuck for the day.

Luckily, I thought at the time, I had a nice one coming up at Golden Gate in the fifth in Ragin Reggie. He had beaten a soft bunch last time out to score his first career win at six furlongs, was facing many iffy sorts taking big drops and in suspect form and looked like the only horse in the $4k claimer that was clearly in one piece. I was shocked to see him offered at 15/1 (he was a play at 4/1 on my line) and again maxed out, this time on a win/place basis. Everything went well early as he settled off the pace, started moving up into the lane and was full of run turning for home as the leaders bunched up. All he needed was a clear path and I'd be cashing a $30+ winner. The hole not only didn't develop but it closed right on him and the jock was forced to take him up sharply and all was lost, again. Now I was triple stuck.

I used five horses in opening leg of the Pick Four at Santa Anita but was a goner early when Habaneros overcame the 10 hole to win going a mile on the lawn. In the day's featured San Miguel Stakes, I felt Ecehverria was a good play at 5/1 because Omega Code had no chance at 8/5 from the dreaded rail with cold-riding Martin Pedroza. No, the horse to beat was the outside draw, Only the Best. Echeverria, training smartly for Bob Baffert, looked like he might be as good as either and figured to get just the right stalking trip in the speed-laden field. I bet him to win and saved in the Q with 'Best. Somehow, Omega Code got off the rail, rallied outside of leader Only the Best (who ended up inside) and won smartly. Echeverria? He broke sharply and was quickly out-sprinted in a dull effort. Ouch.

I didn't get my price on Bartko (a winner) in the seventh at GGF and passed and it sure looked like hot favorite Java (Fiji's much-touted little sister) would beat her field in the eighth at 'Anita. She didn't, of course, upset by a sharp front-running romper in Southern Oasis and barely salvaged a dead heat for third in a very disappointing effort. I made a modest win bet on Winthrop Joe at 8/1 (I had him at 4/1) in the eighth at GGF, even though I thought he might be in too tough. He was and finished a no-threat third in a quick heat for the level. Another loser.

I liked a horse in the finale at Santa Anita, a $32k maiden claimer. Master Perfect had suffered a miserable trip over the track in a $50k contest January 3 when stopped in heavy traffic early and forced to race on the bad inside. For me, this was a strong bias play at 5/1 or better and he was 8/1 near post time. I played, he lost, I suffered. This day was just not working out.

The last hope came in the ninth at GGF, a miserable little $8k maiden claiming race going a mile where most of the horses couldn't outrun a Clydesdale. On paper, it was simple. Sprinter Herecomesthelion would control the pace and Colins Buddy would chase him home. The problem was that there was little value to be had since five of the other six in the race weren't likely to be backed by a millionaire on "Angel Dust".

So, what to do in the "last call for alcohol" handicap? Lion was bet from 5/1 to 2/1 (which figured) and Buddy was a modest 3/1, neither qualifying as win bets. If I could beat even-money plodder Crystal's Regal, however, the Quinella seemed easy. It was listed at a more-than-

respectable $18 on the projected payoffs, so that's what I decided to do. Now, should I plunge and try to get even for the day or just place the kind of wager I'd normally make when dealing with lousy bottom-level maiden claimers? I did the latter. Everything went according to Hoyle with Herecomesthelion rating perfectly on soft fractions and going all the way with Colins Buddy chasing to finish second. I didn't get out but I cut my losses when the Q returned $17.

So, it was a bad day at the office. I lost, plain and simple. However, I didn't chase, I didn't overreact, I didn't increase my wagers. I didn't fall into the "get out" trap. On this day, I might have pulled it off but that is the perspective of a loser. There would be more racing on Wednesday and after that and after that. I would live to fight another day and that, my friends, is what this game is all about.

WORDS TO THE WISE FOR THE WEEK--If you pass a race, it's the same as betting $1000 to win and place on a horse that runs second and returns $4 in the place hole. Now, think about that for a while.