FINDING FALSE FAVORITES

The quest for the "false" favorite should be the number one priority for every handicapper whether they be professional, recreational or amateur.

Let's set the parameters for a "favorite" as the program choice or any horse opening at 5/2 or less. For strong handicappers who do a better job at selecting the public choice than the linemaker, follow your own heart and soul at choosing the chalk when applying the following principles. Many of these guidelines are somewhat subjective, but the more you work at it, the more proficient you will become at employing them. Remember to be ultra tough since you are analyzing horses that will be short prices. If in doubt, go ahead and red flag 'em.

ABILITY: Employing whatever rating method you prefer, determine whether the horse is "good enough" to win. Personally, I use my "Fast Figs" (published daily in *Today's Racing Digest* or TRD) to judge the contention in a race. It doesn't matter whether you use them or opt for the *Digest's* "Fractional Charting" or "CPRs" or Columns 5/6 in *Today's Racing Digest* or "FIRE Numbers" or use "Beyer" figs, "Barry Meadows' Master Win Ratings" or "Thoro-Graph" or "Trackmaster Power Ratings" (the list can go on and on). Whatever your choice, it is necessary for you to determine what score is necessary for "contender" status. With "Fast Figs", it's five points. In the "Fractional Charting", it should be three lengths. For "Meadows' Ratings", it's three points. Max points in this category is two.

(A)--If the horse doesn't figure on top (or tied for 1st), assign it one point.

(B)--If the horse doesn't figure as a contender, assign it two points.

PHYSICAL CONDITION: Max here is one point.

(A)--For horses that have raced within 30 days: those that have not started within 14 days and do not have a published workout within 10 days (one point).

(B)--For horses that have not raced within 30 days: those without two works in the last 12 days (one point).

RACE CONDITIONS: Max is two points

(A)--Horse not proven (in-the-money finish) at today's distance (route or sprint), one point.

(B)--Horse not proven on today's surface (dirt, turf, wet), one point.

CONNECTIONS: Max is two points.

(A)--Stable wins at less than 10% overall or is on the "cold" list over the last two months as shown inside the front cover of the Digest, one point.

(B)--Jockey wins at less than 10% overall (use annual records unless the current meeting record has more data, one point. If preferred, use the Jockey/Trainer record shown in the comment section of TRD and give one point if the team has not combined for at least one previous win or have succeeded at less than 10% long-term.

MISCELLANEOUS: Max is five points.

(A)--Suspicious class drop, one point. Any horse dropping two levels off good form for today's race or has taken such a drop within its last three races and is not stepping up again today.

(B)--Horses lacking tactical speed ("R" in TRD's PER Column 7), one point.

(C)--Has no wins in its last 10 starts, one point. For Maidens, any horse that has been beaten twice or more under today's conditions (class/distance), two points.

(D)--Has not had a break of at least 45 days in its current Past Performances, one point.

(E)--Figures to be disadvantaged by an on-going track bias, one point.

Any horse receiving one or two points is a *Vulnerable* favorite. Any horse with three or more points is a *False* favorite. Horses without any points, are legitimately *Solid* favorites.

Solid favorites should not be bet against and are good 'singles' in Pick Three/Pick Six action. *Vulnerable* favorites can be 'used' in exotic wagering by players who like them but should not be bet to win. *False* favorites should be eliminated from consideration and BET AGAINST.

Not everyone will see every potential favorite the same by using this list. It's merely a guideline for determining just how good/bad the potential short prices look in any given race. Feel free to modify the list in any way you see fit. In the handicapping game, nothing is written in stone. NOTHING.

Today's Racing Digest Handicapping Tips

GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Eclectics. Contrarians. Lone Wolfs. Mad Dogs.

Call them what you want, it's the "alternative" handicappers that win at the game while their more traditional, conservative brethren die an ugly death, buried in an avalanche of red ink caused by short-priced losers, takeout and frustration. For

this group, just betting on a horse going off at 18/1 represents heresy of sorts since they are totally devoted to black-and-white handicapping theory that requires current form, proven ability and high numbers to be in their corner before investing. Of course, if such a horse doesn't exist in a given field this does not preclude them from guessing on which of the favorites may win and wagering accordingly.

