

The Do's and Don'ts When Handicapping Del Mar Trainers

(By Dean Keppler)

One of the most anticipated summer racing meets in the country begins Friday, July 18, at Del Mar, and getting a strong feel for the local and ship-in conditioners that flourish at this popular “Where the Surf Meets the Turf” Southern California venue is key to grinding out profits over the 31-day ultra-competitive stand. As a traditional trainer-angle handicapper for the last several decades, I have relied on pioneers in the horse racing industry who paved the way for understanding and utilizing trainer statistics. Two of my favorites are Jim Mazur (<http://www.proghandicap.com>), who continues to produce excellent and valuable online meet-specific trainer stat data (and his tedious records were instrumental in putting this article together), and the late Ed Bain, who boldly challenged traditional speed figure-oriented play by focusing primarily on his culmination of specific profitable trainer angle patterns. When I first managed the DRF Press book division for Daily Racing Form many years ago, Mazur’s arsenal of track-specific trainer angle self-published titles were a tremendous fan favorite, and his loyal clientele are fortunate enough to enjoy his material decades later.

In recent years, DRF Formulator and Race Lens have introduced a more modern and technical approach to identifying a range of specific, profitable trainer angles that consistently win in various situations, thus allowing handicappers to zero in even further on their favorite trainer angles or “karma” moves, as Mazur penned many moons ago. I have successfully incorporated elements from several reputable and valuable handicapping sources to identify the angles that I have found most profitable, specifically in Southern California.

Let’s look at some of the household trainer names most will be familiar with, and a splash of some perhaps not-so-familiar faces that are worth following or unfollowing this 2025 summer Del Mar meet.

Bob Baffert

It should come as no surprise that Baffert has won at a 30% clip with his overall starters over the last two years and finished close to that impressive win percentage in several previous meets. He’s won the summer meet training title a record nine times. Jockey Juan Hernandez is his go-to rider in most situations, and the conditioner continues to perform better on dirt than turf. All his maiden special weight firsters on dirt are usually live at Del Mar, but be wary when he shows up in the maiden claiming ranks. His win percentage plummets considerably. He does exceptionally well when teamed up with the ownership of Michael Pegram, Juddmonte, or Zedan Racing Stables.

Dan Blacker

Blacker was skunked last year, going 0-for-21, but has done well in previous Del Mar seasons. He is eligible to bounce back in 2025 and is always dangerous with dirt horses stretching out in distance and when making his second start of the meet.

Phil D'Amato

D'Amato consistently wins in several different categories, sending out a ton of horses from his huge stable. He finished second in the 2024 standings with 21 wins, and jockey Hector Berrios was aboard for more than a third of those victories. An excellent grass trainer and overall solid layoff barn. One of the few categories in which he does not excel is horses transitioning from turf to dirt. There are frequent circumstances where he has multiple runners in the race, and it is always beneficial to give the horse with the bigger price a second look.

Craig Dollase

Dollase had a breakout 2024 season with a 5-2-2 mark from 21 starts after going a combined 0 for 29 in 2022-23. When the betting money shows for Dollase runners, it is usually a great sign that they are live and worth inclusion. Jockey Armando Ayuso and Umberto Rispoli have done well riding for this outfit.

Ron Ellis

The key statistic for trainer Ron Ellis is horses returning off 61-90 days' rest, where he has an impressive 4-for-5 (80%) record over the past several seasons. Live runners from this barn are usually well backed at the betting windows. The ownership of Doubledown Stables has a surprising 0-for-18 record, however.

Peter Eurton

Trainer Peter Eurton consistently excels in various categories at Del Mar. When you narrow down his stats, he is super in turf sprint races (over 40%), when using jockey Antonio Fresu, and when teamed up with the Exline-Border Racing ownership. His record with juveniles is solid, and he performs slightly better in his second or even third start of the meet, but I wouldn't advise ignoring any starter from this reputable stable.

Carla Gaines

Trainer Carla Gaines had one of her better meets in 2024. She has done well when teamed up with jockey Antonio Fresu, Iconic Thoroughbreds, and Spendthrift Farm. Gaines excels when stretching horses out in distance and can certainly win off the bench. When the betting money shows up, it's usually a positive sign.

Mark Glatt

There is not much that veteran conditioner and Southern California staple Mark Glatt does not do well. Glatt clicks close to 30% with dirt route runners and horses returning off 15-30 days' rest. He moves horses up in class successfully, and the ownership of Drummond, Lee, and Schwartz has won at nearly 60% with this sharp barn. His horses typically perform better with a race under their belt at the meet, while making their second or third start off the layoff. Hall of Fame rider Mike Smith does not ride many horses for this barn, but when he does, it is a positive sign.

