

Computer Handicapping Primer

by Joe Mainardi

It's hard to believe that it's been fifteen years since the "Thoroughbred Horse Race Analyzer" came out. It claimed to be a "revolutionary" handicapping tool... NOT!!! It was a form of "Chinese water torture" -- made in Hong Kong, no less -- that turned a simple mistake into a total disaster. My first real experience in "computing" was a Radio Shack programmable calculator and a binder full of charts. When computers became affordable, I was able to convert my charts and formulas and charts into a computer program for my personal use. Another stroke of luck -- I was looking for a tax write-off -- turned the program into a successful commercial product. You know it as **Hor\$ense**.

In today's fast-paced world of simulcasting, you need to take advantage of all resources available to you... including those computer based resources known as handicapping programs. "Why?" you ask. Let me tell you why. There are three major reasons you should use a computer handicapping program: speed, accuracy, and emotions. Let's take a lengthy look at the speed and accuracy aspects.

Serious handicapping involves a myriad of complex variables, and a good program must analyze the controllable handicapping factors. I believe there are nine basic controllable factors in thoroughbred handicapping: SPEED, PACE & FINAL PLACING, TRIP, PAST CLASS, CURRENT CLASS, (horse, jockey & trainer) IN-MONEY RATIOS and WORKOUTS. Let's take a closer look at each factor.

SPEED - While it is easy to judge speed under equal conditions, a track variant difference of five points or a horse "shipping" in confounds most handicappers. Imagine how hard it is to estimate times for horses that are stretching out or shortening up. Good handicapping software should be able to convert past performances of almost any race at any track in North America. Any decent program should be able to analyze any past performance (PP) between 5 furlongs and 1 1/4 miles, and effectively adjust *Daily Racing Form* Speed Rating and Track Variant, Beyer Speed Figures and others... for sprints, routes, turf and main track races. Adjustments based on trouble calls and jockey weight differences should also be part of any decent handicapping program.

PACE & FINAL PLACING - A horse's relative position within a PP is only part of the pace story. You also need to know how that pace fits the race you're handicapping. Good handicapping software will automatically make these adjustments by comparing the pace of the PP against the estimated position of the race being handicapped. A program should also adjust for field size differences and route/sprint switches.

TRIP - My view of trip handicapping is simple. I see it as a horse's ability to run the necessary times at each call, to get the pace needed to win. An effective program is one that will compare pace-based positions against speed-based positions. A good trip analysis should point out the best positioned horses.

CURRENT CLASS - Have you ever tried to get a handle on the real value of a \$10,000 claimer at your track versus a \$20,000 claimer from somewhere else? Any handicapping program worth its salt should be accurate to within 10% of actual purse values, and it should offer annual track class updates for nominal charges.

PAST CLASS - In some races, you need to know the past class of the horses. The most accurate way is to weight the number of first through fourth (or fifth) place finishes, and then divide by the amount of money won. Good software should provide accurate past class calculations.

IN-MONEY RATIO - This is a formula that can be applied to a horse, jockey or trainer. Dividing the weighted number of WIN, WIN/PLACE, or WIN/PLACE/SHOW finishes by the number of races run will produce these ratios. This is a must for any handicapping program.

WORKOUTS - Have you ever tried to figure out the REAL value of a workout? It gets more complex when you add in the workout pattern, days between workouts, "gate" workouts, "dogs" up, handily versus breezing and track condition. This option should exist on any program.

Okay, let's stop with the information overload for a minute, and look at what it means to you. To manually perform all of the above tasks by hand, you could easily spend up to two hours on a ten horse race! Do you really spend that long handicapping? *Of course not!* You cut corners. You leave out PPs, skip the non-contenders, and so on. Even with all the cheating, you still spend around thirty minutes handicapping a race by hand. . . and you've lost a lot of accuracy.

On the other hand, a good handicapping program will offer different levels of interaction. This ranges from entering all of the data by hand to using data files (from BRIS and others) to do all the work for you. This can take anywhere from thirty minutes to three minutes per race! Using a handicapping program, you get much more accuracy in the same amount of time OR you get much more accuracy in one-tenth the time!!! Either way, you've gained an edge over manual handicapping.

But what about the emotional part of handicapping? A computer program doesn't know -- or care, for that matter -- that you recently won \$80 betting a certain horse. And it doesn't remember that a horse in today's sixth race cost you \$200... nine months ago. Handicapping programs deal with data, and they should not accept human emotions as input. By nature, man does not forget emotional events, but successful handicapping cries out that they need to be suppressed. By factoring out emotions from your initial handicapping, you can reduce your chances of making a bad bet on a bad race.

With the affordability of computers, there is no reason to leave yourself behind in the thoroughbred handicapping game. Before you know it, every serious handicapper will use a computer handicapping program to do the work their predecessors did by hand. The money you make on good bets and the money you save on avoiding bad bets will far exceed the cost of most programs.