

TODAY'S RACING DIGEST HANDICAPPING TIPS

"THE TRIP"

Ever see "The Trip"?

It's a relatively tame exercise in psychedelia written by Jack Nicholson and starring Peter Fonda made at the height of the drug-crazed '60's. It wasn't very good back in 1967 and, more than likely, it's totally incomprehensible if seen now. Still, there are certain correlations you can make between the mind benders of that generation and the horseplayers of today.

Handicappers take "a trip" every time they bet on a horse. Some are beautiful experiences where everything goes according to plan. Others are not unlike being slipped a tab of bad acid (although I couldn't testify to that personally). They may not be as physically debilitating as LSD but these "bad trips" can do severe damage to the fragile psyche of one who wagers regularly.

Some of the negative experiences are strictly the result of misfortune. Others, however, are the direct product of human error. As bettors, we make a decision, go to the windows and then sit in a state of suspended animation while events unfold, unable to have any control over our fates. Once the gates spring open, no amount of screaming at the jockey to "get off the darn rail" or "send, you idiot" is going to change the outcome.

In horseplaying parlance, this sort of stuff falls under the umbrella of "trip handicapping". For the majority, a bad trip is nothing more than a lousy start or being shut off in mid stretch while making a winning move. For others, it's a much-more exacting, though inexact, science. Those who take the time to become proficient in this area have a terrific edge over the competition. Everyone may now have speed figures handed to them but only good trip handicappers can take those numbers and upgrade or downgrade them accordingly based on how they were achieved.

Here are some things to keep in mind when dealing with trips:

OBVIOUS TROUBLE--It's totally useless, for the most part, because everyone and their brother saw it. Breaking badly may be reason enough to excuse a poor effort by a horse that normally is away alertly and on the pace. In situations like this, you just ignore the race and pick an earlier effort on which to base your opinion. However, there are no guarantees the horse will break alertly next time out, either. Sometimes horses that are hurting (whether of mind or body) will protest their infirmities by bad gate habits. Stretch trouble is equally non-profitable. The stretch runner trying to wend its way through traffic in the lane before being forced to take up may have run a winning race that day with a clean go but circumstances could be 100% different time next time out. The horse doesn't run as well, the early pace is too slow and/or the competition is just plain stronger. One thing you'll almost always get with this sort is a low price.

SUBTLE TROUBLE--A longshot makes an early run on the turn, gets blocked to lose momentum at the 1/4 pole and then finishes evenly without being abused and lands off the board. Because the horse was a big price and not many were paying attention, this one has large overlay potential. The vast majority of significant trouble occurs on the far turn and into the lane. This is the spot where riders are making their moves with 'live' horses, yet it is the toughest to see clearly, even on a TV monitor. Watching this portion of the race on the head-on replays carefully is critical here. With races going off willy-nilly from all over the country, you don't see as many folks concentrating on the replays as you once did.

PACE TROUBLE--This is a good one. Concentrate on speed types involved in serious pace duel situations here. Those that are stuck inside or between horses in a three or four-horse battle are taking all the worst of it. If the jock is sending as hard as he can trying to win that battle, the horse is generally going to be dead meat by stretch time. Those that survive and actually win are good bets to step up and win again, particularly if the pace isn't as cut throat. Those that fade may be excellent investments on the drop when the early splits are not as demanding. Cheap maiden claiming events often produce "next out" winners of this type. Deep closers that make up ground

sprinting behind a soft pace scenario are also worth looking into in their next outings if given more distance and a better upfront set up to work with.

BIAS TROUBLE--He who knows bias, has a big, big advantage over the competition. The Southern California tracks have been relatively bias free this year but up North, it's a different story. The bias situation there can be extremely volatile and sometimes it may change from day to day. That wasn't the case at Santa Rosa last week where the outside was just very, very good for the first six days. Understanding which horses were virtually eliminated from contention by being stuck on the wood will be incredibly important when it comes to evaluating their chances at upcoming fairs as well as Bay Meadows in the fall. The hardest thing to understand is why more riders aren't tuned in to the situation. It was amazing how many horses were actually guided to the inside by jckkeys who seemed in a bigger hurry to get back to the sweat box or their Gin Rummy game than in winning the race. You'd think trainers would tell their rider that under no uncertain terms will you take this horse to the rail but that apparently isn't the case either.

There is still a certain amount of prejudice about "bias" in general from the establishment in the game who prefer to believe that the best horse wins almost every race.

TACTICS TROUBLE--Again, this is an area where the human factor is all important. Many riders will peruse the PP's in an attempt to determine what the other horses are going to do but none of these folks are going to be confused with Andy Beyer. Some riders have their hands tied by a trainer who tells them how they want the horse ridden. Others simply devise a game plan before the race and stick with it, no matter how the event unfolds. I, for one, will go to by death thinking that Evening Promise should have won Del Mar's Osunitas Handicap at 10/1 on Saturday. In a field totally void of speed, jockey Garret Gomez opted to take his mount to the back of the pack, even though she had flashed tactical speed at Lone Star Park May 29 and had shown some zip down the hill at Santa Anita April 15. When he didn't, Smooth Player and the pace-savvy Eddie Delahoussaye was allowed to dictate terms from the start. Once Evening Promise was turned loose and allowed to run, she finished strongly but had to settle for 3rd money. Perhaps, she would not have won if 'sent' but the fact that she ran so well against the shape over a course that played well for speed on opening week, makes her a filly worth following in future engagements at the seaside. I don't think this is a note that obvious to many other handicappers and, hence, may prove of considerable value.

The beauty of good trip handicapping is that it's one person's opinion. You might have 10 top players watching the same race and come up with 10 different opinions of what was important. In a game where success is often based on truly individual judgment, this can be a beautiful thing.