

Trainer Handicapping (Part IV)

By Barry Meadow

The claiming game is a good place to discover who can train and who can't. When a trainer claims a horse, what happens to the horse? Does he improve, stay the same, or go downhill?

When a trainer claims a horse, he usually bases it on one of two suppositions—that the horse is sound and will do at the claimed level, or the horse can be improved by making some changes.

At the very least, after a claim you can be sure that the horse will be thoroughly checked, in much the same way that a new homeowner will go through every inch of his new purchase. Everything from the horse's dental treatment to his training regimen will be reviewed in a search for what is called the horse's "hole card." This might be anything from needing to have his races spaced more widely, to adding a goat to the stable, to changing the type of bit. For handicappers, the best claim is one by a good trainer from a mediocre one. Often, the horse can reverse a lifetime of dull form in just a couple of weeks, at a big price, sometimes by simple things—changing ill-fitting shoes, for instance.

The claiming game has often been compared with poker, with concealment of the truth a major factor. Let's say a trainer claims a horse for \$20,000, then tries him once unsuccessfully for \$25,000, then drops him in for \$16,000. Is the trainer giving up on the horse by dropping him so quickly below the claimed price? Or is he taking advantage of a dull effort in a higher class to make the other trainers *think* the horse isn't doing so well?

Since it could be either case, the sharpest trainers vary their patterns. They dangle two horses as claim bait by dropping them severely, both are claimed away, and both go straight downhill for the new connections because the horses had problems. Now the trainer drops a third horse—only this time there's nothing wrong with the horse and he wins easily, then jumps right back to his regular level. The two horses that were

damaged goods scare off the other trainers, and the trainer gets to steal a pot. Even better, the *next* time he drops a horse, his rivals are not sure how to proceed.

There are many windows through which you can study trainers, and different services approach the subject in different ways. Generally, the more you pay the more you get—though the more you get, the more confused you might become. Every horse in every race has a number of attributes, many of which can be addressed by trainer stats. An example:

Trainer Steve Stable enters Silver Gentleman in a \$12,500 claimer, a dirt sprint. His odds are 6-1. He last raced for \$16,000 some 26 days ago at 1 1/16 miles. His jockey is Gary Goodhands.

You might look up any or all of the following for Stable, on the basis of the meeting, last 10 days, last 30 days, last 60 days, last 6 months, last year, last two years, or lifetime:

- His record with claimers.
- His record with dirt starters.
- His record with dirt sprinters.
- His record with 6-1 shots.
- His record with one-level class droppers.
- His record with horses laid off 21-30 days.
- His record with route-to-sprint horses.
- His record with Goodhands in the saddle.
- His record with this particular owner.
- His return on investment for the last year in various categories.
- His workout patterns with his other winners.
- His workout patterns for this particular horse.

That's just for starters. If the horse is making his third start off a layoff, you might want to check Stable's record there. If the horse is shipping from another track, you might look at his record with shippers. If it's the horse's second race with lasix, first with blinkers, third after a claim--well, you can envision the possibilities.

Even more confusing than the fact that many stats are contradictory is that a single win boosts the trainer's stats in dozens of categories. There's a serious redundancy problem in the trainer-stat business. And how are we to assess these overlaps?

How about if the trainer is wearing his best suit today--is that an indication that his horse is live? What if he enters no horses for three weeks and suddenly enters four on the same day? What if he rarely ships, but despite the fact that there's a suitable spot for his horse locally he chooses to send him out of town? How about if the trainer recently was sent six horses by a prominent local owner, and today he's starting his first one? What if the trainer conditions his horses year-round at some local fair track that's about to begin its annual two-week meet? What if the trainer told a radio audience he loves his horse in the sixth?

All these factors may not be covered by statistics--but they might (or might not) be relevant to rounding out today's picture.

It's easy to seize on one aspect of this game--but if all you know is one aspect, it won't be enough. Sure, the trainer is an important piece of the handicapping puzzle. But he's just one piece. You can't ignore him. But as long as they call it horse racing, let's not forget about the horse.

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