

Assiniboia Downs

How to win Biggly

Story and photo by George Williams

They've been getting together every Saturday morning in the off season at Assiniboia Downs for six years trying to win a fortune. They call themselves the "I Won Big" group.

Their biggest score to date was \$10,000. That's been enough to keep the group and their fearless leader "Ivan Bigg" digging for longshots, making up rules and refining their handicapping skills in an effort to make a big score.

The 30+ plus regular handicappers in the group hail from all gallops of life and range from 20 to 80 years of age. They run the gamut when it comes to handicapping skills. Some know just about every angle in the handicapping arsenal and have been playing horses since they were teenagers chasing tickets on the tarmac. Others are just a nose beyond the pin-the-tail on the donkey stage. But all are equally accepted in this group.

Old horseplayers love to explain to new punters their tricks, traps, highs and lows when it comes to betting horses, and every once in a while one of the newbies will teach those who propose to run with the big dogs in Vegas how to pick a winner with angles nobody can understand. It's a strange mix at times, but it has an unflinching chemistry.

"Our biggest win came in the Pick-6 at Gulfstream Park," said Bigg, a newspaper columnist by trade. "We've had some bad beats and 'just abouts' and missed horses we shouldn't have. So we've made up a set of rules based on our experience. When a horse fits one of the rules it becomes a 'must play' and has to be included on our tickets. 'Added-up numbers' has been one of our best performing rules, especially in maiden claiming races. We take the horses' last race finish position and its position at the first call and look for the lowest number."

The seemingly simple "Added-up numbers" rule has handicapping logic behind it, generally pointing out horses that have shown some interest early in race and sustained that interest to the wire. Most handicappers know how important early speed and willingness to try are in maiden claiming races, yet this angle has produced some huge longshots.

Each member of the group generally contributes \$20 into the pool and Assiniboia Downs adds \$5 to each \$20 share. The betting pool group can be anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000 and the group plays primarily Pick-4s, Pick-5s, and Pick-6s, which would be too expensive for most individual players. Pooling their money gives everyone a chance at a big score. The group also plays Superfecta tickets.

"Superfectas are my specialty," said Bigg, who has cashed

three Superfecta tickets of over \$20,000, each. "We can lose on our Pick-4s and Pick-5s and make our money back on the Superfectas. But the best thing about the group play is the camaraderie. Before, people used to keep to themselves and they would play in small groups of two or three. This group brings together players who normally wouldn't give the time of day to each other."

Assiniboia Downs provides coffee and muffins for the 10:30 a.m. Saturday morning get-together and all are welcome. Crispy bacon treats, while rare, are the group favorite.

"If we make a big score, which we qualify as three-to four-times our money, we get crispy bacon treats," said Bigg. "The group loves their bacon. It sometimes seems like it's even more important than the money. Some players can't always be here but they still go in on the tickets and we send them a photo of the ticket. One guy emailed me after a big score one day and asked me to save him some bacon."

The group is divided up into smaller units of 3-5 people and each unit is responsible for a certain race. The units include a mix of handicapping skill levels, but as the play has continued over the years even the newer handicappers have learned enough from the larger group discussions to make intelligent selections. A small group of 5-6 experienced handicappers take the group selections and craft the final tickets.

"I do it just for the fun and the bullsh**," said retired bricklayer John Whitehill. "There's always some good-natured ribbing and a little bit of teasing that goes on and that makes it fun. If we win, it's a bonus, and if we lose, it's only \$20. It's not as easy as people think. I learn some new angles, although I probably don't remember them all."

Husband and wife Dave and Anne Champion have been part of the group since its inception.

"It's a good group of people," said Anne, who added that she and her husband both know how to handicap and have their own methods for picking winners, but that they also agree with the rule system.

"He (Ivan Bigg) is into jockey-trainer combos now," said Dave. "There are some good handicappers in the group and we're the odd couple. You can be single and come, but it's nice for us. Something we enjoy doing together."

"We can't afford to play the large tickets on our own," said Anne. "This gives us a chance to do that and we also bet a few small tickets on our own."

Occasionally a new attendee doesn't fit in with the group. Kindly wrath soon reins in such black sheep. Either that or they discover for themselves that they just aren't group-style players. You have to be able to compromise.

"Some people just aren't a fit for whatever reason," said Whitehill.

"Who knows," he laughed. "Maybe I'm one of them. But I'm coming until someone tells me I can't."



The "Final Ticket Makers" of the I Won Big group gather 'round (fearless leader Ivan Bigg sports the cowboy hat)