

Looking at Workouts

By Barry Meadow

“Nothing infuriates and alienates racing fans more than erroneous or nonexistent workout information.”—Andy Beyer in the Washington Post, 1990

Not much has changed since Beyer’s comment a quarter of a century ago. Workout analysis remains one of those elements of handicapping that continues to frustrate players.

At some tracks, only one clocker must handle all the works; at some training centers, there are no clockers. As a result, it’s not uncommon that a workout listed in the past performances was actually reported by the trainer. One doesn’t need to be a nutbar conspiracy theorist to see some potential problems here. And clockers are permitted to bet, adding to skullduggery possibilities.

Take the case of Danny Robertson, the clocker at Penn National until the feds arrested him for accepting cash for falsifying workouts. Sometimes Robertson would report times slower (or in some cases, faster) than the horse actually worked. Sometimes he would make up bogus times for horses who never worked at all.

But even when there are two clockers on scene, works are sometimes missed or misreported.

Now it wouldn’t be all that much work for tracks to change this. They could assign numbered saddle pads for all horses scheduled to work for a particular day, have a list of these horses with the distances they are to work, then announce that American Secretariat is ready to begin his work. Some tracks do practice something like this transparency, but certainly not all.

Until then, workouts remain shrouded in mystery. Even if the time in the pp’s is accurate, there is much we don’t know. What was the purpose of the work? Does the trainer usually work his horses fast or slow? How does this particular horse usually work? Was he asked for speed and if so, only at the finish? Was the work in company,

which can perk up a lazy horse? Did the horse break away from the pole from a standing start? Was he all out or under total wraps? Did the rider weigh 110 or 140? How smooth was the horse's stride? Did the horse gallop out strongly past the wire? Was he forced wide by traffic? Did he work when the track was super fast?

These and other questions can sometimes be answered by private clockers, a fixture in southern California but generally less popular elsewhere as horses ship in from farms, training centers, and other tracks. Armed with stopwatches, binoculars, and tape recorders, they show up at dawn in the otherwise empty grandstand and stay until the last work is done. They may be employed by private clients or a handicapping service, always on the lookout for the 2-year-old who is outworking some older allowance horse, or the 3-year-old coming off a layoff who's suddenly become a beast. Often, improvement in the morning foreshadows a better performance in the afternoon.

However, so many big players purchase this information that it's not uncommon for some morning-line longshot maiden with good works to be pounded in the betting. Even worse—some horses work spectacularly but race poorly, or vice versa.

It is easy to be seduced by fast workout times in the pp's. But without knowing the details of the speedy work, it's hard to work up much enthusiasm.

Then there's the letter following the work. On the west coast, b ("breezing") means the horse is doing it all on his own, while h ("handily") means the horse is being asked to run by the rider but not pushed hard. On the east coast, the reverse is true.

It's usually not especially significant if an established horse of class works well. This makes the workouts of horses entered in such races as the Kentucky Derby less important than the workouts of a first-time starter; the Derby entrants have already shown they are runners, and unless a horse is handling Churchill Downs far better or worse than expected, much of what you may read during Derby Week is just noise.

Certainly, workout information is more valuable for lightly raced horses and comebackers than for 6-year-old \$8,000 claimers with 30 lifetime starts, unless the latter is changing barns from a poor trainer to a top one. Many old claimers race with no or few workout between races; their morning activity often consists of little more than long, slow gallops.

Usually, the frequency, regularity, and distance of works is more important than

their speed. Is the horse working every five to seven days? If he's coming off a layoff, do there appear to be breaks in his training?

The key distance for many horses' workouts is five furlongs, generally the best distance for a combination of speed and stamina. Shorter works are usually less significant, even if fast; longer works are generally simply stamina builders. At least one strong five-furlong work since raced is often an excellent indicator of fitness. Beginners should show at least one work from the gate.

Every player should go to the workouts at least once, just to get a feel for what goes on. One thing to never forget, though: A workout is not a race. A horse may perform one way in the morning with no one around, and a different way entirely facing nine other steeds in front of a boisterous crowd.

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