

Horseracing Handicapping: Sprints

Most horseplayers opine that route races are more difficult to handicap than sprints. I hold a dissenting view. If the majority were correct, then we would not see such a disparity between the percentages of winning favorites for each type of race. (this is referring to a chapter of my book)

In fact, one would expect to see the percentage of winning favorites for sprint races higher than that for routes. This is not the case.

A little more than 70% of all races are sprints. A sprint race is less than one mile and not more than one turn. Most sprints are run at 6 furlongs but may be as long as seven and a half furlongs.

Conventional wisdom holds that a fast breaker, a horse that can set a rapid pace for the first quarter-mile and take the lead while saving ground on the rail, has a distinct advantage over the complementation. But what happens when the race is riddled with fast breakers as it most often is? The early leaders will thwart each other's effort and begin to back up in the final stretch. They will also create traffic problems for themselves and quickly run out of real estate to correct the mistake.

Well, what if our sprinter lags behind the rest of the pack? This presents a more severe problem in that a horse that has neither been close to the leaders nor hugged the rail will not have sufficient energy to pass the others during the final stretch run. Even if the horse is able to save ground on the rail, he will run into traffic problems too, as the leaders refuse to open a hole for him. The aforementioned "traffic problems" can be readily seen in the charts comments as "blocked," "bumped," "checked," and "forced wide."

However, the real test of a sprinter's mettle is, indeed, in the last quarter-mile stretch run. It is very important, though, that he runs effectively up until that point. He must stalk, and not lag behind, the leaders from the very start and never for a moment fall out of contention.

Look at each performance line where the horse ran six furlongs. First eliminate any horse that was ever more than four lengths off the pace at the half-mile call for any of his past three six-furlong races. This rids us of the closer. Second, eliminate any horse that was in the lead for the first quarter-mile but lost it at the half, for his last three six-furlong races. This rids us of the speedball and dueler, both of whose running styles are subject to almost the same problems as those of the closer. Last, eliminate any horse that has not finished first or second at six furlongs.

Using the horse's best finish (either first or second) at six furlongs, compute the final quarter-mile time for each of the remaining horses. If the horse was leading at the half as well, this is relatively simple. Convert the final time into seconds, subtract the half-mile time, and you have the final quarter-mile time.

In races where the horse did not lead at the half, add one-fifth second for each length the horse was off the pace to the actual half-mile time and you will have that horse's half mile time. The play is on the horse with the fastest final quarter-mile time.

Delaware Park's eight race on November 1, 2004, was a fantastic example of this angle's effectiveness. Eight horses were entered in this six-furlong allowance, but only three managed to qualify as far as computing the final quarter-mile time.

NAME	FIN. ¼ MI. TIME	POST TIME ODDS	11/01/04 FINISH
Gotta Rush	:26	7-2	1st
Trickle of Gold	:25 3/5	Scratched	Scratched
Carly'ssilvercharm	:26 2/5	5-2	2nd

For example: In Trickle of Gold's last six-furlong race she ran :22 1/5, :45 3/5, and 1:11 1/5.

As it happened, she led at the half and won the race. Converting 1:11 1/5 to :71 1/5 and subtracting :45 3/5 we have a final quarter-mile time of :25 3/5.

Trickle of Gold had set the best final quarter-mile time, but she scratched. Carly'ssilvercharm got caught up in a duel through the half (which we do not want to see) and was caught in the stretch by Gotta Rush. Missile Bay, a horse I eliminated because she had never raced at six-furlongs came late to finish third as the 9-5 favorite. My \$10 exacta box returned \$187 for a net profit of \$167.

Remember, most of the races are won by horses that are able to stalk the leaders but do not make their big move until the final two furlongs of the race. This racing style will...
