Sprint Handicap Testing Zone: My Race/Horse Analysis Checklist

What follows are some structured notes that will hopefully help my thought process when analysing these tricky sprint handicaps.

These are not exhaustive and I will no doubt add to them. There may be important areas that you think I have missed – your suggestions are always welcome. I suppose they could also be used for any handicaps. (with some slight tweaks for the jumping game)

I will keep these notes as a handy companion and reminder of the factors I should be considering, while trying to commit it all to memory!

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Selecting the Race

- All Age Handicaps Only (3yo+ and 4yo+)
    - My focus is on those over 5-6.5f
- 8 or more runners.
    - This is for EW purposes, with at least 3 places to aim at
- Short Price Favourite
    - Ideally a short price favourite that you judge to be too short that potentially creates more value elsewhere. They may have won 2 or 3 on the bounce and you may judge that the handicapper now has them, for example.

That is the easy bit. But, I suspect sticking to that formula is a good place to start. Now we may have a race or five to have a look at.

Where to Start?

Trying not to look at the market I will go through the runners in race card order. For each horse we are asking a number of questions…

Horse Related Questions

1. Has the horse previously proved a liking for race conditions
   - Distance/Going/Class/Course/CD
   - Number of runners / Days Since Run / Month / weight / track 'surface' (flat to very undulating) / headgear/tongue tie
2. Has the horse conclusively proved that they may struggle in conditions, and can be crossed off on that basis? (eg. may have poor form on good to firm, or proved that they don't stay)
3. What is the horse's winning conditions?
4. Is the horse well handicapped?
   - Have they won from a similar or higher mark in the past?
   - Have they placed off much higher marks, not beaten far and maybe in better races?
5. Is the horse unexposed?
   - Are they still in the 'could be anything category'? Could there still be more to come?
   - Have they yet to prove they can't handle conditions, or may well thrive in them?
   - Have they had a break? - returning after some time off the track, where they may have strengthened up and matured further.
   - Some information on the sire may be useful, esp if trying a new distance for the first time, or first run on that going.
   - These types should not be easily dismissed, not based on the horse's 'form' alone. Weighing up that unexposed profile against not having the experience for a big field handicap.
6. Is the horse in form?
   - Have they been running well, knocking on the door. Sprints are a game of fine margins and an in-form horse is no bad thing. A repeat of recent runs may be enough.
7. Why would the horse improve on recent runs?
   - In the context of the horse's 'winning conditions' have they been running over the wrong distance, on the wrong ground, had trouble in running, not been fit, haven't liked the track, race didn't pan out as expected? (hold up horse in a crawl, for example)
   - Were they poorly drawn LTO, suffering from track or pace bias. (if all the winners of their last race were drawn 1-5 say, and they did best of those drawn 10+. All winners raced handily throughout and they were held up)

8. IS THE HORSE DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT?

- Dropping In Class
  - i. Not just from C3 to C4 say- but also a drop in the ratings band of race…

    - Class 1 Listed Handicaps 96-110+
    - Class 2 Heritage Handicaps, Handicaps of 86-100, 91-105 and 96-110 and Classified Stakes 0-95
    - Class 3 Handicaps 76-90 and 81-95 and Classified Stakes 0-85 and 0-90
    - Class 4 Handicaps 66-80 and 71-85
    - Class 5 Handicaps 56-70 and 61-75
    - Class 6 Handicaps 46-60 and 51-65
    - Class 7 Classified Stakes 0-45

- Change in going
- A move in distance
  - i. Ie are they dropping to 6f having breezed into a race over 7f LTO before fading when hitting 1 furlong out.
  - ii. Likewise is it their first go at further – does their recent runs/breeding suggest this may be beneficial?
- Headgear? Tongue Tie?
  - i. First time or reapplied headgear that has been off for some time. They may have old winning form with it on.
- Number of runners
  - i. Possibly linked to running style. A horse who likes to lead and now gets a small field with no pace pressure (having been forced to do too much in a large field) A horse who likes to be held up but may not have had the fast, collapsing pace, that they require.
  - ii. Linked to this – in a bigger field, higher class races, it is no bad thing to have proven form at further- especially on stiff tracks
  - iii. On the flip side- if you stay 6f well in a fast run, big field race – it isn't impossible that you may stay further in quieter waters- a smaller field 7f race say.
- A longer than usual break, or making a quick return.
  - i. Is the rest pattern unusual? Does the days rest suggest a problem, time to develop, get over a hard race, or may have had an op – wind op or been gelded?
- Jokey Booking
  - i. Is this a 'significant booking'?
    - A 'big name' who hasn't ridden the horse before, who you may not associate with the yard
    - A decent claiming rider for the first time
    - A jockey who has a good relationship with the horse, has ridden before, but may not have been on for some time.
    - Is it there only ride on the card? This may be insignificant.

9. Entries
   - Does the horse have any entries coming up? Are these significant?
   - Are connections planning on winning this race and following up under a penalty before reassessment?
   - Did they have multiple entries and the trainer has decided this is the most winnable?
10. Form
   - Have their recent races worked out well, produced more winners/placed horses? -horses now running at a higher level etc.
   - Did they bump into a progressive rival LTO? (This horse may have won well but they may have beaten all the other exposed horses well enough)

Trainer

- Is the trainer in form?
- What is the trainer's record at the track? (esp in handicaps)
- Does the trainer have a record in the race, have they won it before?
- What is the trainer's record when teaming up with this jockey, in all handicaps and at the track? (possibly important if a change in jockey from last run)
- Has the trainer had the horse long? Are they from another stable and could be improved for a change in surroundings/training methods?
- Have they travelled far? How many runners on the card/in the race?

Race Set-Up / Pace / Draw

- Which horses like to lead, track the pace, run mid division, or be held up?
- How will this pace set-up suit the different runners?
   - Is there a lone front runner who could get away?
   - Is there an abundance of pace where it may be best to be held up?
- The Draw?
   - Are there any positive/negative draw stats, also linked to the pace set-up?
   - Are there positives – ie front runner drawn low/against the rail?

Other Considerations

- Times?
   - It may be possible to compare race times for those who have won in similar conditions before, esp CD winners on the same ground. This could help give some further context to the runners.
- IF a horse is still growing/maturing/finally finding form – previous efforts in certain race conditions may be meaningless. This could be especially true of stamina or going questions. A horse may have poor form on its two runs on soft, but may be a different horse from when they tried it last season (as an example)
- Is there a horse that just looks like they may 'out-class' the opposition?
- How competitive is the race?
   - By this stage it may be clear if too many have a chance and it is best leaving. Or so many are unsuited by race conditions that only a couple really stand out etc.

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Right, I think that is it for now. I dare say I have missed the odd thing, or knowing me something major that was just too obvious for my own thought process!

Do feel free to leave a comment or drop me an email with any factors that you consider important, that I may have missed.

At this point it is about an assessment of the horse's chance against their odds. That is easier said than done and not something I have mastered as yet. My results for 2016 for advised priced against BFSP show I am not too bad, but there is plenty of room for improvement.

Many 'value' hunters would start with the biggest price horse first and see if a valid case can be made, in the context of their price- working their way down. The bigger a horse is in the market, the more you may feel comfortable about overlooking the odd negative/question.

By this stage you may have a clear idea of who you want to back and then a case of assessing their price.

This is an area I need to improve on so I won't be imparting any wisdom when it comes to 'value' for some time. In fact, I may ask a guest contributor to share their thoughts on that subject.

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Good Luck

Josh

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