

Trainer-Handicapping-Pt.-II

By Barry Meadow

The typical trainer has never calculated a variant, has never used velocity ratings, and can't tell you the sprint-to-route percentage for himself, let alone any other trainer. He's too busy worrying whether the owner who's two months behind will ever pay him, whether the new vet he's using is any good, whether the groom who got drunk last night is going to show up today, and whether he should drop his best horse into a claimer and risk losing him.

As handicappers, we generally give little thought to these problems. What we care about are results. How good, overall, is this trainer? How has he been doing lately? Does he seem to have specialties such as good after layoffs or stretchouts, and not so good with 2-year-olds and shippers? Does he have a favorite rider or two? What happens after he claims a horse?

You can buy trainer data that analyzes every trainer's performances in dozens of categories--dirt-to-turf, second-after-a-claim, horses under 3-1, or whatever. Usually, the typical trainer (good and bad alike) loses somewhere around the track take for most categories. The good trainers win more often but at lower odds, while the lower-ranked trainers win less frequently but pay better.

However, once you take dozens of categories--particularly with small samples--there's little doubt that you can find some profitable subsets. Sure, Tommy Trainer had 12% wins and lost 18% overall, but on sprints to routes he had 20% wins and a 27% flat-bet profit. And Harry Horseman, with 17% wins but a net loss of 19%, had 28% wins with a 74% flat-bet profit on horses away 90-120 days who went off at 4-1 or higher.

What are we to make of these discoveries? Often, nothing.

When you have a large number of subsets, some are going to be profitable simply due to chance. And the smaller the sample sizes, the more that chance will skew the results.

Take Tommy Trainer. While it appears he did much better on the sprint-to-route move, he had only 30 starters and hit with 6. Typically, he would have won with 4--and winning 6 instead of 4 is well within what statisticians call *standard deviation*). In other words, chance alone might easily have accounted for the difference.

Harry Horseman had 7 winners out of 25 starters who fit the description above. But maybe there were five photos and our trainer won all five. Had he lost all five, somebody likely would have written that the trainer is no good with that move.

Still, many people will tell you to follow these trainer strengths. But often, the results were too limited to draw any conclusions at all, or were simply normal deviations that might well have happened by chance alone. To believe you can simply follow some angle because a trainer has done well with it over a small, extracted subset of a large group, isn't very likely.

It gets worse with general information sources that report only that "Billy Backstretch is great with maidens." No statistic here, so we have no idea what this source is talking about. What does "great" mean? Does Backstretch win 36% but the average payoff is just \$4.40? Does he show an ROI of +71% based on 200 winners, or 20, or 2? First-time starters or fifth-time starters? Sprinters or routers? This year, last year, or five years ago? 2-year-olds or 3-year-olds? At all tracks or just one? With certain jockeys or everybody? With or without lasix? With certain workout patterns?

So does that mean you can't use any of this stuff at all? No, because trainers do tend to repeat what's worked for them.

Take workout patterns, for instance. Certain trainers will not enter a horse unless they've been able to work it every 6-8 days with at least four works between races, at least one of them at five furlongs or longer. Others believe in bringing their horses up to a race with long, slow gallops, and their horses often show not a single workout between races. So if you're confronted with a horse who shows no workouts, a look at the trainer profile should answer some questions.

Or take the early part of a meet vs. the latter part. Some trainers have their stock all wound up and ready to roll from the first day of the meet, while others prefer to race their horses into shape. The first group often dominates early, but after their horses win and move up, they don't do as well later—while the second group often starts slow but kicks it into gear later in the meet.

Some trainers will frequently win by dropping a horse quickly, below its claimed price. But if another trainer buys a horse for \$25,000 and enters it six weeks later for \$16,000, you can virtually throw the horse out.

Some trainers win most of their races with dirt sprinters, and almost never win on the grass. Others specialize in turf races, or dirt routers. Take two well known trainers as they headed into the 2015 winter meet at Santa Anita. Looking only at their Santa Anita starts for the past five years:

Bob Baffert: 25% wins the past five years at Santa Anita, but a horrid 1-for-44 in turf sprints down the hill.

Ron Ellis: 1-for-22 with first-time starters at Santa Anita, but 8-for-23 with second-time starters at the track.

But we're stuck in a dilemma:

- To get large sample sizes, you need long-term results--and what the trainer did five years ago with a completely different stable may be irrelevant to what he's doing lately.

- But to use small sample sizes may be completely misleading.

Better to see what the trainer has done *recently*, in all categories. Has he been winning with certain riders? How are his debuters? Is he hot or cold? Many trainers go through cycles--preparing for specific meetings, gaining and losing owners, changing the help--and what the guy did three years ago may not matter much now.

Then again, it may. Every trainer is different.

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