

Ways To Win

By Barry Meadow

Every so often, I hear some player, or read in some handicapping forum, something to this effect: “You can’t win unless you do X.” That X could range from understanding graduate-school-level mathematics to staying away from favorites to watching horses in the paddock.

I say, best not to say you can’t do something. I played the thoroughbreds full-time for more than 20 years. And certainly, there were some things I could have done better. I rarely watched horses in the paddock, or studied the warmups. I could have kept better bias notes. I bet too many races at fair tracks and bullrings where some horses take to the configuration and others don’t.

Then again, I did a bunch of things right. I studied the replays carefully. I rarely bet unless I felt I had an edge. I took advantage of rebates and promotions.

Winning isn’t easy, particularly since an estimated 20% of today’s handle is bet by computerized robotic wagering teams, whose software spits out frighteningly accurate odds lines and makes optimal bets faster and better than most individuals can do. But even these teams can’t do everything. “We don’t play perfectly,” says Bill Bentner, head of one of the leading teams. “But we play well enough considering we bet on every track. A lone wolf playing his own circuit may actually do better than us at that track.” That’s because the lone wolf can add such factors as paddock department and accurate race notes (the teams all depend on charts, though some use humans to supplement their trip notes at some tracks). And understand the daily nuances and idiosyncrasies at his home track.

So, what about you? Do you have a winning plan? Let’s look at a number of possibilities (find the one that appeals most to you):

- ***Concentrate on one or two tracks and know all the horses, trainers, and jockeys at those tracks.*** That means keeping detailed notes on each horse, understanding which jockeys fit which types of horses, studying the replays, knowing the

trainers, being able to figure changing biases on the fly, etc.

- ***Stick with non-jackpot carryovers***, particularly on mandatory payout days. There's often more money given out than is taken in, which gives you a positive expectation. Some of these require major money, so this is not a strategy for desperados.

- ***Play turf races only***. These races generally attract a better class of horse, more easily handicapped than the dirt maiden claimers that are so common at so many tracks. Watch replays, and you can see who might have had particularly good or bad trips of late. You can often catch longshots who actually figure in these races.

- ***Look to beat vulnerable favorites***. By playing against horses who have no particular edge in speed and pace numbers, or who have no early speed, or who are coming off long layoffs, or who are ridden by 5% jockeys, you're more likely to catch prices. Learn how to identify horses that will probably be overbet. When you're right, at least you'll get paid.

- ***Consider trifectas and superfectas***. Unlike the pick 3's and pick 6's, you have to be right only once. If you can leave out a favorite or second choice, so much the better. Many tracks offer 10-cent or 20-cent bets in these pools, so don't be afraid to throw in some bombs. Take stands—this one must be in the top two, this other one can't be on the ticket at all, etc.

- ***Zero in on trainer specialties and patterns***. Learn the ins and outs of your 20 leading trainers. Know who works his horses fast, who raises his horses in company only when he's confident, who wins off layoffs, which jockeys each one prefers to use, etc. You're not going to make big money just through speed and pace numbers, but trainer analysis can still land rewards.

- ***Specialize in tracks, and bets, with lower takeouts***. Pick 5 players in California, for instance, are charged 14% at Del Mar but 24% at Golden Gate, and those in Kentucky buck a 14% takeout at Kentucky Downs but 22% at Churchill Downs. These are huge differences.

- ***Follow small tracks with small handles***. While you can't crush a race at Mahoning Valley as you might at Saratoga, you probably won't be facing the same number of sharpies, either. If you specialize in tracks where there's not much out-of-state interest from serious players, you might have an advantage. Some places handle almost

nothing on Monday through Wednesday, when many big players don't participate.

Whatever you do, stick with these universal strategies:

Do all you can to get the largest rebates possible. This might mean using more than one ADW, depending on varying rates per track.

Pay attention to promotions and reload bonus offers. Free money always helps your bottom line.

Apply proper money management principles, betting only when you feel you have an advantage.

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