Most races simply don't offer horses that standout over their opposition and when they do, the prices are so tiny that no one can turn a respectable long-term profit. Often, the most interesting horses in a field are the first ones the traditional players will throw out while their more freethinking brothers and sisters, on the other hand, are attracted to these "x" factor anomalies. Let's look at a couple from last Friday's card at Hollywood Park.

5TH RACE--Straight maidens going nine furlongs on the turf, just the kind of race that "form" players hate (or should hate). The percentage of winning favorites in races of this sort at Hollypark (according to the Digest) is a mere 24.3%, far below normal. This fact alone made success for the morning-line favorites (Rasby at 8/5, Distant Venture at 5/2 and Calypso Poet at 3/1) seem unlikely and sent the contrarian crowd into action. None of the favorites was certain to improve. Rasby and 'Poet had raced OK in their turf debuts May 16 but neither had run well enough to top the Fractional Charting while clocking in at times slower than par for the class level. Distant Venture was trying turf and two turns for the first time after two so-so sprints while bred only moderately for the new surface. Four of the longshots in the field were Aleyon (off three months and from a barn winless for 1998), Hovdey (a 17-time loser), Runaway Kidd (another from a low-profile barn with a low-percentage rider) and Inwood (didn't run a step at 47/1 in his debut under these conditions).

The only remaining entrant in the field was Northern Truce (8/1 on the line). The 4-year-old gelding had finished well back in five previous dirt starts at various distances and was beaten 11 1/2 lengths by $32k maiden claimers sprinting on dirt April 1, his most-recent race. At first glance, he didn't belong in the race. However, the first question to ask in these situations is, "What is this horse doing here?" From that point on, the positives started to add up. Northern Truce had been claimed by a good trainer (Doug Peterson), had been off for two months and was still being raised in class. He was by a solid grass sire (Truce Maker), was related to a classy turf winner (full brother to classy Southern Truce with earnings of more than $850,000) and was being ridden by Corey Nakatani, the current kingpin of the jock's room with 30% winners at the meet. By his placement of the horse, the trainer was telling all who would listen that he had made a good claim. The new surface made it easy to overlook the negative dirt form, especially when the pedigree backed up that way of thinking. Nakatani's presence boosted the confidence level and the positive value element was obvious given the suspect nature of the opposition.

If Northern Truce had attracted undue attention in the betting, he would have been an easy "pass". However, he hovered around his morning line price and went off at 8/1 in the eight-horse field. I can't remember an easier turf winner as he stalked Calypso Poet early, sailed by him easily into the lane with Nakatani maintaining a stout hold and breezed to the wire by 3 1/2 lengths over Distant Venture at $18. Both Rasby (6/5) and Calypso Poet (7/2) were off the board.

<u>7TH RACE</u>--A 5 1/2-furlong turf sprint for allowance horses, more fertile territory for seekers of price. The percentage of winning favorites: 21.7%, again far below the norm. The morning-line favorites were Bello Beau at 2/1, Dinnerat the Derby at 5/2 and Meadow Prayer at 3/1. Beau had run OK over the course in two tries while in traffic trouble both times. However, he figured five ticks below par for the level in the Fractional Charting, was ridden by a struggling Corey Black (3% at the meet)

for a barn also having a sluggish season (Martin Jones, 1/12). Dinnerat the Derby hadn't sprinted in more than 13 months, had never gone short on the lawn and had faded badly in an April 25 grass miler after setting the pace in his first start in nearly nine months. Meadow Prayer was unraced since Aug. 20 at Del Mar and was making his turf debut. Again, there were no 'locks' among the chalk.

The horse that made you ask "why" in the field was Pennysenyen. He hadn't run since debuting at Golden Gate Fields Nov. 21 for Jerry Hollendorfer when running away from a lowly field of $8.5 maiden claimers in the mud at 8/5. Since moved to the top-flight Randy Bradshaw barn, he surfaced here against SoCal allowance horses, a class jump of seemingly monumental proportions. Forming class opinions based on one successful race is a difficult proposition and, again, it seemed wise to side with the new trainer's optimism. The colt was training smartly and might have matured dramatically during the 6 1/2-month layoff during his two and three-year-old seasons. The Digest showed Bradshaw and jock Rene Douglass had combined for seven wins and 19 in-the-money finishes from 27 starts since Nov. 25 and the risk at 18/1 in a seven-horse field? Damn right, even if he didn't win. Win he did, however, blowing by the leaders in powerful fashion into the lane and romping home at $39.60.

