



*Iron Maidens Thoroughbreds
Handicapping The Maiden Race
April 7, 2011*



Tomorrow is opening day at Keeneland race track and that means the most precocious of this year's two year old crop will make their debuts. I know, I know. Everyone is in the midst of Derby Fever and too busy to worry about a bunch of early maidens. Besides, those races are impossible to handicap, right? Wrong.

The majority of handicappers avoid maiden races like a communicable disease, but there are ways to determine live horses in these races and doing your homework can potentially pay off with big bucks.

Pedigree is one of the most important factors in handicapping early maiden races. A working knowledge of which sires and damsires get winners first time out is invaluable. To make things a little easier for the poor beleaguered horseplayer I have created a list of precocious sires whose offspring win at 18% or more first time out.

Don't forget to look at the records of the dam and siblings. Many past performance papers and software include information on the dams and siblings of the first time starter. Dams that have blacktype (stakes wins) or siblings with stakes victories are a strong sign of class, especially if they won as juveniles.

Become familiar with the auction abbreviations, such as OBS, KEE, BARR, FTF. Look at the sales prices of two year olds in training. Speed sells and these babies do well in the very early maiden races.

Pedigree isn't the only tool in the arsenal of the handicapper contemplating a maiden race. Below are a few dependable rules to remember.

1

First, a first time maiden in the 1 post is usually not a good bet. They tend to break in or become intimidated on the rail. Some will be used coming out of the gate in sprint races to grab the lead. A good horse can sustain it, but most will fold in the stretch. Additionally, a horse breaking from the far outside post will often break to the right, losing valuable ground while his jockey sorts him out.

2

Second, a horse adding two or more furlongs against contenders with previous experience at the race's distance is suspect unless the horse has several solid stamina works of at least 5 furlongs or longer. That just sounds like common sense, but you'd be surprised how many trainers don't give their horses stamina works and prefer to rely on long gallops to get their horses fit. Yes, it works in England, but the race fractions are typically slower and their horses only sprint the final three furlongs.

3

Third, look at the works. A horse that has fired a current or second current 4 furlong bullet when there are at least five or more works at that distance is live, especially a first time starter. A horse with a "live" work pattern (fast/slow/fast or slow/fast/slow) of 4 furlongs and up is also live. This is especially true of horses from conservative barns that normally don't win first time out. If their horses are working in the top five, it's a good bet the horse will finish in the money. Often these horses go off at attractive odds.

4 Fourth, the majority of maidens tend to regress, even slightly, in their next race out. This doesn't mean they cannot win while regressing; it's just something to be aware of when the horse is facing winners for the first time. I find this to be true even with horses that have taken two or three tries to break their maiden. Some horses, mainly stakes caliber, will actually move forward off of their maiden race. How do you find them? Look at their works. Look closely at the breeze pattern of a horse making its first start after breaking its maiden. If the works aren't equal to or faster than works before he broke his maiden, it's a good bet he won't move forward.

5 Fifth, look at trainer and trainer/jockey stats. As noted, some trainers don't win first time out. The reverse is opposite too. Some trainers excel with precocious babies. Unfortunately, everyone knows who they are and often their horses go off at short odds.

6 Sixth, be wary of a horse attempting two or more new things in a race. Shipping, farther distance, first time facing winners and new surfaces should all be taken into account. How many times have you seen a horse who has broken their maiden impressively, then ship in for a stakes race at a longer distance, go off at short odds and finish out of the money?

7 Seventh, there is nothing like experience. In a field with mostly first timers, if there are a couple of horses with experience, keep an eye on them. Even if they finished out of the money in their first attempts, they are better prepared than the rest, especially if they are working well in the morning. This holds true with a horse that ran out of the money first time out, or found trouble during the race, then didn't start again for more than a month. Often the baby needs time to grow and will be better next out.

8 Last, - but more important than the other rules - races aren't won on paper. Learn the language of the horse.

In the world of internet gambling, you are at the mercy of the cameraman and can't always see the horses in the paddock or post parade, but when one bets a maiden race, it is crucial to see how the horses are behaving. Or not. A little sweat never hurt anyone, especially on a hot, humid day. A first time runner looking like a shampoo commercial can be tossed. So can the horse with the rolling eyeballs that looks like he'd rather be anywhere but here. Look for a horse that has a bounce in his step, he's eager, on the muscle (dragging his groom all over the place) yet not kicking, rearing or causing general havoc. There's a shine to his coat and you can tell he's having a good day.

