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On The Turf

By Barry Meadow

In a typical turf race, horses lope along, then power home. That makes turf racing very different from dirt racing, where early speed is highly prized.

Most of the world's most prestigious races take place on grass--England's Epsom Derby, France's Arc de Triomphe and Australia's Melbourne Cup among them. It is mostly in the United States where dirt races rule, and turf races make up a small minority of the events.

Generally, the most prestigious tracks offer the most and best grass racing. A few (such as Saratoga and Belmont) have two turf courses, while some smaller tracks don't even have one.

Because turf courses are more difficult to maintain than dirt courses, the tracks that offer turf racing usually restrict the races to the better-class runners at their tracks—stakes horses, allowance competitors, high-priced claimers. While they may offer turf races for maidens and even, occasionally, maiden claimers, in general turf racing is the province of better horses.

That changes the handicapping equation immensely. Higher-class horses are more consistent than their lower-class brethren. Since the number of grass races is limited, the same horses often face each other several times. Because the pace of turf races is generally slower, horses can often win off layoffs—speedy workouts don't mean much. (As an aside, in grass maiden routes, first-time starters do just fine, even though first-times starters in maiden route races are generally throwouts.)

What does mean much is how each horse has performed on the turf previously. While most horses show similar ability on turf and dirt, many do not. When handicapping turf races, emphasize the horse's grass performances—especially races under today's track conditions (e.g., yielding, fast, etc.).

American grass races are sometimes easy pickings for European shippers. Generally, horses from England or France or Ireland are competitive in one class higher in Europe (e.g., a horse racing who's competitive in European allowances might do well in American stakes races). New European shippers often get first-time lasix, a drug not used on the continent, which further helps.

In some ways, analyzing turf races is similar to handicapping harness horses. Horses who are forced wide early but can't get close to the front of the pack are pretty much done, and post switches are often immense. A horse whose last two turf miles found him starting from posts 9 and 10, but today he draws the 2 post, may mean a big form reversal. Conversely, if the horse is going from post 3 to post 8, he's got a problem—a big problem. Check your own track's post stats for each turf distance so see how big that problem actually is. (Every course is different. For instance, while a one-mile turf race at Santa Anita favors horses in the first five posts, the twisting right-handed downhill 6 ½-furlong course there leaves the first five posts at a disadvantage.)

Another way in which turf handicapping is similar to harness handicapping is in the emphasis on trips—understanding what each horse did in his last several races considering the pace, ground loss, and trouble—and being able to predict who's going to get what kind of trip today. This is where video watchers have a huge edge over the typical player who's just reading a past performance line.

In fact, watching turf races carefully is, I believe, the most important part of turf handicapping. Every jockey knows the idea is to save ground, but races don't work that way. If a horse is caught wide into a slow opening quarter, it's no big deal—but if he's forced to go wide into the stretch after a slow three-quarters, it's a very big deal. After watching a horse two or three times on the turf, you should get a pretty good idea where he belongs, and what type of race would play to his strength.

As in harness handicapping, some players calculate the last quarter that each horse has run on the turf, which is useful to an extent—but if a certain horse can come home in 22.3 while nobody else can beat 23.1, that won't help him if he's six lengths back heading into the final quarter. Thus it becomes crucial to try to figure out who's going to be where in a turf race. Will the race be fast or slow? Will the horses with inside post be able to save ground easily? How are the horses with outside posts going to

get into the race?

This is where jockeys come in. Since on the turf, horses are rated rather than going all out from the starting gate, it becomes important to find a jockey who understands strategy, knows where he's supposed to be, and has the patience to stay there until the right time. At most tracks, a few jockeys dominate the turf ranks. Thus they get hired by the trainers of the favorites, and the cycle of success continues while the marginal jockeys are stuck on 20-1 shots from the outside.

When assessing the chances of inexperienced horses on the grass, a knowledge of pedigrees can help. While the Daily Racing Form offers the Tomlinson numbers, these are based simply on the 1-2-3 finishes of a sire's progeny on turf, and make no allowance for class. More useful is the Brisnet turf number, which does account for class. Get to know the top turf sires. An up-to-date list is available, free, at Bloodhorse.com.

Not everyone takes to the turf. A prescription for failure, for example, is a horse getting blinkers on who's racing for the first or second time in a maiden claimer. Blinkers on generally means the horse has had trouble focusing, the class level indicates he's probably going nowhere, and the inexperience on an unfamiliar surface doesn't help, either. Compare that type of horse with one who's had 35% wins in his turf races—at least you know this win-type can handle the turf.

Unlike the procedure I used for dirt racing, I never did pace and speed figures for turf races. There might have been one turf race a day, the races were often "about" distances, the rails might have been up or down, and the field might have dawdled to the half two seconds slower than usual. Instead, I had ratings for each horse before they entered, then noted what happened in that race—who beat whom, off what trips, and with what trouble or pace problems? This required an in-depth review of every turf race. I rarely watched a turf replay only once.

Since trips are so important in turf races, luck often plays a role. Get pushed just a bit wide and you lose; get out of the box a moment too late and you lose. Thus you can often get good prices on horses who've lost a few races but have raced well without luck. If they get lucky today, you might get \$14 instead of \$6 at the cashiers window. So look for that type of horse.