

SECRETS TO PICKING WINNERS

By Ivan Bigg

Manitoba bettors are lucky. Assiniboia Downs sells programs that make it easier than ever to spot contenders in races anywhere in North America. Even for first-time bettors.

How easy? Here's an example: A group of seniors, most of whom had never played the races, were shown what to look for in a program during the first 10 minutes of a seminar. After that lesson, most of them easily spotted and picked a \$63 horse (for a \$2 win bet)!

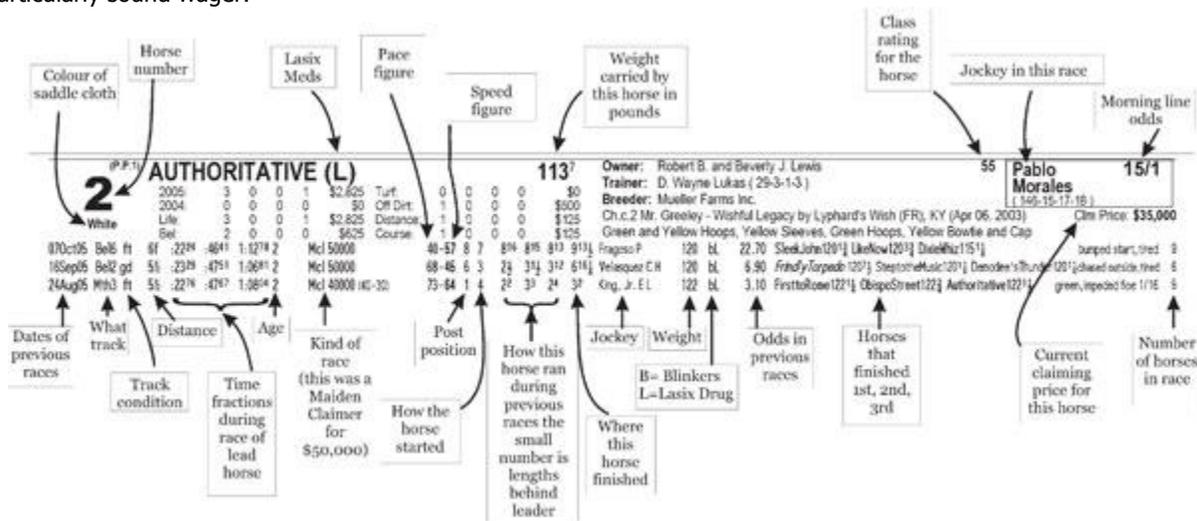
Here's the secret:

Every program the Downs sells, whether it's for live racing at the Downs or in Kentucky or Hollywood or any other North American thoroughbred track, has two bold-face numbers in the past-performance lines of every horse that has been racing. The first bold-face number shows whether the horse likes to be on the early lead. (It's called the **PACE** figure.) The second bold-face number shows the horse's overall **SPEED** and ability to pass other less-speedy horses as they near the finish line.

So, simply, here's what to do. First, look at the top of each race to see the **distance** of the race. Is the race six furlongs (3/4 of a mile) or is it a mile? Then look for the horse that has the best bold-face numbers at that distance. Generally speaking, a horse that has a PACE number far ahead of others (by 20 or 25) will be a big threat to get an easy, early lead and stay in front all the way to the finish line. That's the horse the seniors picked for a \$2 win bet that paid \$63.

However, if horses in the race have pace numbers that are fairly close to one another then look for the horse that has the biggest second number, the SPEED number. That kind of horse will wait for the leaders to wear themselves out challenging each other in the early going, then kick past them in the stretch.

Below is a typical-looking past-performance chart for a horse. Note the PACE and SPEED figures in bold. Remember: look at the top of the page first to see the distance of the race. Then find the horse with the best pace and speed figures at that distance. If BOTH pace and speed figures are higher than any other horse in the race, that is a particularly sound wager.



WHY DOES THIS INFORMATION GIVE YOU AN EDGE?

- (1) A lot of race-tracks don't sell programs with this important information
- (2) A lot of bettors rely only on the one-dimensional numbers printed in the Daily Racing Form. That's the tabloid-style newspaper that has only one bold-face number in each past-performance line. That is a SPEED rating, called a BEYER number, because veteran horseplayer Andy Beyer originated the concept. So bettors only using the Racing Form don't have early PACE figures to show them that a horse may get an early easy lead and wire the field. That's the edge that program-users at the Downs get.

CAN IT BE THAT SIMPLE?

Often it is. But, of course, nothing works 100 per cent of the time in horse racing. However, the big payoffs bettors often get when they bet horses with a huge PACE number offsets losses when the horse doesn't go wire to wire.

DOES THIS SYSTEM WORK BETTER IN SOME RACES?

Yes. This system works best for horses that have never won a race. That is called a Maiden race. That information is shown at the top of the race, describing who the race is for. Also, this system works best when horses are sprinting. Six furlongs (3/4 mile) is the most common distance, but that also works well at 5 or 5 1/2 furlongs, which is just less than six furlongs.

WHAT ARE OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER?

(1) The classier the horse, the more consistently the horse will perform up to the standards of his previous PACE and SPEED figures. Generally speaking, the size of the purse of each race will tell you whether it's for classy horses.

(2) The least consistent horses are horses in "claiming" races for older horses (ages five and up). These horses, especially at "B" tracks, are in and outers. The owners don't care if someone buys their horses at the specified claiming price. Those horses have their good days and bad days. Bettors are well advised to stay away from betting those kinds of horses to win. Remember especially that fan favourites lose overall 66 per cent of the time.

