

Trainer-Handicapping- (Part III)

Copyright 2015 by Barry Meadow

In general, the larger outfits can take more chances than the smaller ones. Take two horses you think are worth \$12,500. The large stable, which buys and sells dozens of horses a year, puts him in for \$10,000 to try to win a purse; if the horse gets claimed, so be it. The small, fearful barn puts him in for \$16,000, afraid that somebody will claim him away.

Or take a 3-year-old who's just won a \$20,000 claimer and has all his allowance conditions available. Three weeks later, there are two races the same day that the horse is eligible for—a \$20,000 claimer and an allowance race. The fearful guy will put the horse into an allowance to protect him; the big guy will put the horse into the allowance only if he thinks the horse is improving; otherwise, he'd race him right back for \$20,000.

Thus when looking at what a horse is doing in this particular spot, check the trainer. Take a horse who just lost in a nondescript performance for a \$25,000 tag. Next time he appears in the entries—two weeks later at the same distance—he's in for \$40,000. If the trainer wins only 5% of his starts, you can probably safely toss the horse. However, if the trainer is a 20% winner, it's possible the trainer is showing confidence by raising the horse two levels despite the seemingly bad last line. Same move, two widely differing conclusions.

Speaking of a 5% to a 20% trainer switch, it's difficult to underestimate the upside after a claim or private purchase. Maybe the horse won't improve at all, but often the improvement is monumental—so much so that often you can throw out the horse's entire previous form. Let's say a top trainer takes a horse for \$10,000 off a weak trainer. The horse, despite a series of low Beyers and dull performances, shows up for \$20,000, a three-level jump. Don't be too quick to eliminate him on supposed bad form or slow performances. Chances are we're looking at a completely different, and improved, horse. Figure the horse as a contender no matter what the running lines look like.

It works in reverse as well. A horse has been sailing along for \$20,000 with Sam Supertrainer, then gets claimed by Irving Inability. It's unlikely that Inability is going to improve the horse. If the horse shows up a week later, Inability probably hasn't done

enough damage to negate the horse's previous form—but if the horse doesn't race for three or four weeks, nothing good is going to emerge.

Part of every trainer's responsibility is to find out what his horse likes. The sooner, the better, since racehorses have just a finite number of races in them. He has to figure out if the horse prefers sprinting or routing, dirt or turf, leading or coming from behind, racing on the inside or on the outside, likes his races spaced or not, can run well fresh or not, gets along with particular jockeys, needs certain equipment, likes to work out fast or is lazy in the morning, can run in the mud or not, likes ovals with tight turns or wide turns, etc.

Within each of these problems are further considerations. If the horse prefers to sprint, for instance, does he prefer five furlongs or seven furlongs? If he likes the turf, does he like it soft or hard, cut short or grown tall?

A trainer can learn only some of this from workouts or team drills. Mostly he has to go by trial and error. Even if the horse is bred to run long on the grass, and the trainer's whole schedule is to prepare the horse for this, the horse might just turn around and decide that what he likes is to sprint on the dirt. If the trainer prefers to train horses to rate, he might have a kamikaze type who refuses to try unless he's allowed to fly out of there.

As in other endeavors, all trainers are not created equal. Some can read a condition book and determine not only a suitable spot for their own horse, but they often know exactly which other opponents figure to be entered there as well. A trainer needs skill at spotting his horses. Run a \$16,000 horse for \$20,000 and you rarely win; jam him in for \$12,500 and your win percentage soars. Spot another one in an open \$25,000 and he gets nothing; ship him 100 miles away for a \$25,000 claimer open to 4-year-olds only who have never won two races and he's got a winner.

Every horse is in one of three cycles—he's improving, declining, or staying the same. Often, where the trainer places the horse will tell you. If you can separate the good trainers from the bad--and then concentrate on the favorite plays of the best trainers--you'll gain a significant edge over your competitors who simply check how many firsts, seconds, and thirds the trainer had, or who ignore trainers altogether.

###