

The Racer's Edge
A Handicapping Primer by Larry Simpson

A Thoroughbred 'Toss Out' - Sometimes You Have To Dig Deep!!

'Separating the wheat from the chaff!' Or in racing circles, contenders from pretenders! Or better still, possible good betting opportunities from horses considered to be 'toss outs'! Usually, the latter are not too difficult to find as they are generally horses with obvious poor form on paper, and are the first ones eliminated from consideration by the astute handicapper. But not so fast! Sometimes it doesn't pay to be too hasty when 'tossing', as you will soon see.

Before eliminating a horse it is imperative that you look for excuses! See if you can find that possible hidden element that perhaps accounted for the last few sub-par performances. You may also find that the last race, or even the second last race, may not be sufficient enough to provide you with a well rounded picture of a horse's capabilities, especially when it comes down to analyzing how he or she may run today.

Here's a prime example of where recent performance, or rather lack of performance in the past two races, will sometimes cloud the handicapping equation. Horse 'A' is a lightly raced three-year-old colt, racing in a mid-range Maiden Claimer for one of the track's leading trainers. Horse 'A' finished 10th, beaten some 20 lengths in his most recent start, and the race before that finished 9th in a nine horse field, again losing in double digits. To most people, this horse would be an automatic 'toss out' for today's race. Certainly on paper it looks like he has gone off form. Or has he? Sometimes when the actual decision to 'pitch' a horse is made, especially if it is conducted in a hasty fashion, you may actually be costing yourself some prime betting opportunities that could be staring you right in the face!

Let's assume that today's race is a 6-furlong sprint on a fast track. Our horse's last race was at a mile on the turf, and the race prior to that on a very wet racetrack, again at a one-mile distance. Keeping in mind that Horse 'A' is lightly raced with only six lifetime starts, the astute handicapper decides to overlook the last two races because of 'track excuses' choosing instead to concentrate on the three-year-olds prior racelines. In his first lifetime start Horse 'A' finished 5th at 6-furlongs. Then in the next three starts, the past performance lines show two third place finishes and then a fourth, each time showing good early speed but he backed up in the stretch. Also, a quick perusal of the odds in the past performance lines for the first four races shows that Horse 'A' was a 'well thought of' horse, with odds as low as 3-1, and as high as 6-1. And to take it just a little further, our Horse 'A' is still racing in the same class today as in the previous two races, so even though he was beaten in double digits two races in a row, Horse 'A's' trainer (we have already established that he is one of the circuit's leaders) is not trying to bail out today by offering him at a lower claiming tag. Obviously we are not talking about damaged goods-no fire sale here!

We simply must give a horse like this careful consideration. He obviously is not the automatic 'toss out' as we first thought. The race on the wet surface is a total 'throw out' as Horse 'A' obviously didn't care for the mud which is not uncommon with young horses, while the one-mile turf race was probably used as a stamina builder, and another way of sharpening his already useful speed. (Note-the highly proficient turf to dirt angle is visibly present with Horse 'A'). Today's 6-furlongs on a fast track should be just 'what the good doctor ordered' for Horse 'A', as the prevalence of early speed in his past two races simply reinforces the fact that this is a horse that is STILL in relatively good shape, even though he has not had the good finish results to prove it!

Also, it is important to consider who is riding this horse today. If the jockey named just happens to be one of the top riders on the circuit, and he or she has ridden Horse 'A' before-BIG POSITIVE ANGLE!! Who better to know the horses actual capabilities on a fast racing surface like today! Likewise, if one of the leading jockeys on your circuit has ridden the horse in his past two drab races and he or she stays on for today's race-BINGO-all the signs point to a big effort today!

Now after digging deep on our Horse 'A', we have come to the conclusion that in today's race he does appear to fit distance-wise and class-wise and is not the quick 'toss out' that we originally thought. Also, one of the circuits leading riders is named to ride and we have already established that he hails from one of the leading barns on the track. Therefore it begs the question -IS HORSE 'A' A GOOD BET TODAY?

Watch the tote board for action or non-action if you may. If Horse 'A' gets very little betting action on the tote, perhaps going off at odds of 10-1 or more, in my opinion I would let him go today. Remember, in his past races, Horse 'A' was well bet, so today's lack of betting action may be a bit of a concern as it just doesn't fit the same profile of past races! Mind you, in every race, so called overlays are created and in the case of our Horse 'A', the fact of the matter may be that not enough people have done the homework to the same extent that you have. Perhaps they have automatically tossed Horse 'A' because of his two double digit losses, kind of the 'what have you done for me lately scenario', and with this being said, he just might 'pop up' at a goo price today. Obviously betting on Horse 'A' is a gamble, but isn't that what betting horses is all about? Certainly the lack of betting action on the board today is cause for concern, however not enough cause for me to not make at least a small wager on this 'overlaid' horse.

On the other hand, if Horse 'A' has a Morning Line of 12-1, and early money shows up to the point that he opens at 6-1 or less (basically 1/2 of his morning line), drifts back up to 12-1, then back down again as post time nears, then you just might have a live 'value-play' here. Another good betting proposition here, probably a little stronger even than the one mentioned above and thus you would manage your bankroll accordingly.

It is evident from the above example that the most important lesson to be learned about the 'toss out' theory is that you need to dig deep in order to find some hidden indicators. And this perseverance will only make you a better handicapper in the future!