

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

NUMBERS ARE OK, BUT

Speed vs. Class--the time honored argument in the racing game that just won't go away.

Oh, it's true that in the year 2000 it's not as easy to scare up a rip-roaring, scenery chewing "discussion" in this arena. The masses now endorse speed figures like religious zealots bowing before an idol of unknown origins. Racing writers dutifully suggest stakes races will be won by the horse with the best Beyer Rating. Trainers, off all people, spend thousands of other people's dollars based on numbers created by people they've never met. And handicappers bet the rent on figures without taking the time to determine how they were earned.

The proliferation of speed figures has made it too damn easy for even horseplaying neophytes to masquerade as experts. Most believe, without equivocation, that numbers are the "truth and the light" and act accordingly.

While a case can certainly be made for the validity of figures as an important handicapping criteria, there is also ample evidence that "time only matters when you're in jail," as the old hardboots once retorted when some college-educated geek tried to tell them that their horse just wasn't fast enough to win a particular race. The proof in this is easy to find. Although horses with obviously superior numbers do pay far less now than they did 20 years ago, the overall average of winning favorites continues to hover in the 30% range at tracks across America, just as it has for decades and decades.

I defy the number buffs to explain the results of certain races using figures. For example:

SA - 1ST - JANUARY 20--Kalihi Maggie wins this one mile claiming race for 3-year-old fillies at \$22. This young miss had just graduated from the maiden ranks December 17 while winning easily going 7 1/2 furlongs at Hollywood Park with a miserable Beyer Rating of 51 while the favorites in the race came off figs of 67 (Winning Genes), 65 (Aly McBear) and 59 (Erin's Reb). On numbers, she couldn't win but 'Maggie proceeded to crush the field. I'm sure this result left many scratching their heads.

Betting on Kalihi Maggie would have required a different approach. First, numbers are notoriously inaccurate with young horses and may climb or fall substantially as the still-developing steed learns to love or hate the racing game. It's not tough to find jumps (or declines) of 10, 15, 20 and even 30 points with horses at this stage of their career. Second, figures posted for oddball distances like 7 1/2 furlongs (or 6 1/2 on turf down a hill) are virutally impossible to pinpoint. Third, the people involved make a difference with this kind of horse. Kalihi Maggie gets her oats from high-percentage trainer Cliff Sise and after being ridden by four different jocks in her first four races, Corey Nakatani had taken over for the romp in start #5. He was back aboard in her first start with winners, not something to be ignored as many top-line riders don't waste their time with horses unless they've been duly impressed with the individual's ability and chances to improve. Fourth, a win is a win. Horses coming off victories (even maiden claiming victories) must be given consideration in their next start. The only other entrant looking for a repeat score in the field was Born To Be Spoiled and this one had registered an even-worse figure (47) in her last-out tally while being unraced in more than three months. Despite the lack of recency, the lower rating and the difference between Nakatani and Matt Garcia, 'Spoiled still went off at a slightly lower price (9/1) than did 'Maggie but ended up being eased after being used up chasing a very swift early leader.

The lesson to be learned from this race is that when comparing young horses with unproven form at the distance, you must be very tough on the favorites and a bit more lenient on the price types.

SA - 3RD - JANUARY 20--A cheap \$10k claimer for older females going a mile. Raise the Tempo had had run numbers of 50-39-55 in her last three starts, well below the recent scores for just about everything else in the field. A one-dimensional frontrunner from the Paul Aguirre barn, she obviously needs everything her own way pacewise to win but when she has gotten it in the past, she has done quite well with seven career victories. Unraced in slightly more than a month, she had shown some life in the a.m. lately with a bullet work of 47.4h (fastest of 28 half-mile moves on the tab) January 7 and seemed to have a reasonable chance to clear early in this event. She did just that, had a four length lead with a furlong to go and just did last at \$24.

Pace is often the determining factor when a horse's ratings are in the roller coaster format. An easy lead will lead to good numbers and a contested pace will yield bad figs. When a deep closer gets a hot tempo to run at, the rating may be very good. When things don't go right early, the rating comes up mediocre to poor. Projecting how the race will be run will often give you the evidence necessary to build a case for or against those with a proven style, regardless of the most recent numbers.

SA - 8TH - JANUARY 23--This was the Grade II Santa Ynez Stakes for sophomore fillies going 7 furlongs and if you were a numbers person, one of the first horses to toss was eventual winner Penny Blues (\$32.20). Her career best Beyer (79) had been earned in a December 29 victory (at 14/1) while the field included Breeders' Cup Juvenile Filly winner Cash Run and 7-panel stakes victor Classic Olympio who had both earned ratings over 90 more than once. There was also the impressive debut winner Mean Imogene in the field and she posted a 95 first time out. How could Penny Blues ever hope to compete while moving from a slow allowance event into a graded stakes? On paper she could not.

However, those who observed her rather-odd victory over the Santa Anita strip might have been tempted. She had raced with the leaders early, had dropped back on the turn like a horse destined to finish last and then had come back on in the lane to be up in time while racing on Lasix for the first time. She was saddled by Eddie Gregson and ridden by Eddie Delahoussaye (who had coaxed her home last time in their initial teaming). Eddie D. just let her drop back early in this race and made a rail-skimming move into the lane to win going away.

Visual evidence should not be disregarded with the youngsters. When you see a horse do something that isn't done very often, pay attention and take note, no matter how slow the time for the race may have been.

GGF - 5TH - JANUARY 12--Some horses just do enough to win, no more. Take the case of My Favorite Story up north. In this \$6,250 claimer at the Gate, 'Story actually figured to run well, even on the numbers but somehow went off at nearly 6/1 and paid \$13.60.

A review of My Favorite Story's record reveals the most important of all handicapping elements--individual heart and guts. Here's a horse that had won 10 of 26 lifetime starts and the last five of those victories had come by margins of a neck, a nose, a nose, a neck and a neck. In each of these successes, he had been on the lead in mid stretch, had been challenged and headed inside the furlong pole and had come back on to win each and every time. You can call winning five consecutive photos luck if you want but it's more like determination. This mental element cannot be included in anything as objective as a speed figure and it's up to the handicapper to factor the subjective "will to win" into the equation.

On this particular day, My Favorite Story went head-and-head on the pace every step of the way with favored Zig, was headed in mid stretch and came back on to win by a neck to give him six straight photos. I know they don't keep records on such things, but he's got to be right up there with the all-time leaders. Forego, of course, was the stakes champ when it came to winning the close ones but even he lost to the camera every so often.

All of this only goes to prove, that you can't don't always win races with paper and pencil. There are other factors involved with 'picking winners' and those that play strictly by the numbers are doomed to everlasting frustration.