Isolating price plays of this sort can be done on a fairly-regular basis. Look for events with vulnerable favorites run over conditions where form traditionally doesn't stand up. Look for mystery horses with more than one improvement factor; a move to a productive barn, a switch in surface or distance, good works after layoffs, equipment changes, new Lasix, jock changes. And most of all, look for 'value'.

By doing things differently than the majority of people going to the windows, you can become an Eclectic, a Contrarian, a Lone Wolf or a Mad Dog. Hey, it's lots of fun.

"I WANT TO BE ALONE"

Greta Garbo and Howard Hughes probably would have been great handicappers. The two most-famous recluses of the 20th Century may have been driven by anti-social demons but all that time by themselves would have allowed them to work those tricky handicapping puzzles without being undermined by the opinions of others.

If you're goal is to become a successful investor at the track, one of the most-important lessons to be learned is to believe in yourself and YOUR opinions over all others. Handicapping is essentially a singular game, like professional golf or tennis or any other endeavor when the outcome depends almost entirely on the individual. The human species, however, is a social animal for the most part. Sociologically speaking, people feel most comfortable when part of a group and prefer to agree rather than disagree. Handicapping, however, rewards free-thinking and action that is contrary to the herd. That's why most who try to become serious handicappers fail.

The track is like no place else on earth. Once inside any equine emporium, you can stop and ask virtually any total stranger who they like in any race and get a cheerful response. Some people don't even wait to be asked--they simply tell you who they think will win. The tribal instinct takes hold. If you stop the same people on the street and ask for directions, you're likely to be greeted with a cold stare and a mumbled, unintelligible answer.

The local newspapers have selections, the DAILY RACING FORM is full of them, TODAY'S RACING DIGEST has its share and there are scads of others (myself included) who are happy to peddle their analysis for a price. There is nothing wrong with this--it's just business. The majority of people that go to the races

regularly are not really interested in the process of picking winners. They are interested in making money and they don't give a hoot how they do it.

However, this publication and this column are dedicated to those of you who truly want to succeed at the game on your own merits. In order to do so, you need to develop an independent-thinking process and then put it into play at post time.

Most serious players have no difficulty locking themselves into a room for a couple of hours of hardcore handicapping. They analyze the chances of each entrant, project how the race will be run and, some, even compile an accurate betting line that should tell them when a horse offers the proper value to be worth a play. They retire for the evening with a pretty good idea of what they think will happen, what events look playable and which should be passed.

Then they get up in the morning. They check out the newspaper to see how their local handicapper sees the day's races. They read the editorial stuff in the FORM. They get more opinions from other public prognosticators. They go to the track and talk to their handicapping friends. They overhear someone who has talked to a certain trainer who thinks his horse can't lose the 4th. Suddenly, they have five or six different opinions crowding their memory bank and, often, the first horse to be tossed out is the one they loved the previous night. You know the rest--their $22+ winner rolls home and they've haven't got a dime on it, even though they had the horse as a legitimate 4/1 shot on their betting line.

It's perfectly OK to seek out information from a wide-variety of sources, as long as it helps you make an intelligent decision on how to approach any given race. It's even OK to interview (or read) a reliable source for help in events that never did come into focus during the handicapping process should you need help in multiple-type wagers like the Pick Six or Pick Three. However, when it comes time to make your major plays for the day, they should be YOUR plays.

This can become very difficult if you attend the races with other good handicappers, especially if you happen to believe them to be more-successful long-term than you are. Example: You've made your top selection 5/2 in a certain race and it's going off at 5/1. However, your well-respected colleague is in love with something else that you made 5/1 and is holding at 7/2 on the board. He goes off to bet and you become torn to smithereens over whether he's right and you're wrong. It's essential, however, that you stand firm and make YOUR play. If you lose and your buddy wins, don't go into a deep funk. Instead, discuss the race with him afterwards and try to learn what he saw that you didn't. Perhaps there is something to be learned here that you can profit from down the road. Perhaps you'll come away feeling you made the right play, even though it lost.

