

Racing Maxims and Methods of Pittsburg Phil -- by Edward Cole (1908)

CHAPTER 4 -- Handicapping

Many systems are employed to handicap horses. Some are successful while others are decidedly faulty. In my opinion the old-fashioned way of handicapping by comparison is the best - which is to draw conclusions from weight and class standpoint, time being a minor consideration. As the official handicapper takes weights for a foundation for his work, why should a different system be employed by a player of horses? After the official handicapper has allotted the weights to be carried in a race, it is then that the player is put to the test, and it is his judgment against that of the official handicapper. If he can find a flaw in the official handicapper's work, he will probably find the winner of the race.

The player has a great advantage over the official handicapper, for the reason that he has the opportunity of considering the present condition of a horse, when the handicapper must not let such a factor enter into his calculations. When he starts his work, he bases his calculations on the best performance of every entry, and to him all entries are supposed to be in the best physical condition possible.

For instance, when Mr. Vosburgh, the Jockey Club's official handicapper, gets the entries for the Suburban and Brooklyn Handicaps in January, and the races are not run until June, there is no chance for him to consider anything but the bare facts of horse against horse. He judges on their past, and so allots the weights they are to carry, that, in his opinion, the race will finish in a dead heat as it were. He endeavors, in his calculation, so to weigh each that all will finish together. Condition enters so much into such races as the Brooklyn and Suburban Handicap, however, that out of an entry of seventy or eighty horses sometimes not more than ten go to the post. This is not always because the owners are not satisfied with the weights allotted, but on account of sickness or mishaps of some kind that have come to the horses during their preparation, which prevents them from being sent to the post. It is rarely that more than fifteen per cent of the entries in the classical handicaps go to the post, and not more than from seven to ten per cent in the big stake races. This shows the value of the condition of a thoroughbred when called upon to race. I mention this as a fact-that the condition of a horse in a race has considerably more to do with his winning, or losing, than the weight he carries. In other words, a horse might be allotted 126 pounds in a handicap, and he might be beaten by a moderate horse carrying only 110 pounds. This does not mean that the moderate horse will always beat him at that difference in weight, for the condition of the two horses might reverse matters very decidedly a week or two later. A horse usually carrying top weight in a handicap could not win with 90 pounds up if he is not in condition. Sysonby once ran a dead heat with Race King. Such a result could not have been possible with both horses at their best.

For instance, a horse in the Brooklyn Handicap carrying 110 pounds, might beat the top weight carrying 126 pounds, yet in the Suburban, the condition of the top weight would be so much improved that he would run away from the horse that beat him in the Brooklyn. If any of the

readers of this volume will go through the records of the classical handicaps, they will see that such cases have frequently occurred. This demonstrates absolutely that the player of horses, if he is a close student of the disposition of a horse and its condition, can almost tell the official handicapper what horses should be prominent at the finish with average racing luck. This is because he knows which horses are in the best condition.

Horses are the same as human beings where condition is the test of superiority. If a first class prize fighter, foot runner or athlete of any kind, is not in good physical condition, he can be defeated by an inferior man, where if both are in the best condition possible there would be no question which would win. It is exactly the same with horses, and picking the winner of a race rests entirely upon the ability of a man to tell when a horse is in good condition and when he is not. If one good horse is not at his best and there are inferior horses which are at their best, they will beat him in nine cases out of ten. Hence the condition of a horse is of much greater importance to a person who is playing the races, to adhere to the cast iron rule of some persons who say: "because this horse gave that horse fifteen pounds in actual weight and beat him he should beat him again today." While he might do it, it is not a sure thing, as the reverse condition of the two horses might change the result. From this cause many people attribute the result of a race to crookedness, when it is nothing more nor less than the good condition of one horse and the lack of condition of another. The trainer may not be at fault, he has possibly done the best he could and possibly believes his horse to be in excellent condition. But horses cannot talk. They cannot tell you when they are not feeling well, and they do not always give any outward sign, though they occasionally do. I have had horses which I believed to be in the most perfect condition, yet they ran most disappointing races. I have seen horses work for a race and the work has been so impressive to my mind that I have made very large wagers on them; yet two days later in the actual race, when they should have run up to their work, they have fallen far behind. Many times a very fast work before a race does more harm to a horse than good. From this a very common saying has arisen among the trainers: I worked my horse this morning 1 1/4 miles in 2.06, and he looks as if he will win sure." The other trainer will reply: "You have just about made him run his race to-day," and it has been proven times out of number, the fast work of two days prior having dulled his speed.

