

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

THE SPEED TRAP

Americans, as a whole, are a trusting lot. They pump billions of dollars into the economy annually buying bogus products and investing in silly get-rich-quick schemes that they know won't work. They want to believe in miracles. How else can you explain a bad TV show like "Touched By An Angel" managing to stay on the air so long? Now, that's a miracle.

When they see something in print, they tend to believe it. You know, the old "It's true, it's true, I read it in the Inquirer, it must be true" routine. Horesplayers also "believe" and these days they believe in speed figures, for better or worse. Numbers, numbers, numbers, everybody has numbers. Back in 1974 when Andy Beyer introduced Speed Handicapping into the mainstream, only a handful of serious bettors were doing their thing with par times, parallel time charts and track variants. A fledgling TODAY'S RACING DIGEST was becoming quite popular in Southern California at the time since they offered Comprehensive Performance Ratings (CPRs) and a fractional chart that projected how the horses would finish IF they all repeated their most recent representative race. Readers loved it because people trust numbers and this was something the "regular" guy couldn't get in Daily Racing Form. Besides that, it often worked out pretty well.

The proliferation of speed figures over the last three decades, of course, has diluted the pari-mutuel usefulness of such numbers. Former "time" standouts that would produce payoffs of 3/1 or more while stepping up in class are now hammered to even money or less on a regular basis. Traditional speed handicappers moan this fact constantly while contrarians try to use it to their advantage. Instead of automatically backing the best number they, instead, seek out reasons why they should bet against it figuring they will be rewarded if they can successfully go against the crowd. That, after all, is what this game is all about.

The opening day card at Santa Anita produced a couple of such opportunities for those who realized that numbers are simply a gauge as to how a horse HAS performed and hardly a guarantee of how it WILL perform.

After seeing Ghostzapper entered in the 3rd Race and D's Bertrando in the 5th Race, the true believers probably felt that it was just a matter of time before these lightly-raced two-year-olds took their rightful position in the starting gate at Churchill Downs on the first Saturday in May. Both had demolished their maiden fields while earning fancy Beyer Ratings that towered over everything else in their respective fields. If the numbers held true, these races would be no contest. Here's how each event set up from both a Beyer and Digest Fractional Chart standpoint with the morning line and final odds:

<u>3RD RACE</u>					<u>5TH RACE</u>				
GHOSTZAPPER	99	1:09.6	4/5	1/5	D'S BERTRANDO	105	1:22.9	9/5	3/2
ZAYED	83	1:10.1	8/1	9/1	UNFURLTHE FLAG	96	1:23.0	5/2	2/1
SCRIMSHAW	82	1:10.4	3/1	4/1	MARTINBLESTME	88	1:23.7	6/1	6/1
ROLL THE GOLD	78	1:10.4	12/1	25/1	EXCESSIVEPLEASURE	85	1:23.3	5/1	5/1

If you chose to believe everything you saw and everything you read about the ballyhooed favorites, there was little option other to accept them as the real deal and either take the short price or pass the race. If that was your choice, you missed some nice chances to make money. When facing apparently superior numbers of this sort, the contrarian asks the following questions to see just how legit these horses may be:

1. Did the horse "earn" the number against legitimate competition or was it just racing against the wind?
2. Does the horse have another number that also "lays over the field"?

3. Was the number earned on today's track at today's approximate distance?
4. How had the also-rans in the previous race performed in subsequent events?
5. How will today's expected pace impact the favorite?

Let's look at Ghostzapper first. The Frankel colt had debuted at Hollywood Park on November 16 and crushed nine other juveniles by nine lengths while stalking the pace in the clear and blowing right by everything with a quick burst from the outside into the lane. For that reason, he didn't really "earn" the number as much as fell into it. Since it was his only race, there was no possible verification with a secondary figure. The win came at 6 1/2 furlongs and today the Awesome Again youngster was shortening up a bit to six panels (acceptable but not perfect) and he was running on the quick Santa Anita surface rather than the deep Hollypark track. None of his nine rivals had come back to break their maiden during the next six weeks and Ghostzapper would be tackling some sprinters who were both sharp and talented. This checklist identified him as a horse to bet against at a ridiculous 30 cents on the dollar.

D's Bertrando fared even worse. Much had been made of him scoring the highest Beyer Rating for any juvenile in the country when he dominated five overmatched foes at Golden Gate on a "good" track November 9. However, he simply outsprinted them early and already had the race won after two furlongs. He hardly did anything to truly "earn" the 105 Beyer. His previous race was a troubled debut where he ended up second with a myriad of excuses and a soft 73 Beyer. That couldn't be considered verification of his big number. The race was run at six furlongs at Golden Gate on an off track and now he was asked to go seven furlongs at Santa Anita on a fast surface. None of his former opponents were able to win their next start and he was hooking at least two and perhaps three other speed rivals in today's field. Based on his Beyer advantage, some players may have felt 3/2 was a gift but questioning minds realized this was not the case.

In the Ghostzapper race, the favorite was bumped hard at the start, dropped back to race along the dull rail and then swung out to finish a well-beaten fourth while never in the hunt. D's Bertrando was hustled from the start by the visiting Russell Baze, couldn't make the lead while between longshots Excaper and Sailwiththecaptain and was a done deal on the turn while fading out of the money.

While the favorites were bailing out, the races actually were run in fairly formful fashion. Scrimshaw overhauled Zayed at the wire for a \$28.30 Exacta in the third and a very relaxed Excessivepleasure settled perfectly in the early furlongs and crushed by daylight with Martinblestme a distant second for a \$30.60 Exacta in the fifth. Excessivepleasure, in fact, ran the race that most believed would come from D's Bertrando. Although the Doug O'Neill colt had gone wire to wire in his debut win, he proved to be more than one dimensional in his second start while the favorite did not. The point is that when you're accepting a decent price on a horse, you can be more liberal in your handicapping thought process. When considering a short price, you cannot.

There figure to be many more of these overbet "figure" horses coming up in the near future. In fact, there were a couple of fast maiden winners on the opening day card that may fall into the same category as Ghostzapper and D's Bertrando next time around. Genuine Performer cruised over maiden claimers for \$32k in the 2nd Race with a perfect trip and might be vulnerable against starter allowance types while Southern Image romped in a swift straight maiden race in the finale while basically clear from start to finish. Whether these horses win or lose next time remains to be seen but they WILL be very short odds, you can bet on that.