Many people find the written word particularly difficult to ignore. There it is in black and white, it must be true. A certain public handicapper is strong on the 8/5 favorite, writes a sentence saying why this horse "should" win and goes on to the next race. It all sounds so convincing that you think betting your 8/1 overlay is a waste of money. After all, this fellow is being paid real cash to perform this public service and you're just somebody with a real job who enjoys handicapping. Again, don't listen.

Most public handicappers are just like you. They like the game, have enough knowledge of the process to do an adequate job and have enough ego to get a charge out of seeing their names/pictures in the paper. This, however, does not necessarily qualify them for "expert" status.

Mentally, media pundits come in all shapes and sizes. Some are quite diligent, very honest and sincerely try and do a good job. Others just do it for the money. Some bet their own money, others don't. However, the vast majority believe it their job to try and pick the "most likely" winner of the race and are "logical" to the hilt. I once heard one of these individuals on a radio talk show who said it was his job to

pick the favorite for the good of the public rather than put his true choice on top. One thing for sure, taking an "obvious" approach is a one-way street to financial failure.

However, these handicappers can serve a useful purpose. After I handicap a race, I like to see how my contenders stack up selectionwise in both my local newspaper and in the pages of DAILY RACING FORM. If we agree, I generally figure the race to be unplayable because my thought process was either too logical or the race is simply too obvious to be bet. However, if my top contender is well down the list (or not mentioned at all), I tend to get excited. With very few exceptions, public handicappers will generally mirror the thinking of the "common man" which can point out probable underlays even more accurately than the program's morning line odds.

The lesson to be learned here is that anyone who has read this far has what it takes to be a newspaper handicapper. That makes YOUR opinion as good as any you may read anywhere. If you learn from your mistakes and don't repeat them, you will eventually become a winning player. Believe it.

Today's Racing Digest Handicapping Tips

CATCHING THE BIG ONE

Although animal rights' groups may take offense at the analogy, there are many ways to skin a cat at the track.

Traditional handicapping where the player compares strengths/weaknesses in various categories between entrants is fine. Occasionally, using these time-honored concepts will even turn up an overlay like **Big Find** in the 3rd at Santa Anita Jan. 14. He was the fastest horse via numbers, he was fresh, he was coming off a bad trip, he was handled by a top rider (Stevens), he drew the perfect post,

was proven at the level and figured to beat his six rivals in that bottom-level allowance sprint at 6-1/2 furlongs. Personally, I made him 6/5 on my betting line and an overlay at 8/5. He won by two and paid nearly $9.80.

Obviously, not everyone saw the horse in the same light I did. It doesn't matter. Every decent handicapper comes across a 'Big Find' every so often--a horse that just seems like it's going to win, does and pays a nice price. It's just not always that easy.

My guess is that only about 40% of the races offered around the country on any given day can actually be handicapped. Some are too hard, others are too easy. A good handicapper should be able to correctly pick about 33% of those races, but those winners will often be the favorite or a short-priced second choice yielding underlay results. It takes true patience and self-control to wait around for horses like **Big Find**, and then courage to back them with the conviction required to make all the waiting worthwhile. There are still a few pros around who can sit on their hands all day at the track and pass all 16, 18 or 20 races offered in a dual simulcast situation, but not many.

'Action' drives the rest of us, for better or worse.

Employing handicapping angles isn't a bad way to go should traditional methods lead you into a blind alley. The best time to pull out the angles is when you have no strong opinion in a race other than the favorite looking 'false' or 'vulnerable'. Keeping in mind that angles should only be used when the price is right (6/1 or more is a good guideline), here are some of my favorites;

1. THE SPECIALIST -- Look for horses that have MULTIPLE wins at today's track AND today's distance. Any runner that has posted a 15% success ratio over its career in both categories can be dangerous, no matter what its current form. A recent example: **Danebo Stampede** (1st/SA/Jan. 8). He was 4/23 (17%) at SA and

was 7/19 (37%) at a flat mile. He paid $43.60 in a 10-horse scramble for bottom-level claimers.