To get down to actual handicapping, you begin with the old fashioned scale weight, wherein it is prescribed that horses of certain ages shall give horses their junior so much weight at certain distances, and at different seasons of the year. This scale is the real foundation of handicapping. After a race in which these horses have met, the handicapper will decide for himself which horse is the best under the scale condition, and in future races he will put on or take off weight as he deems fitting to bring them together, or to make them run a dead heat as it were.

A man like Mr. Vosburgh, who has had years of experience and has the value of every horse that he has seen run at his finger ends, can so allot the weights that to the casual it will be mystifying. I have seen handicaps of ten horses in a race where it was next to impossible to tell which would win out of the ten. This is where the man who is a judge of the condition of a horse and of his disposition has an advantage over those who have not acquired such knowledge. It may be that

some of the horses will not run over the track prescribed, while others have performed creditably over it. Some horses will not carry their weight as well as others. Then again jockeys will make a great difference in the running of horses. All these things have to be considered and every horse must be treated separately and his entire disposition analyzed. Some things will be found in his favor and others will be found against him. After drawing a conclusion as to the most probable winner, one of the most important items is to draw a mind picture of how the race will be run_ for there are many times that some horses are aided considerably by the way a race is run. while others are killed off early in the race.

One thing can be depended upon positively-if there are two or three very fast horses in a race, one or two of them will quit before the end of the journey if the route is of reasonable length. In other words they will race themselves into the ground, generally because their jockeys have no better sense than to be carried along with the early pace in a race. It is in such cases that an intelligent rider will sometimes win on the third or fourth best horse. This is where an intelligent jockey has a great value, for he profits by the mistakes of others-and lest I forget it, in future talks, you can say right here that seventy-five per cent of the inconsistency in horse-racing, which is generally put down to criminality, is nothing more nor less than lack of intelligence on the part of the jockeys. Many times a handicapper is deceived in horses through their poor showing in races. This usually is when horses are going back after having reached the keen edge of condition. Sharp, practical trainers will then run them three or four times, knowing that they are not at their best, the intent being to get the handicapper to reduce their weight in races. Then there will be a lapse of time before such horse is entered again, but he will appear on the list with possibly the same weight to carry as he did in his last race. Instead of being in poor condition the rest he has had will have done him good, and he will be in perfect condition.

It is in such cases that killings are made. In speaking of killings many are attempted but few are accomplished, for the reason that while one man has been conniving to make a killing with one horse, there are others that have been playing the same game, and frequently three or four killings are attempted in the same race, when only one can be made. The others will be losers.

If a player can, through close observation of the market, find out that three or four different horses are being heavily played, it is a good time to test his skill as a handicapper to decide which in his opinion is the best horse of the number, and speculate accordingly, and if he cannot determine for himself exclusive of tips, stable information and the like, which is the best horse, it is best for him to watch the race without speculating, for he will not confine his attention to the one horse he is playing, but divide it between all the horses concerned, and he may see something during the running of the race that will stand him in good stead upon some future occasion, when the same horses meet again, as they frequently do after a short interval.

I have made several big winnings during my career. The biggest I ever attempted was on Parvenue, but unfortunately I did not win one-fifth of the money that I should have won, owing to a technicality. I owned Parvenue and he was a good racehorse, so good that I never really knew how good he was. A race came up at Monmouth Park for which he was eligible and I

