

Track Class

By Barry Meadow

What do you do when a horse moves from one track to another, or changes circuits altogether? Racetracks are not equal. Some tracks attract the best horses, while the horse population in others is made up mostly of the aging and infirm.

It's inaccurate to believe the old saw that "A \$10,000 claimer is a \$10,000 claimer is a \$10,000 claimer." Certainly the \$10,000 claimers at Belmont Park, for instance, are better *as a group* than the \$10,000 claimers at Louisiana Downs. However, at times an *individual* claimer at a smaller track is just as fast as his counterpart at Churchill Downs or Del Mar. Many owners are reluctant to ship a horse out of town and prefer to race for lesser purses at their local oval. You can't automatically dismiss a horse just because he's spent most of his career at Nowheresville Park.

But usually, the top tracks offer the biggest purses and attract the top horses, trainers, and jockeys.

Each May, American Turf Monthly offers its Track Equalization Chart. In this article, we'll look at two additional ways to compare tracks—by median purse, and by how tough the maiden and allowance horses are. This is not a complete list of every track in the country, but it's representative.

Let's look first at each track's median purse in 2016. Tracks rated A are the top tracks. B are middle-grade tracks, C are lower-level tracks, and D are the lowest-level tracks. Some meets at some tracks may be stronger or weaker than other meets; for instance, while the Gulfstream Park fall meet is a solid B, its winter meet is closer to A. And certainly, some races at C tracks are tougher than some races at A tracks--for instance, in 2017, Santa Anita began scheduling \$6,250 claimers, its lowest claiming class in decades.

A: Median 2016 purse of \$50,000 or more

Aqueduct
Belmont
Del Mar
Keeneland
Santa Anita
Saratoga

B: Median 2016 purse of \$20,000- \$49,999

Churchill Downs
Fair Grounds
Gulfstream Park
Laurel Park
Monmouth Park
Oaklawn Park
Parx Racing
Pimlico
Suffolk Downs
Woodbine

C: Median 2016 purse of \$10,000 – \$19,999

Arlington
Canterbury Park
Charles Town
Delaware Park
Delta Downs
Ellis Park
Evangeline Downs
Golden Gate Fields
Gulfstream Park West
Hastings Racecourse
Indiana Grand
Lone Star Park
Los Alamitos
Louisiana Downs
Penn National
Prairie Meadows
Presque Isle Downs
Remington Park
Santa Rosa
Sunland Park
Tampa Bay Downs
Thistledown
Timonium
Zia Park

D: Median purse of less than \$10,000

Arapahoe Park
Assiniboia Downs
Belterra Park
Emerald Downs

Fairmount Park
 Finger Lakes
 Fonner Park
 Fort Erie
 Hawthorne
 Hazel Park
 Mahoning Valley
 Mountaineer
 Northlands Park
 Portland Meadows
 Retama Park
 Ruidoso Downs
 Sam Houston
 Turf Paradise
 Turfway Park

If we take a typical \$12,500 claimer:

- Track rated A—This horse is probably one of several others worth that price or higher.
- Track rated B—Most of his opponents are not worth \$12,500.
- Track rated C—May not even be a \$10,000 claimer at an A track.
- Track rated D—May not even be an \$8,000 claimer at an A track.

Now let's compare 40 U.S. tracks through another window—where the maiden and allowance horses fit. The chart below, though it changes not only from year to year but also during the course of any particular season, gives very rough claiming equivalents for the typical 3-and-up open maiden and allowance conditions at 40 U.S. tracks. The chart, constructed from the 2016 par times from Cynthia Publishing, compares the typical clockings of claimers with those of their non-claiming brethren. The typical NW2 competitor at Belterra Park might fit with \$7,500 claimers—but a horse eligible for the same condition at Saratoga might be up against \$62,500 claimers.