2. PROFESSIONAL LONGSHOTS -- Some horses simply have a way of confounding the wagering public while running best when least expected and vice versa. A runner with two longshot wins in its current PPs qualifies. I use 6/1 or higher as my criteria for a 'longshot'. For example, **Adoracion** (5th/SA/Jan. 17) had scored at 6/1 Dec. 30 and at 9/1 Nov. 2. She returned to the claiming ranks to win easily over $20k sellers at $17.

3. THE PREPPED HORSE -- It's no secret that the majority of horses tend to begin positive form cycles in their 3rd through 6th start following a layoff of 45 days or more. The shorter the rest, the quicker they may be ready to pop. Look for signs of improvement in the most recent races (early speed or a good finish) combined with a distance/surface switch and, perhaps, a class drop to seal the deal. **White Hot** (7th/SA/Jan. 17) fit the pattern nicely when making his 4th start back after being off from May 10 to Nov. 19. He ran a solid 2nd on dirt Jan. 3, was moving back to his preferred turf footing and was dropping from $80k to $62.5k. He won at $33.60 against a competitive field of grass horses.

4. THE SUPERIOR WORKOUT -- An exceptional work going five furlongs or longer within seven days of a race is often a very positive sign. I consider an 'exceptional' work to be in the top 10% of the drills for the distance on the day's tab. Although he didn't win, **Tryumphant** (6th/SA/Jan. 18) qualified. He worked 1:13.4h (2nd fastest of 39 moves) six days before he ran and nearly upset heavy-favorite **Moonlight Meeting** at 50/1 odds before settling for 2nd at $17.20 to place. A horse like **Fearless Pirate** (4th/SA/Jan. 18) could have been considered on this angle after drilling a brisk 46.4h (1/10) bullet five days before his downhill turf start. He returned $44.60.

5. STRANGER DANGER -- Shippers from out of state making their California debuts are often worth a long look. Basically, they are 'x' factors in the handicapping puzzle and are generally overlooked by 'blood-and-guts' players who prefer to have a 'look see' at the newcomers before taking them seriously. By then, it's often too late. **Ms. Forte** (2nd/SA/Jan. 19) came in from New York to win at $15 while **Shot MD** (5th/SA/Jan. 15) ventured west from Iowa to post a $43.20 surprise. In the latter's case, the public opted for Turf Paradise shipper **Alluwish** (9/5) since he had been running close to subsequent So Cal stakes winner **Rio De Oro** in Arizona. He was badly beaten in another case of the 'obvious' losing to something more subtle.

6. SECOND-TIME-STARTERS -- Many firsters are simply not prepared for the craziness that goes on at the gate and race poorly in their debuts. However, when they drop in class second time around, better things happen. Look for horses that were well beaten but face easier and get an equipment change and/or Lasix second time out. If they flashed some speed or were well backed (10/1 or less), so much the better. **Satire (**5th/SA/Jan. 14) was a perfect example. He was 'no factor' debuting with straight maidens Dec. 21 but dropped to $32k and added blinks for start #2 (and even had the highest Fast Fig in the field). He returned a healthy $30.80.

Angles like these simply give the action-seeking handicapper an effective way to kill time between their 'Big Finds'. Investments should be kept minimal, but sometimes they return maximum-type results.

<p align="center">Today's Racing Digest Handicapping Tips</p>

<p align="center">WELCOMING THE STRANGERS</p>

Back in the late 1960's when TODAY'S RACING DIGEST was just getting off the ground, founder-publisher-editor Bill Saunders coined the phrase, "Stranger

Danger" to identify horses from out of the area that might be overlooked as contenders because the wagering public was not familiar with them or their talents.

