

Daily Racing Form
Handicapping | Posted 1/22/2009, 6:40 pm
Experts zeroing in on accurate track biases
By Dave Litfin

OZONE PARK, N.Y. Much of the art/science of handicapping involves the subjective interpretation of basic, objective facts. For example, no two sets of speed figures ever come out exactly alike even though much of the same data goes into them. And after initial computations are made, it is sometimes necessary to tweak the figures at a later date to better reflect what we believe actually happened.

The attempt to quantify track bias is even trickier and more labor intensive, which Daily Racing Form handicapper Steve Klein addressed in his book *The Power of Early Speed* in 2005:

What is the difference between Bigfoot and accurate daily track-bias ratings? wrote Klein in chapter 13, as he set out to detail a methodology for calculating Klein Track Bias numbers. According to most handicappers, one of the two doesn't really exist. . . . If it turns out that you really aren't very good at spotting and objectively analyzing track biases, bravely sticking to the wrong plan while ignoring a long string of losses is going to cost you.

Handicappers who had grown used to watching a steady parade of front-running winners on Aqueduct's inner dirt track have had to adjust their thinking this winter to a significant degree. To say the surface hasn't been as kind to early speed as in past years is an understatement but exactly how much has the bias shifted?

Answering such questions on a daily basis is the essence of a new handicapping service called Racing Flow (www.racingflow.com), which came to the handicapping marketplace in 2008 as the result of an eight-year collaboration among Washington D.C. area horseplayers Phil Gregoire and R. Jake Jacobs.

Gregoire, 46, and Jacobs, 52, were dissatisfied with available methods of quantifying pace and track bias, and set out to rectify the problem while taking on the name *The Plod Boys*, which refers to PLODS (slow-paced races) and ZIPS (fast-paced races), along the lines of the race-shape theories detailed by Bill Quirin in the early 1980s, and long familiar to do-it-yourself figure-makers who construct Quirin-style pace and speed numbers. Gregoire and Jacobs culled data from thousands of results and developed statistical multiple regression models to define how selected variables influence the amount of closing in any given race. Racing Flow figures are translated to a standard deviation scale so that they are consistent for all tracks, surfaces, and distances: A FLOW figure of 0 indicates the race was neutral for speed runners and closers. A large negative number (-200 or less) indicates the race favored speed, and is called a PLOD; a large positive number (+200 or more) indicates a race favoring closers, and is called a ZIP.

According to Racing Flow, the most speed-biased date in New York in 2008 resulted in bias figures of 215, while the most closer-favoring date was a +259. The weekend of Jan. 10-11 resulted in figures of +284 and +263, on Saturday and Sunday, which made them the most closer-friendly surfaces on the circuit in over a year.

Among the speed horses that fought that bias and have raced back thus far is Edashor, who chased and stopped badly in race 6 on Jan. 10, and returned a week later to win from off the pace at 15-1.

We will be watching closely for speed and fade types [from Jan. 10-11], especially those in which the winner came from far back, said Gregoire.

Horses who set or forced the pace against that strong bias and may deserve to be upgraded on Saturday are Midnight Player (race 2), Hidden Prince (race 4), and Thunder Buddy (race 5). Two horses in race 6 who closed with the aid of the bias

and may deserve downgrading are Masterofthehouse and Mr. Bogart.

The Racing Flow website provides access to a large amount of free data, and last week gave out Nownownow, the 18-1 winner of the San Fernando.

Regardless of what the fractions look like to the common eye, he was against a speed-favoring flow in the Malibu, Gregoire noted.

In a marvel of space-age technology, users of Daily Racing Form's web-based Formulator can upload Racing Flow's weekly updates directly into the past performances with just a few clicks. When a race card is opened, ratings for track bias (did the surface favor speed or closers?), race flow (did this specific race favor speed or closers?) and BL12 (how far back was the winner at the first two points of call?) magically appear.

And believe this from a technology challenged 50-something handicapper: If I can do it, you can do it.

Copyright - 2007 Daily Racing Form, LLC. All rights reserved.