(3) Pace and speed figures aren't quite as reliable in races over the grass (turf). Turf races are indicated by a capital "T" with a circle around it.

(4) Good trainers win more races than bad trainers so looking at a trainer's win-rate, printed in the program, will add to your overall feel for the race. However, good trainers are often over-bet and, in that case, it is worth betting against their horses.

(5) Smart bettors can get a huge edge on the public by looking past mere past-performance lines for each horse. These things can suddenly improve a horse's performance:

a. Claimed from a recent race. If there's a little "c" in a horse's past performance line, it means the horse has a new owner. Think about this logically. If you just invested a bunch of money in a new horse, what would you do? That's right, you'd pull out all stops to make that horse a winner to prove your investment was a good one. So...look for improvements in a just-claimed horse, especially if the horse was claimed by a great trainer.

b. Equipment changes. If a horse now has blinkers (indicated in a note at the bottom of the all the horses in a race), an early-pace horse stands a better chance of going to the lead and going all the way. Blinkers concentrate the horse's attention on what's ahead. If blinkers have been taken off, that also is a good angle, especially if a horse has been prone to show a lot of early pace and has tired in the late going. Taking blinkers off may relax the horse and he'll save his energy for a late closing kick.

c. Change in distance. A horse that shows early quick PACE at a mile or more and usually tires and is now racing in a sprint race is an excellent bet. That horse will likely have more stamina to give a late kick at the shorter distance.

d. Workouts. Here's a trick hardly anyone knows about. Look at a horse's last three workouts. If a horse has identical times at identical distances two workouts in a row, that horse is a solid bet, regardless of the odds, which may be huge. For example: 4f 46.4; 4f 46.4. Or if the first and third works are identical, but the middle one is not (but is a different distance), that also works. The workouts are listed at the bottom of each horse's past performances.

e. Is the horse male or female? For some reason, female horses with early PACE ability perform better after a layoff than male horses. So a fresh female horse with a big PACE number has a good chance of going wire to wire.

(6) Looking at trainer statistics in the Daily Racing Form will also give you an edge. At the bottom of each horse's past performances in the form you'll see stats on how good a trainer is in various areas: bringing a horse back off a layoff, adding or taking off blinkers, racing on turf, etc.

(7) For first-time starters, reading comments in the Daily Racing Form about that horse's daddy (sire), will often give you a huge edge. Some sires produce offspring that win first time out at a high rate. Anything 14 per cent or higher is big.

MONEY MANAGEMENT

Leaving the races with extra money in your pocket is more a matter of attitude than of ability to pick horses. Without a betting strategy even great horse-pickers can leave with depleted pockets. A winning strategy usually contains these elements:

(1) Pre-race preparation. It is wise to look through programs looking for races you love a lot. As mentioned earlier, the most consistent type of race for PACE and SPEED figures is a maiden sprint race.

(2) Having two pockets. One pocket is for placing bigger bets on horses you love. The second pocket is for tiny bets on other races you must play only because you need the action. You may even add a third kind of bet: the \$10 show parlay bet. Bet 5 to 10 races starting with \$10 show and putting all your money on the next show selections, etc. This low-risk bet often leads to big unexpected rewards.

(3) Patience. The pros will wait and wait and wait then plunge big. This may not be for you but this is something to consider if you take the game seriously.

WHERE TO GET EXTRA INFO

Monthly horseplaying seminars are held at the Downs. Watch for them. Get The Insider, a weekly horseplay/fun stuff report emailed each Wednesday. To receive The Insider, email theinsider@assiniboia Downs.com Also, many great, fun-to-read books have been written about horseplaying. Watch the Daily Racing Form for new titles. Get previous titles at bookstores and at the library.

Enjoy the challenge! Maybe you, too, will eventually agree with this motto of many horseplayers: A bad day at the races is better than a good day anywhere else.

How much can you win?

The sky's the limit because Assiniboia Downs pools are now common-pooled with U.S. pools. So if Assiniboia Downs bettors are better than players in other parts of the continent, money will flow from those places into the pockets of Manitobans.

A local grain farmer, for example, won an entire Win-4 pool at Keeneland race track in Kentucky, winning \$73,000.

This was not possible until the laws were changed in the U.S. to allow direct Canadian participation in U.S. pools.

Also, it's not necessary to spend a lot of money to win big money. Two businessmen in South Dakota bet a combined \$8 on a Breeders' Cup Pick-6 a few years ago and collected the entire \$2.4 million pool.

One of the most important attributes for any horseplayer is patience. Betting the same amount on every race is generally a recipe for losing. Good players will wait for races they like a lot and bet more money on those races.

However, they will pass or bet very tiny amounts on races in between that they don't have a strong opinion on.

It is generally recognized that five per cent of horseplayers are professionals who make a living at the game.

It is also wise to keep in mind that race favourites lose 66 per cent of the time. Experienced bettors will therefore look for horses with not-readily-apparent angles that will enable the horses to beat the favourites. Such angles could include: horses purchased by a new owner, horses with equipment changes (such as putting on blinkers or taking them off) or horses moving from a long race into a short race after showing a lot of speed in the long race.

At the end of the day, win or lose, most horseplayers love what they do and have adapted the motto: "A bad day at the track is better than a good day somewhere else." We hope you have a good time at it, too.