PLAYING POKER WITH WOODBINE'S $200,000 PICK 4

by Ed DeRosa

The question surrounding the $200,000 guaranteed Pick 4 on Sunday at Woodbine is not what to do with Wise Dan but what kind of ticket structure is necessary to turn the 1-to-5 he will be in the win pool into a better return in the Pick 4?

And because betting on horses is a pari-mutuel game, the key to answering that question is as much about who I like as not only who others like but also how they will bet.

I think Wise Dan wins this race 80% of the time, but that means he loses 20% of the time, too, and there is some temptation to go against him because he will be on more than 80% of the Pick 4 combinations.

If you go against Wise Dan and give yourself a 50% chance to pass through the other legs then you are 39-to-1 to complete the sequence ($.5*.5*.2*.5 = .025$ or 2.5% or 39-to-1). Based on my handicapping, that kind of coverage requires two horses in the Northern Dancer (race 8, leg 1) (Forte de Marmi and one other of your choice), three horses in the first-level allowance for Ontario breds (race 9, leg 2), and three horses in the maiden nightcap (race 11, leg 4).

The cost of this ticket is $18 at Woodbine's $.20 minimum or $90 for a buck. At our 39-to-1 odds this sequence would have to pay $702 for $.20 or $3,510 for a buck to offer fair value. That's a nice payoff but is it practical given the presence of 4-to-5 Forte de Marmi to kick things off? I don't think so. What happens when we single Wise Dan? The chance of hitting is now 9-to-1 ($.5*.5*.8*.5 = .1$ or 10% or 9-to-1) and the cost is $3.60 for the $.20 minimum or $18 for a buck.

This sequence would have to pay $32.40 for $.20 or $162 to offer fair value. Again, Forte de Marmi makes it tough to get to that number, but what if we beat him? The win parlay on three $10 winners plus a $2.40 winner (Wise Dan) is $150 for a buck, and since the Pick 4 routinely pays more than the parlay, it's safe that we'll get the payoff we need if we make it through this sequence.

But how will others play it? The $.20 minimum is an interesting wrinkle because most players use it to give themselves more coverage, which actually adds the potential for value on more likely outcomes because that more coverage comes uniformly (i.e. most players just add horses to the same ticket they would have played at $.50 or $1).

I think most players are far more likely to try to beat Forte de Marmi and spread in other races than they are to spread in Wise Dan's race. This makes beating Forte de Marmi but still keeping a narrow focus on tickets the best bet for value on Wise Dan in the pick 4.

Race-by-race picks are below, but my overall approach is that if I'm using Wise Dan then I don't want Forte de Marmi or the top choice in the last leg as well. I'm still only 50% to get out of those races while trying to beat the favorite, but I think I've given myself a 75% chance to get through race

9, leg 2, which improves are chance of success to 15% instead of 10%. We still may not get the 17-to-3 fair odds return on all combinations, but we'll certainly at least double our money on a 1-to-5 shot, and that's a risk I'm willing to take given the chance for even bigger payoffs as well.

THE RACES AND BET:

In the Northern Dancer (race 8, leg 1), Forte de Marmi is the most likely winner but not by enough that I'm going to use him at all. If he and Wise Dan wins there's no chance for me to make money, so what's the point of even using him? Turkish is overmatched, but the rest are right there with Irish Mission and Stormy Len legitimate pace threats stretching back out to 1 ½ miles and Hotep as an interesting chance to get first run. I'll also use Hempstead North and Perfect Timber because the goal is beating Forte de Marmi, not picking the winner.

In race 9 (leg 2), I'm hoping #4 Pugsley gets ignored off his recent turf tries because this is a horse who clearly likes the course and distance. #s 1, 2, 3, & 9 fit too.

Race 10 (leg 3) is the $1-million Ricoh Woodbine Mile, and I'm all in on Wise Dan, who holds a speed and tactics advantage over these and for good measure will note that his Prime Power is 21.9 points more than his closest rival Za Approval. A loss here would be as big of a surprise as I've probably ever seen in person.

Race 11 (leg 4) concludes the sequence and a big weekend at Woodbine. It's a 12-horse maiden race and the type a lot of people will be spreading in if singling Wise Dan (and especially if singling Forte de Marmi as well), so thin to win is my mantra here.

#4 Csonka has a lot going for him switching back to Polytrack after disappointing as the 2-to-1 favorite in his second career start/turf debut. He outran his odds when second at 35-to-1 in his debut but showed the kind of speed that can win this with the surface return. #9 Take It All is the other speed threat, but I have concerns about his going seven furlongs and being drawn to Csonka's outside.

Of course that scenario makes me want to look at closers and #5 Jobber Bill, #7 Stormy Connection, and #8 Machito all fit that bill. I expect Stormy Connection to be the favorite, so I'll toss him because I think his kick will be dulled being so far back in a seven-furlong race. I'll use #s 5 & 8.

So our ticket is 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 with 1, 2, 3, 4, 9 with #4 Wise Dan with 4, 5, 8. This is $15 for $.20 or $75 for a dollar. Even beating a couple favorites we won't get rich if it hits, but we will more than double our money on a 1-to-5 shot with a chance for even bigger returns.

I will be live at Woodbine all weekend! Share your own plays with me on Twitter @EJXD2 & use hashtag #WOMile. Also, compare the handicappers! Mark Johnson's Spotlight Selections for the entire Woodbine Mile day card are free at Brisnet.com. Also available is Daily Selections full-card analysis with best bets and Ultimate Past Performances for the entire weekend of great racing!