It's a concept that continues to merit attention, especially at Del Mar where new barns and new horses ship into California looking to enjoy the sea breezes and the high purse structure. During the first 15 days of the new meeting, handicappers who did nothing other than seek-and-bet on these newcomers have enjoyed some profitable hunting. No fewer than 17 animals qualifying as "Stranger Dangers" have won, many at big numbers. For the purpose of this article, we are looking at runners that last participated at a track outside the SoCal 'loop' in their most recent assignment. Some came from the Bay Area, others from out-of-state and some from out of the country. Here they are with their payoffs, last track and trainer:

JULY 22 (2) - GARVE ($6.80) - SARATOGA - MOTT

JULY 25 (5) - SICY D'ALSACE ($84.80) - EUROPE - N. CANANI

JULY 26 (9) - SIR KEN ($42) - GOLDEN GATE - HESS

JULY 27 (4) - SIR RETSINA ($9.20) -- GOLDEN GATE - SUMJA

      (8) - CASINO KING ($20.20) - EUROPE - TRUMAN

JULY 29 (1) - RAISE A REBELETTE ($16) - GODLEN GATE - SOTO

      (3) - ZOELU ($22.60) - CHURCHILL - CROSS

      (5) - ZONE LORD($12.40)-PLEASANTON - HOLLENDORFER

JULY 30 (5) - JADE HAWK ($18.60)-BAY MEADOWS-SAHADI
JULY 31 (7) - YOKAMA($4) - GULFSTREAM - MOTT

AUG. 1 (10) - CLURE ($10.20) - BELMONT - MOTT

AUG. 2 (8) - SUBORDINATION ($7.20) - BELMONT- SCIACCA

AUG. 3 (4) - CHEROKEE ASSEMBLY ($19.40)-LONE STAR - HESS

AUG. 5 (7) - DOWTY (3.40) - GULFSTREAM - MOTT

(8) - CHIKALIS ($24.40) - PLEASANTON - J. GARCIA

AUG. 6 (7) - SOPHIE MY LOVE ($15.60) - CHURCHILL - MANDELLA

AUG. 7 (7) - COCKTAILS ANYONE ($11.20) - EMERALD - CHAMBERS

With the exception of the winners from Hall-of-Famer Bill Mott, all but two of these newcomers returned more than $11. Some were coming off layoffs, others shipped in fit-and-ready off their out-of-the-area efforts but virtually all were overlooked by the public. There is no systematic way to handicap horses of this sort but it's enough to know that your wagering competition will often throw them out, simply because they don't know them. As always, if the masses are doing one thing, successful players are doing the other.

Here are a few hints that may get you on to a winning stranger:

(1) Accept their recent form at face value. If they have been winning, or running bang-up races recently, they may well continue to fire in their new environs. Zone Lord, Sir Retsina and Cocktails Anyone fit into this category.

(2) If they have been freshened but are training well after joining top-class local outfits, expect them to fire. Sophie My Love, Sir Ken, Jade Hawk and, to a lesser degree, Raise A Rebelette fit into this category.

(3) A European that races quickly after arriving in this country is always dangerous. Sicy D'Alsace started less than month ago in France before winning the San Clemente Stakes at boxcars.

(4) After a thorough review of their true credentials, should the local contingent appear on the soft side, the newcomers generate additional appeal.

(5) If the stranger performs well in its local debut (even if they don't win), you may want to back them again next time, too. It takes many handicappers some time to

accept these horses. Ask for Speed, for example, shipped in from Hastings Park in Canada to pop at 14/1 on the Hollypark turf in her first start for Poco Gonzalez yet came right back to win the 7th at Del Mar Aug. 3 as a 6/1 overlay in a five-horse field.

(6) Pay little, if any, attention to the published Beyer Ratings on these shippers. For whatever reason, these figs simply aren't as advertised when it comes to comparing circuit switchers, especially when they come from smaller tracks. Certainly, there is a risk factor involved when backing an 'unknown' but it appears to be one that is more than compensated for by the built-in 'value' potential of these contenders. It's not cheap to ship horses around the country and you have to believe that the connections involved believe they have a shot to do some damage if they go to the time and trouble necessary to play on someone else's homecourt. Often, they are right.

Editor's Note: After this article ran, the parade of stranger-dangers continued, Silverbulletday ($3.40 - Aug 8), Anet ($2.80 - Aug 10), McKay ($25.00 - Aug 12), Musgrave ($7.00 - Aug 15), Cut For Luv ($37.40 - Aug 16) and Sweetnsour Gold ($20.60 - Aug 21).