prepared him for it. Prior to my purchase of him he was a common sort of horse, but he improved much after I bought him; consequently few knew very much about him, or even entertained the thought of his improving sufficiently to beat good horses, but he had shown me in his work that he could do almost anything I wanted him to do. He looked such a real good investment to me that I had five or six men in the pool rooms of New York, of which there were many in those days, and each one had from two thousand to four thousand dollars to invest. When the betting opened, Parvenue was quoted in some books as high as forty to one, and my commissioners told me afterwards that they placed some money at those odds, and that the lowest price they took was fifteen to one. At the track i also had several commissioners betting my money, and the lowest they got was twelve to one. Just before it was time to go to the post there was some trouble in the steward's stand. A horse, I believe it was Dagonet, had been carded on the programme to carry a certain weight, when according to the condition he should have had a much lighter or heavier impost. The mistake was not discovered until nearly post time, and the stewards decided to scratch the horse. All bets were declared off, and a new book was made. This, of course, upset my calculations entirely. It at once disturbed the equilibrium of things. The men in the pool rooms, who had bet my money, had to wait in line to get their money back again, and when the new prices were put up Parvenue was quoted at much less odds owing to the big commission having been placed all over town, and becoming common property. The same condition of things existed at the track. My commissioners there had to wait and get their money back before they could bet it again, and this time when the prices were quoted, the highest I got was twelve to one. Much of the money was placed back again on the horse by my commissioners in the city and on the track, but nothing like the original amounts. It is unnecessary to say that Parvenue won all by himself, and after all the trouble and excitement I won over \$45,000. I was so disgusted with the turn affairs had taken that I really never reckoned up how much money i would have won on the race had not the bets been declared off the first time, but it would have been an enormous sum.*

[I interviewed "Sam" Doggett, who rode Parvenue in this celebrated race, and he gave me the most lucid description of "Pittsburgh Phil's" confidence in the horse and his coolness under such nerve straining conditions. He had thousands upon thousands of dollars at stake when he gave Doggett instructions how to ride. In the language of Doggett: . . . " `Pittsburgh came into the paddock and said to me, 'Sam, you are riding a pretty good horse. Just let him rate along, and when you get to the head of the stretch let him down for a few strides and you will be in front. After you get there do not show him up too much.' Why, if he had been my horse and I had four hundred dollars depending on him I would have won by a sixteenth of a mile if I could, and I think if I had ever known the amount of money he stood to win on that horse I do not really know what would have happened, but I did not know that he was betting more than one hundred dollars on him. You talk about a cool and collected man, 'Pittsburgh Phil' stood alone. He knew more about horses and horse racing than anyone and seemed to have phenomenal knowledge and confidence in his own ability. The Editor.]*

In handicaps the top weights are at a disadvantage always, unless they are very high class horses, for the reason that they have to do so much more work than their opponents. It is not advisable

for the top weights in a long race, say at one and a quarter miles or longer, either to make the pace or follow it too closely; for if there is too much speed in the early stages of the race it will affect the horses that try to keep up with the leaders; hence it will be seen that the top weights are generally mixed up in the middle of the bunch or in the rear if they happen to get off badly, which causes them effort in threading their way through the field, especially if it contains anywhere from twelve to sixteen horses. They have to be very intelligently ridden to avoid interferences from horses that are dropping back, and many times they have to run outside three or four horses when they are making their run, which is very costly, for a horse loses considerable ground in running outside other horses. Then there is always the chance of their being jumped on or cut down in a race. In fact there is so much racing luck against horses, especially those carrying the heavier weights, that they are many times beaten through bad luck.

I once went over the year's record of Ethelbert and found that he lost thirty per cent of his races through bad racing luck-races that he would have won under normal conditions. This rule would not apply to a horse like Hamburg, or any very high class horse, because a real high class horse is good enough to go to the front from the start, or attain such a position in the advance guard that he will not be bothered nearly so much as a horse like Ethelbert, which was not a high class horse, but merely a first class handicap horse.

All these things have to be considered well when seeking for the winner of a handicap, or in fact any other kind of a race. Many a time a good horse is beaten in the spring of the year through lack of condition. There are few trainers who can send a horse to the post the first time out for a big race, in perfect condition. The horse may appear so to them, but they lose sight of the fact that a horse that has been trained for the race in private, should be fit to run a mile and a quarter if he is expected to run a mile race. I mean by this, that when a horse has not had a race for some months and has been prepared for a hard struggle he loses a certain amount of nervous energy while walking round the paddock, while being saddled, in the parade going to the post and in waiting for a start.