Bob Hess

Those who follow my Southern California handicapping analysis regularly know that I'm a big fan of the veteran Desormeaux/Hess jockey-trainer combo. At Del Mar, however, this usually lucrative team is only 1-for-15 over the past three racing seasons. Hess is what you would consider your bread-and-butter claiming trainer, and his performance reflects that at Del Mar as well. Most of his success comes from claiming races with horses that turn back in distance and when well-backed. Any starter over 5 or 6-1 is usually a toss for this barn.

Steve Knapp

Knapp is fresh off a solid winning meet at the Los Alamitos Thoroughbred afternoon stand and looks to continue that momentum into Del Mar. He has started a lot of horses at Del Mar over the past two seasons and has won just shy of double-digit figures percentage-wise. He is 3-for-4 (75%) when teamed up with the ownership of Howard and Janet Siegel, and most of the stable's winners are heavily supported at the betting windows.

Brian Koriner

The Koriner sweet spot at Del Mar seems to be horses returning off 15-30 days and dropping in class. Like many outfits at Del Mar, they like to be in the winner's circle at this prestigious meet and will drop a horse down in class to get the money. This barn excels with stretch-outs in distance and when teamed up with owner Rusty Brown. Over the past several seasons, Koriner has had several starters fill out the underneath vertical exotics, making him an excellent choice for trifecta and superfecta players.

Craig Lewis

Trainer Craig Lewis does well with a decent number of starters at Del Mar, when you consider his stable size. Most of his success has come in turf route events, and utilizing jockey Hector Berrios, who has been a superstar over the Southern California grass course since relocating his tack from Florida.

Richard Mandella

Mandella racked up nine wins in 2023 but only had three victories last year. Nonetheless, the legendary Hall of Famer is capable of winning at any time. His go-to ownership includes MyRacehorse, Spendthrift Farm, and Pine Oak Stud. This barn has always done well with the stretch-out in distance and usually fires when well-backed by the public at the windows.

Andy Mathis

Mathis had a fabulous meet in 2022, winning 12 of 41 starts, with a win rate of close to 30%. He has not performed nearly as well over the last two seasons, but is still very dangerous with any turf starters (in sprints or routes) and especially those returning after some rest. His first start off the layoff is a solid angle for these connections.

Michael McCarthy

Trainer Michael McCarthy was elevated to the public masses spotlight with the success of Journalism during this year's Triple Crown run, but is no stranger to the Del Mar winner's circle. He is equally effective on all racing surfaces and at all class levels. The barn has had success with top riders Juan Hernandez and Umberto Rispoli, who finished first and second, respectively, to close out the 2024 season. Repole Stable and owners Warren, Jr., and William K. have had excellent success when teamed up with this conditioner over the past few seasons. The barn is sure to score with a juvenile firster again this year, having won close to 20% with their two-year-old debut runners overall.

Peter Miller

Miller has maintained a solid overall win record of 13% over the past three seasons at Del Mar. That percentage is slightly higher in dirt sprint races and with horses returning after more than 90 days' rest. This barn will drop a horse in class considerably at Del Mar to potentially secure a win, and is especially dangerous when using Hernandez or Rispoli in the saddle. He is 4 for 19 (21%) with dirt to turf starters but a subpar 0-for-13 with turf to dirt runners.

Steve Miyadi

This barn typically arrives with its stock ready to run well at Del Mar. When not securing victories, Miyadi runners will regularly fill out the vertical exotics. Most of his success comes in turf sprint events, and when utilizing jockey Armando Aguilar. This outfit attracts a ton of betting support when live and has had excellent success with Nicholas Alexander as a barn's key owner.

Graham Motion

Motion did not make an appearance at Del Mar in 2024 but secured three wins from four starts in 2022 and 2023. If she shows up in a turf stakes race this year, take notice. This shrewd barn is 3-for-3 with stakes starters, and all of them were making their first start of the meet.

Jeff Mullins

Mullins racked up 11 wins in 2024 and won at a sensational 24% clip. This conditioner excels in all relevant categories, whether it's sprinting, routing, or on dirt or grass. He effectively moves horses up and down in class and has had great success, most recently with jockey Reylu Gutierrez. Mullins has been known to excel with recent acquisitions, while performing well in the "claiming game" overall and being effective when stretching horses out in distance. What is most attractive about this conditioner is that he is often overlooked in the betting pools, frequently bringing home double-digit winners. Mullins is a must-follow this upcoming meet.