Track	Maiden	NW1	NW2	NW3
Aqueduct	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$62,500	\$80,000
Arlington Park	\$10,000	\$16,000	\$40,000	\$62,500
Belmont Park	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$62,500	\$80,000
Belterra Park	\$ 2,500	\$ 4,000	\$ 7,500	\$15,000
Canterbury Park	\$ 6,250	\$12,500	\$25,000	\$50,000
Charles Town	\$ 2,500	\$12,500	\$20,000	\$25,000
Churchill Downs	\$30,000	\$40,000	\$62,500	\$80,000

Del Mar	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$62,500	\$80,000
Delaware Park	\$ 8,000	\$16,000	\$25,000	\$50,000
Delta Downs	\$ 5,000	\$15,000	\$20,000	\$25,000
Ellis Park	\$10,000	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$50,000
Emerald Downs	\$ 7,500	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$50,000
Evangeline Downs	\$ 4,000	\$12,500	\$20,000	\$25,000
Fair Grounds	\$10,000	\$17,500	\$40,000	\$50,000
Fairmount Park	\$ 2,500	\$ 6,250	\$10,000	\$12,500
Finger Lakes	\$ 3,000	\$ 9,000	\$10,000	\$20,000
Golden Gate	\$16,000	\$40,000	\$62,500	\$80,000
Gulfstream Park	\$12,500	\$20,000	\$62,500	\$75,000
Gulfstream Park West	\$ 8,000	\$16,000	\$25,000	\$40,000
Hawthorne	\$10,000	\$16,000	\$25,000	\$50,000
Indiana Grand	\$ 8,000	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$50,000
Keeneland	\$ 25,000	\$40,000	\$62,500	\$80,000
Laurel	\$ 7,500	\$15,000	\$30,000	\$40,000
Lone Star	\$ 7,500	\$15,000	\$25,000	\$30,000
Louisiana Downs	\$ 4,000	\$ 7,500	\$17,500	\$25,000
Meadowlands	\$ 7,500	\$16,000	\$20,000	\$25,000
Monmouth	\$12,500	\$20,000	\$32,000	\$50,000
Mountaineer Park	\$ 2,500	\$15,000	\$20,000	\$25,000
Oaklawn Park	\$12,500	\$20,000	\$40,000	\$50,000
Parx	\$ 8,000	\$16,000	\$25,000	\$40,000
Penn National	\$ 6,250	\$12,500	\$25,000	\$32,000
Pimlico	\$ 3,000	\$10,000	\$25,000	\$32,000
Prairie Meadows	\$ 7,500	\$16,000	\$30,000	\$35,000
Santa Anita	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$62,500	\$80,000
Saratoga	\$32,000	\$50,000	\$62,500	\$80,000
Suffolk Downs	\$ 8,000	\$16,000	\$20,000	\$25,000
Tampa Bay Downs	\$ 8,000	\$16,000	\$32,000	\$62,500
Thistledown	\$ 2,500	\$15,000	\$20,000	\$25,000
Turf Paradise	\$ 8,000	\$16,000	\$20,000	\$25,000
Turfway Park	\$15,000	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$50,000

Let's take two horses who just finished second in a maiden race. One raced at Pimlico, where the maidens don't go much faster than \$3,000 claimers. The other ships from Hawthorne, where maidens are about as fast as \$10,000 claimers. It's likely that

without knowing anything else about either horse, the Hawthorne maiden probably faced better foes than his Pimlico counterpart.

However, when you take the better-grade allowance horses at these tracks—non-winners of two races other than maiden, claiming, or starter—the differences melt away as each could be competitive with open \$25,000 horses.

Sometimes there's not much logic to this chart. For instance, at Finger Lakes, non-winners of two are hardly faster than non-winners of one. But at Gulfstream Park, there's a huge jump from NW1 to NW2.

And sometimes the claiming tags are not really comparable, even though they display the same number. For instance, NW3 races at Keeneland and Golden Gate both go about as fast as the local \$80,000 claimers—but it's likely that the Keeneland races, packed as they are with future stakes type, are tougher.

So, there you have it—three ways to compare track with track (the ATM Track Equalization Chart, median purses, and maiden and allowance equivalencies). None are perfect, and if you look at these tracks a year from now, there may be major changes. Some tracks may move up, particularly if they shift to short boutique meets where the year's purses are condensed into fewer races. And if slots are suddenly taken away from some racetracks—which seems more likely as time goes on as legislators wonder why they're subsidizing horse racing—those tracks are likely to slide to the bottom.

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