The surroundings of a race track have a great effect on some horses. They are high strung and of nervous temperament, and they waste a whole lot of energy and a great deal more the first time out after a let up than they do after a race or two. There is nothing like racing horses to be assured of their condition. One race for a horse is equal to two or three private trials. It will do him more good. It will make him hardier and it will relieve his nervous condition considerably.

A horse can be compared to an actor in this regard. An actor going to produce a new play, while he has all the ability and is satisfied in himself that he is perfect in every detail, will invariably falter at some stage or another the first night, but he will improve after that first night's experience. So it is with the majority of horses. There are some horses that seem to be devoid of nervousness. They do not fret or worry about anything. McChesney is an example. There was a horse that walked around the paddock like an old cow. He would not lose an ounce of nervous energy in a year under any condition. If he were keyed up to run one mile and a quarter he would

run one mile and a quarter. You could bet anything that he would run the race that he was ready for. McChesney is an exception in this regard.

It is in such cases as these that the "clockers," the man who gets up at three o'clock in the morning to watch the horses working, is a necessary adjunct to a successful horse player. If he is a good man he will tell you exactly what the horses are doing and how they are doing it. It is not always a question with him that because a horse has worked three-quarters in 1.13 he should beat a horse that has only worked three quarters in 1.14. The horse that has worked in 1.13 has possibly received a hurried preparation, and being of a nervous disposition possibly would lose a certain amount of energy before a race, while the horse that has been worked in 1.14 has been steadily prepared and possibly carried heavier weights while working than the horse that worked in 1.13. It does not follow that because a horse has worked three-quarters in 1.13 that he will run in 1.13 in his race. He may do it much better alone than in company. It is in such cases that the disposition of a horse is the deciding factor. Then again a horse may be fully extended that has worked in 1.13, while the horse that worked in 1.14 had considerable in reserve. It is only the expert "clocker" who can discover such things, by his constant watchfulness.

I have found that track conditions are of the utmost importance. Some horses will run good races over certain tracks, while in the same company under similar conditions on other tracks they will run very disappointingly. A horse will run a good race at Sheepshead Bay while at Gravesend he will run quite the contrary.

There also are horses that like the shape of some tracks and not others; but I attribute this change of form to the action of a horse more than anything else.

There are many horses that cannot make sharp turns, while others are exceedingly nimble.

For instance, Lady Amelia can run around a hat, while a great big horse finds it difficult to make a good turn. Hermis can run on any old track. He is a good horse. The same can be said of Beldame. In fact good level headed thoroughbreds can be depended upon almost anywhere. It is only what I term sucker horses that book their going and have likes and dislikes.

The Bennings track, for instance, has a very deep soil, and it takes a mighty muscular horse to win there. It needs a horse with strength. A strong horse with only moderate speed-a rater I might say, would beat a much faster horse at Bennings for the reason that the fast horse would become leg weary, and the strong horse will get him when he is nearing the finish.

On any track like Bennings where the going is deep and of a sandy nature, it is a good system to play horses that have shown a liking for such a track. If you will look over the records you will find that winners repeat frequently, while those which are defeated will be defeated almost continuously.

I won many wagers through studying the disposition of horses on certain tracks. Nothing could be more noticeable in this respect than the running of some horses on the grass track at

Sheepshead Bay. It is a recognized fact that some horses improve many pounds over the grass course. One in particular, Decanter, you could always depend upon to run a good race over the turf.

There is another important item in regard to the turf course at Sheepshead Bay. It has a peculiar formation, and one of the fundamental principles in trying to figure out the winner is the early speed of a horse. Early speed is essential and a horse possessing that commodity has a much better chance to win over the turf course at Sheepshead Bay than a slow beginner, as the trailing horses usually go very wide on the turns owing to their not being banked the same as they are on the main courses. While horses do win over the turf course and come from rear positions they have to be much the best.

Another fact that I discovered in horses racing over the turf is that they will go further than they will over a dirt course. They do not get tired so quickly. A sprinter, which has been used to running three-quarters of a mile, will go a mile over the turf invariably.

A horse accustomed to running one and one sixteenth-mile races, will hold out for one mile and a quarter on the turf. I was never satisfied as to the cause of this but thought possibly that the footing was better and did not cup out with the horses like it does over a dirt course, which is naturally trying on the muscles, as it is to a man who tries to run over the sand at the seashore.