Today's Racing Digest Handicapping Tips

THE "WHAT IF" STRATEGY

Everything is not always as it may seem on the surface, especially at the races. Horses that "figure" to win often get beat, even in the biggest events featuring the best of the breed.

When faced with what appears to be a dominating horse in a major stakes race, many value-oriented handicappers (myself included) get lazy and, more or less, concede the contest to the chalk without first asking some very significant questions. I call this the "What If" strategy. Recent examples at Del Mar include

Silver Charm in the San Diego Handicap July 25, Fiji in the Ramona Handicap Aug 1 and, to a lesser extent, Hawksley Hill and Labeeb in the Eddie Read Aug 2.

Handicappers should always employ this approach in rich stakes races featuring a much-ballyhooed and talented runner that figures to go to the post a strong, odds-on favorite. Any time the "hype" horse fails to measure up on even one of the following questions, players may want to consider how they would play the race on the *"What if this horse wasn't in the field"* basis. First, the questions to ask about the favorite----

(1)--Is the horse coming off a subpar effort that might suggest he's tailing off from the rigors of a campaign that initially earned that big 'rep' ?

(2)--Is the horse proven over today's surface, whether it be the main track or the turf course?

(3)--Is the horse in for a prep designed to leg it up for bigger, more-important confrontations down the road?

(4)--Will this horse be disadvantaged by today's likely pace scenario?

(5)--Is this horse trying a new distance significantly different from what it's been running?

(6)--Has this horse been unjustifiably been crowned a future star by the media?

Any horse entering a major stakes race off an unexpected loss might get a "yes" for question #1. Silver Charm's defeat at 2/5 odds in The Stephen Foster Stakes at Churchill Downs just prior to his poor effort in the San Diego is a case in point. After getting the lead into the lane that day, the grey drifted in noticeably and didn't finish at all in his traditional 'straight-and-strong' manner. That grueling trip to

Dubai and his all-out finish to win the race may well have knocked him off his feet and left him vulnerable against top-class stakes company down the road.

Unless, horses have run well over today's surface, there is always a lingering doubt about how they will adjust which would earn a "yes" for question #2. There was no denying the power of Fiji's performances at Santa Anita and Hollywood Park prior to the Ramona but she had never tried the quite-different Del Mar turf course and was being asked to win by her backers at 2/5 while having gone seven weeks without running. Pretty much the same scenario existed the next day with Hawksley Hill and Labeeb (who was scratched for one of his wing-dings at the gate).

No horse wins EVERY race and top horsemen don't really ask them to go all out to win 'minor' events. Even top-class runners may be "given" a race in added-money company, though they may win without doing their best work. That's generally the stable's hope but, basically, they are looking for a performance that will gear their runner up for bigger races on its schedule. That's question #3.

Marquee stars are regularly expected to overcome negative pace situations but often can't because they are facing tough competition. Speed types expected to encounter severe pace pressure or fast-finishing closers catching paceless fields become vulnerable in question #4. A poor post position may also be a factor here.

Two-year-olds that run fast sprints in major events and become the "new" heir-apparents to Secretariat may falter when asked to carry their speed around two turns at eight or eight-and-a-half furlongs. Running style and pedigree analysis are crucial in this area. Then, of course, there's always that question about getting 10 furlongs, the distance that has sunk so many in the Kentucky Derby. However, it's just as tough a puzzle when handicapping longer events on turf or dirt for established older runners. A "yes" answer in question #5 runs up a red flag.

The racing media tend to fall in love with potential stars faster than the public but after reading article after article about a certain "great" horse before it has earned that praise can sway the typical player into believing what they read. These stories will be filled with backstretch quotes about the awesome talents of the horse in question, generally from trainers, jockeys and exercise riders who "want" it to be true more than anything else. Remember, that "greatness" is earned on the track and cannot be bestowed by a press boxer with a lap top. Unless, this horse has done it and done it with abandon, the answer to question #6 may again be 'yes'.

