



Fans a racing fans confront “handicapping mysteries.” There is not fraud against us, just things most fans do not understand. The rules of racing allow many to occur. A race can have a horse that was not in the race to win. “Quit pulling my leg,” you say. Well, just a little pulling. Training a horse for a race is part science, part experience and part luck. At times, the horse is tuned and ready to race, but there is not a race that suits him. What does the trainer do? Find a race. The experience and maturity would benefit his training strategy, even though he is not in the race to win. When the gates open most fans, especially those that wagered on him believe he is in the race to win. Sometimes, not so.

An informal pool of racing fans at the Saratoga racetrack revealed that most fans were unaware that this scenario happens regularly. How can that be, isn’t that fraud against fans in the pari-mutuel system? No, it is legal. For example, a horse trains well and the connections are looking for a mile race on the turf, his preferred racing distance and surface. The track racing secretary does not create one, so the horse is ready to go, but no race in which to run. But there is a race carded for 1 1/16 miles on the turf. So, they run, as part of his training regimen, not necessarily to win.

Horses are entered in races for reasons other than to win. The tracks racing office needs to fill races sufficiently to make for a competitive race that will draw a nice pari-mutuel handle. Since the track assigns barn space, some trainers are compelled to cooperate and enter horses that may not be perfectly ready to run that race. At times trainers use a race as a prep race for an upcoming race that they really want to win. The best antidote for any of these situations is to carefully read the past performances including the conditions for the race. You are trying to answer the question, “is this horse suited for this race”?

Another mystery is a horse as an animal not a machine. There are many factors that affect whether a horse is interested in running in the race. Think about it in human terms. A bad night’s sleep, fear, interest in competition that day all play into the horse’s attitude to run. As Rich Migliore has said on Fox Sport that “110-pound jockey is not going push a 1200-pound horse around” [paraphrased]. It takes finesse and psychology to get that big animal to perform as wanted. Even though the horse’s past performances and figures say he is a contender, only the horse knows for sure. To a skilled horseman or handicapper body language in the paddock or during the post parade will help.

One that the Horseracing Integrity and Safety Authority will eventually resolve is racetrack rules that are different in states. A jockey violation in one state may not be a violation in another. Although less common some states may allow specific medication while others will not. Racetrack configuration and surface are different from track to track. Climate and weather patterns may affect a race. A good example of the latter is running on the turf at Saratoga or running at Kentucky Downs' undulating and curvy turf course.

With a heavy emphasis by tracks on gambling and handle, the public handicappers play a significant role in the fan enjoying a day at the races. However, we must remember that these handicappers make their selections a few days before the race is run. A lot can happen in this period that will affect the validity of their picks. Weather, scratches and track conditions are not fully known by them at the times they submit their selections for publication. Following tip-sheets or newspaper picks blindly can damage a day at the races, not to mention your wagering bankroll. Public tips can be a good starting point but, fans must tailor them to be used at post-time. An assignment not easy for the casual fan.

These and many other "mysteries" confront the casual fan as they go to the races. Many will remain unresolved when the gates open, even for the astute handicapper. That is what makes racing a wonderful puzzle to solve. That is what makes the sport of racing so wonderful. Understanding these mysteries will come only after the last horse in a race crossing the finish line is why they run races. How exciting.