

Like last week's Kentucky Derby, handicapping the race for Jack Quinn's congressional successor may not be overly instructive, but it sure is fun.

Candidates scrambled like a Buffalo city official chasing a 100-dollar bill when Quinn dropped his bombshell, getting news coverage from Seattle to London, and everywhere in between.

Already, candidates can be slotted into one of three categories: serious (Paul Tokasz, Brian Higgins), silly (Jim Kelly and Tony Masiello, who inexplicably felt compelled to actually confirm he would not be a candidate) and second-tier (Kevin Gaughan, Carl Calabrese)

So, while everyone toys with the idea of ponying up what will be a healthy six-figure entry figure, here's the morning line on who might make it to the starting gate, and their chances of putting a nose out in front at the November wire.

Brian Higgins -- The strong second choice for the Dems becomes the immediate front runner with the early scratch of assemblyman Paul Tokasz. Higgins is one of the favored new breed locally and in the state. And Dems will shovel wheelbarrows full of cash into the race. Could hold a winning ticket at 3-to-1.

Joel Giambra -- Give or take an extra \$500,000 for the odd desk chair and filing cabinet, Giambra is probably the best the GOP could offer. Although his city support would be nil, he's still generally well liked in the suburbs. With a district, though, that favored Al Gore over George Bush 53-41 percent in the last presidential election, he might figure the climb is too steep. Best in show, though, for name recognition and campaign finances, so can't be overlooked at 4-to-1.

David Swarts and Pat Gallivan -- Swarts, the Democratic county clerk and Gallivan, one of the several "convenience" Republicans who will consider a bid, both suffer from largely administrative and generally unglamorous political positions that are hardly springboards to the U.S. Capitol. Gallivan, particularly, is a political neophyte, but both are Quinnesque: good looking, smooth talking, quick on their feet and generally likable fellas. Book them at 8-to-1.

Nancy Naples and Carl Calabrese -- Naples could have some serious personal money invested into the race if she so chooses. But, like Swarts and Gallivan, issuing audits and counting tax receipts is hardly enough to induce even one goose pimple. Calabrese doesn't even live in the district, and does anyone actually know what he's been doing for the last few years? Solid GOP veterans, but no "oooh" factor here. Put them down at 12-to-1.

Jack Quinn Jr. -- It's hard to imagine that Junior could make a serious run, despite the obvious advantages of the Quinn family gene pool and Quinn Sr. political bank account. His mention is likely a courtesy for some future endeavor, but he can't completely be dismissed if Dad really wants to see it happen. Intriguing possibility, but probably not great value at 15-to-1.

Kevin Gaughan, Kathy Hochul and Paul Clark -- The Buffalo conversationalist, who has forever trotted out his friendship with the Kennedy family, has to be positively salivating at the thought of a Congressional seat. But what has Gaughan really accomplished? Talk is cheap, a congressional race is not. Clark, the West Seneca supervisor who's already says he's running no matter, is hoping first in wins. That's not how it works in a horse race, despite the advantage of a top-shelf trainer in political insider Tim Clark, his brother. A lot of people might say Kathy who? Hochul, a Hamburg town councilperson, has worked for both Daniel Patrick Moynihan and John LaFalce, and is married to a high profile assistant U.S. attorney William Hochul who helped prosecute the Lackawanna Six case. Those are some significant chips to be cashed if needed. A lot of Dems would have to say no, but she's a darkhorse worth mentioning. Still, it's tough to imagine any of the three being near the lead at even the quarter pole, at 20-to-1.

The Field -- In political circles this group is also known as the usual suspects. All have at least one fatal flaw -- not enough money, not from the right area, not sparkly enough. Chances for types like Chautauqua county assemblyman Bill Parment, state senator Bill Stachowski and Peter Crotty, all Democrats, rate somewhere just slightly north of Beetle Bomb at 50-to-1.

Since it will likely be a Democrat who wins this race, the betting line forms to the left.

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)