Once these questions have been addressed, you will have a better idea of exactly how these horses truly stack up. Again, if you get even one positive response, you may want to handicap the race as if the favorite is not in the

field and see what you come up with. One thing is certain, you will be dealing with some strong contenders at very high odds.

In the recent cases of Fiji and Silver Charm, they did turn out to be suspect at the prices which opened the door for some big payoffs. The Mud Route/Hal's Pal Exacta paid $116.80 in a five-horse San Diego Hcp. field. The See You Soon/Sonja's Faith Exacta returned $410.60 when Fiji didn't have the best of trips. Unexpected bad luck is something else the favorite may have to deal with to win which leads to yet another question--"What if so-and-so has a lousy trip they can't overcome". That one's not included in our list because it can't be answered before the race. Still, it's a legit concern and enough of one that should cause handicappers to think a long, long time before investing at 40 cents on the dollar.

Superstars don't always lose, of course. On the other hand, you don't have to go back all that long to remember Cigar at Del Mar or Gentlemen finishing up the track in the Santa Anita Handicap and wondering how you would have bet the other contenders in race if those horses hadn't been entered. It can be damn hard

to pull the trigger against these icons but, on the other hand, you don't have a chance to hit the bullseye if you don't shoot the gun.

Today's Racing Digest Handicapping Tips

FRESH-AND-READY CLAIMERS

Everybody loves to pick a price horse. The "rush" is something special when you walk to the window, bet on a 15/1 shot and watch it win like it should have been 2/1.

Some longshots, of course, simply can't be picked by a traditional handicapping approach. If they didn't appear to be flawed on the surface, these winners wouldn't be going off at long odds. Most, however, do show subtle signs of impending improvement but they go unnoticed by the crowd in their rush to 'pick a winner'. They flock to the obvious horse(s) who come off good races, have the highest last-out speed figure, are proven at the class/distance/surface, have top jockey/trainer connections and are picked by every public handicapper sitting in the press box. It requires imagination to come up with winning price plays as well as the strength of conviction to go against the flow.

Certain types of races provide the seeker of price with better opportunities than others. Today's Racing Digest will give you hints with their stats detailing the performance of favorites under various conditions, but the most fertile territory for longshots are claiming events for older horses. These races feature runners that have been around awhile, know what it's all about and are often raced into shape while showing an improving pattern in their recent efforts. Let's consider a "longshot" to be any horse going off at odds as high or higher than the number of horses in the field. In a '10'-horse lineup, then 10/1 is a longshot, etc.

Last week at Santa Anita and Golden Gate Fields, they ran a total of 25 races for "open" claimers (conditioned events up north, races for 3-year-olds and Starter or Optional Claimers were not considered) and six of them were won by longshots. Did these winners have anything in common? Yes, lots. They were fresh, they were in form and they had won a race without going too far back in their past performance lines. Here they are:

APR. 1(2ND/SA) - QUEEN GEN ($18.80): This mare was 7/1 in a six-horse field of $40k claimers going six furlongs. After being off for more than 10 months, she had run 2nd against $32k sellers Mar. 6, so she was fresh and in good form. She had won seven of 32 lifetimes starts, including her fifth start back.

APR. 1(6TH/SA) - AGATE ($32.20): In a race for 4-year-olds only, he was dropping out of a pair of Cal-bred Allowance events and into a $20k seller. He had raced five times after a two-month layoff in the fall (fresh), had been in the hunt for six furlongs of his last race going seven panels (in form) and had broken his Maiden in his third race back.

APR. 1 (3RD/GGF) - RAPID STREAM ($17.80): A $10k router where Dr. Giggles opened at 4/5 coming off two breezing wins at Bay Meadows, Rapid Stream was a legit alternative in the seven-horse field. He was in the fifth start of a comeback for Larry Ross after being off 3-1/2 months, ran a solid 2nd in his last effort and had won a conditioned $12.5 race three starts back.

APR. 1 (5TH-GGF) - THREE NO ($35.60): A nine horse field of $16k sprinters. Three No had one race after being off nearly two months and ran a solid 3rd in that race for the same tag as today's price. Although not known for winning races, he had scored in his fifth start back, so he was 'in form' and had a recent victory.