Doug O'Neill

Team O'Neill has been a consistent winner at Del Mar over the past several seasons, boasting a large and talented stable. O'Neill does well with dirt route runners and horses dropping down in class. He's had great success using jockey Antonio Fresu in recent seasons and with the Michael Bello ownership (4-for-6) (67%). Horses returning from 31 to 60 days seem to perform best for this ultra-consistent outfit, which is fully capable of winning at any level, as proven year after year.

George Papaprodromou

After a disappointing 2023 season when going 3 for 87, with several underneath finishes, this top barn bounced back in a big way in 2024 with 13 total wins. The Papaprodromou barn has had success with debut runners at big odds and when using jockey Kazushi Kimura, who comes off a strong mini-meet at Los Al and has been riding confidently and aggressively all year. Horses that are turning back in distance shine for this top outfit regardless of class level.

Dean Pederson

This barn had a tremendous meet in 2022, going an impressive 8 for 12 (67%), but cooled down some in the last two seasons, while still managing five victories from 26 starts. Pederson has been solid in dirt sprints and turf routes, which is somewhat of an unusual combination. He has had tremendous success with horses returning off 61-90 days' rest (5-for-7; 71%) and those runners making their first and second try off the bench. Whether his horses are making their first or second start of the meet, or entered in a bottom-level claimer or stakes race, this barn is super live at this popular seaside venue. Give them all a second look.

Leonard Powell

Powell's reputation as a superb grass conditioner is well-known by many serious, seasoned Southern California handicappers. What may not be as well-known, however, is that most of his grass victories come in route races. He is 0-for-14 in turf sprints the past three years at Del Mar. A key angle for sure. This barn has performed well for various owners, but has particularly clicked well with Eclipse Thoroughbreds, going 5 for 14 (36%). Horses making their second start off the layoff and second try of the meet perform best.

John Sadler

Sadler had a fabulous 2024 stand, winning at a 25% clip, and his average win payoff was nearly \$12. He excels with dirt route runners and horses returning off extended layoffs of three months or more. Jockey Hector Berrios and Juan Hernandez were his go-to riders, and he's done extremely well when teamed up with the Hronis Racing ownership. Sadler can win at any class level and has for many years.

John Shirreffs

This barn typically produces three or four winners during the meet. Shirreffs is solid in dirt sprints and is usually ready to fire with any horses making their first start of the meet and any runner making their first try off the bench.

Wesley Ward

Ward has not run many horses the last few years at Del Mar, but he is worth paying attention to when he does make an appearance, particularly in turf sprints. He is 4-for-8 the past three seasons, and those wins were with horses starting after a layoff of 30 days plus and making their first try at the meet.

Tim Yakteen

Yakteen has steadily improved at Del Mar over the past couple of seasons and does well in dirt sprints. He was a longtime assistant to Baffert, so it should come as no surprise that he has had half a dozen first-time starters win as well at the local stand. Kimura has ridden well for this outfit, and they consistently perform well across various wagering price points. Do not shy away from a Yakteen longshot that fits a winning profile and is being overlooked by the public. They win frequently.

The following conditioners have struggled in recent years and may present an opportunity to bet against at short odds:

Edwin Alvarez (2 for 31)

Vann Belvoir (1 for 31)

Val Brinkerhoff (3 for 84)

Daniel Dunham (0 for 19)

Reid France (0 for 14)

Brendan Galvin (0 for 17)

Ruben Gomez (1 for 25)

Eoin Harty (1 for 26)

Karen Headley (0 for 22)

Sandino Hernandez (1 for 31)

Dave Hofmans (1 for 22)

Jerry Hollendorfer (1 for 38)

George L. Lopez (0 for 22)

Frank Lucarelli (0 for 16)

Alfredo Marquez (1 for 32)

Jeff Metz (0 for 21)

Bill McLean (2 for 62)

Ed Moger (0 for 44)

Jesus Nunez (0 for 21)

Aggie Ordonez (1 for 29)

Manuel Ortiz Sr. (0 for 21)

Lorenzo Ruitz (0 for 14)

Jack SisterSon (0 for 20)

Walter Solis (0 for 31)

Bill Spawr (0 for 16)

Gary Stute (1 for 39)

Genaro Vallejo (0 for 32)

* A special thanks to veteran author, handicapper, and friend Jim Mazur for supplying most of this statistical data from his Del Mar Handicapper 2025.