Carryovers: Yes or No

By Barry Meadow

Carryovers mark one of the few times in gambling where you sometimes--I say sometimes—have a positive expectation. But that doesn't necessarily mean you should play.

I'm not talking here about jackpot carryovers, which require that to get the big prize, you have to have the only ticket. Assume $100,000 is bet as players chase a pick 6 jackpot at Racino Downs. If the track takes out 20% and sends 40% of the remaining $80,000 into the next day's jackpot pool, today's players will get back just $48,000 of the $100,000 bet--a whopping 52% takeout. No thanks, Mr. Jackpot, except possibly on a mandatory payout day.

But even regular carryovers may not be worth playing, for various reasons. One may be that so much is bet into the pool that the carryover is swamped. Let's say that at Del Mar, there's a $90,000 pick 6 carryover. The next day, $500,000 is bet into the pool, with $125,000 of that going to takeout. That means $375,000 is available to today's winners, less than the $400,000 of new money. That's a takeout rate of just above 6%, which is good, except that the pick 6 is hard to hit no matter what the size of your bankroll.

Then there's the too-many-horses problem. You excitedly start handicapping a $200,000 pick 6 carryover and after your eliminations, you're left with 5 x 5 x 6 x 6 x 8 x 9, a staggering 64,800 combinations. If you start eliminating horses in each race, you're kicking out some who have a real chance of beating you (and would probably make the pick 6 huge as well). Or you could stab with a single in that wide-open last race, and you've still got 7,200 combinations to play. Or maybe try to single the next-to-last race

as well, cutting your play to only 900 combinations. Because those two races are so chaotic, figure that those two singles each have only a 25% chance to win, which means that you have only a 6% chance that both will win—and you still have to hit the other races as well. Even if you have a 90% chance in each of the other four legs, your overall ticket of 900 combinations ($1,800 for a $2 pick 6 wager) has only a 4% chance to hit. Meaning that not only are you going to lose this bet 24 out of every 25 attempts, but it has to pay at least $45,000 to break even. Ouch. And what if your total gambling bankroll is only $10,000?

Then there's the opposite problem—everything looks so obvious it appears that everyone in the grandstand will hit. After handicapping, next to each race number I write either "yes" or "no" depending on whether there's at least one selection that could make for a decent payoff. If I have only one or two yeses, I probably won't play.

Take three carryovers I worked on in one week this July.

Santa Anita offered a $28,000 carryover in the super high 5. I eliminated two of the eight entrants, and four of the remaining six were first-time starters. The only reason I looked at this at all was that I didn't care for the morning-line favorite, who had managed to consistently quit at shorter distances throughout his six-race career. I decided to wait till close to post time before playing to check the odds, only to find that this vulnerable favorite was sent away at 4-1, and the horses I eliminated wound up the two longest shots in the field. So there was no reason to play, just as well since that 4-1 shot finally won, and one of the horses I eliminated staggered in fifth. So I couldn't have been more wrong, but was saved because the crowd gave me nothing to play.

Next came a $7,000 50-cent pick 5 at Sacramento. The field sizes were 6, 6, 6, 6, 6 and 7. Yes, a minuscule carryover, but maybe easy to steal a few dollars for small money, so I did the work. However, all the horses I left in (three horses in four of the races, and five in the other) appeared findable by everyone. For each race, I marked "no" next to the race number. Still, I pressed on. I made a ticket so that one of the two

favorites I liked had to win, so the cost was a mere $112.50, another warning flag—when it costs so little to satisfy yourself that your coverage is complete, you probably have no big upside. Then I did my last calculation—what chance did this ticket actually have to win? Normally to have an 85% chance of winning a race, you need four or five entrants. But let's say, to be especially optimistic, that I had such a large chance given the small fields and the weaknesses of the horses I eliminated. Multiply .85 through five races we get 44.3%, meaning my breakeven number for a $112.50 bet was $253.95. And with no price ("yes") horses in the pick 5, I had no chance for a major payoff. So I didn't play. As it turned out, my two favorites both won, and nobody in the sequence paid more than $6.60. The actual winning payoff was $198.75, meaning this was a long-term losing bet, something like flipping a coin and getting paid less than fair odds even if you're correct—play long enough, and you're sure to lose.

Then there was Santa Anita's $75,000 pick 6 carryover heading into closing day, a mandatory payoff. The pool surpassed $1 million. This could big, so I spent a couple of hours analyzing the card. I had some longshots that could help me, so I took the plunge. And hit all six. And wound up losing half my investment since the whole thing returned a sad $782.

While a carryover is better than no carryover, it doesn't mean you necessarily should play it. Imagine a lottery with a $500 million prize, but they sell only $460 million $1 tickets. Sounds good, except you still have only a 1-in-460-million chance of hitting it. Positive expectation—yes. Good bet—no.

Mandatory giveaway carryovers usually make a play more attractive, but they still don't require a mandatory bet. Maybe the jackpot never grew too big and the bet isn't worth playing anyway, or maybe the same problems listed above apply even with a mandatory payday.

Ask yourself where your edge might be. If you can't find one, maybe you should sit this one out.

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