

Computer Handicapping – Tournament Time

By Joe Mainardi

Hi! Long time, no see! Sorry for being away for so long, but I've been a "Soccer Dad" nearly full-time for the last few years. So, now that my daughter is done with soccer, I'm ready to jump back in with both feet. What better way than to go to a tournament! Back in 2000, I went to my first tournament, and I've learned SO MUCH since then – I've been back twice more, and I'm heading out to the Gold Coast Classic (in Las Vegas) later this month – that I thought you might want to know some "ins-and-outs" of tournament play. I hope that you'll find my experiences interesting... and hopefully valuable. Let's get rolling!!!

Pre-Tournament Routine

To be competitive, you only have two choices: have a plan or wing it! Okay, it's not that simple, but it's not too far off. Those that have a plan sometimes have to "wing it", but it's almost always within the structure of their plan. So, since I don't wing it – and there's no real strategy in doing so – I'll try to help you with a plan.

The first step is to come up with a plan, and then practice with your plan. The easiest way to do that is to create a similar atmosphere for handicapping. Since the upcoming tournament involves 15 wagers a day from six tracks for three days, my plan is to look at my old plan and see if it still works... but I'll do it at home over the next few weekends. I know from experience that I'll need about four hours a day to do the initial handicapping, and then another 90 minutes during each day's races.

Tournament "Rules"

The biggest part of the plan is to lay out the schedule you're going to use – hint, leave PLENTY of slack time – and then go over it until you're sure that you have left yourself enough time... knowing that you can't plan for everything. I'm very detailed, so I've built out a timetable that breaks down just about everything (okay, bathroom breaks are NOT factored in). Here are the things that you don't want to forget: downloading the races (if you're not using a computer, you now have an extra five minutes to work with each day, as the tournaments typically supply the forms), ranking the races, checking the weather (both the night before and the morning of the races), morning scratches, re-ranking your selections, and "outside activities" (it's Vegas, after all).

Tournament Travel

My first year, I focused too much on not ticking off my wife and daughter (I'm just such a giver!), so I agreed to catch a plane on the morning of the tournament. Not such a good idea, trust me. So, for the upcoming tournament I'll leave LA mid-morning on Wednesday – driving in the desert during the hottest part of the day (say WHAT?) – so that I can arrive in time to register early and get settled in. When to leave is a matter of choice. Originally – again, with my wife and daughter in mind – I ran out the casino doors as soon as the last race was over. Now that the family is older, I'm planning on staying Saturday night and driving back early on Sunday morning (you have to leave early to beat the Sunday traffic crush that leaves Vegas en masse around lunch time).

Registration & Settling In

Okay, so you're still stuck on why I'm driving past the aptly named Death Valley in the brutal heat – you have to check out the gigantic digital thermometer when it gets really hot! – just to get to Vegas the afternoon before. Well, the voice of experience tells me the following: [1] I want to register early, because all of the good seats are gone by Thursday morning (I always get stuck with my back to the bank of TVs that are five feet away from me, and I always get bumped into about a thousand times a day!), [2] I'm grumpy from the four hour drive no matter what time I get there, so I might as well have as much extra time to unwind and get an early start on handicapping, and [3] umm... it's Vegas (remember those "outside activities").

Handicapping "Rules"

You MUST have rules for how you're going to prioritize your races. I use **Hor\$ense** for my handicapping, so I can move pretty quickly through the race cards. I have twelve basic ranking criteria for races (would I normally play the race, is there an outstanding horse in the field, etc.), and then I complicate it by adding the morning line odds (I'm looking for 5-1 or more, but I don't always get enough races). Unless there's rain everywhere or a lot of scratches, I will come up with enough horses to play.

The "Tournament Proper"

Now, the fun begins!!! I start every day with a shower – yes, I do worry about my hygiene (nothing I can do about the other people) – and then a visit to any number of web sites where the early scratches are posted. I have my computer with me at all times – they have plugs underneath the tables – so even a really late scratch is no problem. Get your wagers in relatively early, since your "funny money" bet doesn't affect the odds. And don't get sucked in by the shine of someone else's plan... I did once, and never again!

It's all about YOUR plan at this point, and the only "wing it" moments I have are at the end of each day... on the first two days, it's because I still have coupons in my hand (because of scratches or rainy conditions) and I'm running out of races, but on the last day it's usually because I'm not in a position to cash just yet and I need a few LONGSHOTS to get there. Don't forget to enjoy the freebies – continental breakfast and buffet lunches are included, plus all you can drink (no, really... I didn't know that until the second day of my THIRD tournament!) – and don't be afraid to strike up friendly conversations with your tablemates once in a while.

Post-Tournament Review

Once you're done, the only thing left to do is to go home and figure out what you did right this time and what you could do better at next time. Hopefully, you did enough right to pay for the tournament and the trip... that's always my first goal. Now if I could just put it together for all three days, I just might bring home the BIG BUCKS!!