

Track-Specific Handicapping

A survey from 2010 through 2016 revealed that for every 100 runs scored in the average major league park, 142 runs were scored at Coors Field, home of the Colorado Rockies.

The stadium is unique in a number of ways, mostly due to the high altitude with the resultant lack of gravity. Fly balls that would be outs elsewhere sail over the wall, and knuckleballs and sliders often just sit there like invitations to a home run derby. The park is so big that outfielders never quite know whether to play in to protect against cheap singles or play back to chase the frequent long balls. Pitchers have to throw and throw and throw, and the thin air saps their stamina.

Like Coors Field, racetracks have their own peculiarities. While races from one track are usually an indication of what a horse will do when switched to a different one, that's not universally true. Each track has its own distinct surface—more or less sand, severe or moderate banking, varying drainage issues. The starting points for some distances may be different. One track might race during the day and another at night. Or the grass might be tall at one track and short at another. A horse who does well at the one-turn mile at Laurel Park may not prove as handy at the two-turn mile at Pimlico, or the three-turn mile at Charles Town. Aqueduct offers both a seven-furlong turf course and a second which is one mile in circumference; Belmont also offers two turf courses, with differing profiles for each.

. Whether it's a shift from Gulfstream Park to Gulfstream Park West, or from Churchill Downs to Ellis Park, or Los Alamitos to Del Mar, some horses just cannot make the transition. A 79 at Track A does not necessarily mean a 79 at Track B. And if \$10,000 claimers usually go in 1:11.1 at Slowville and 1:10.2 at Crosstown Quickpark, you can't simply subtract 4/5 of a second from everybody's Slowville times to calculate what they might do at Quickpark.

Besides the reasons mentioned above, there are other explanations as to why a

horse who ran well at one track may not repeat the effort when the scene switches to a nearby track (or vice versa). Just a few:

- ***The track sizes are different.*** A horse who might be slow to change leads may do best on a track with long sweeping turns and not so well on smaller tracks with tight turns.

- ***The surface is harder or softer.*** Some horses won't run their best on a hard surface that stings their feet, then wake up when the scene changes.

- ***The turf course may be of a different composition.*** A grass course at one track may be different in many respects from the turf course across town.

- ***The track's running style profiles are different.*** A horse who did well on a speed-favoring track may not do as well when most winners are outside closers.

- ***The horse's surroundings are different.*** Maybe he had a stall that looked out on a lake and he feels confined in his new quarters. Or he's switching to a farm, where he has plenty of space to play and winds up with a new mental attitude.

- ***The air is better or worse.*** Some horses with breathing problems do much better when they go from the city track to the country track.

- ***The temperature is hotter or colder.*** Weather affects some horses more than others, and few horses perform equally well under all conditions.

- ***The horse now must ship in to race.*** While this is no big deal for most horses, some animals do best when they can walk to the racetrack rather than ride in on the van.

- ***The trainer's entire stable may do better at one track.*** Many trainers point for specific meetings, using one track merely as a practice field.

Thus the theory of horse-for-course, which states that a horse does best over a particular track. Take a horse that's 3-for-9 at Pluto Park and 0-for-13 at Dumbo Downs. He must love Pluto and hate Dumbo, no? Well maybe, but maybe not. Like everything else in handicapping, everything needs context, and nothing is absolute.

Perhaps he won those three races at Pluto at a different stage in his career, or when he was in another barn. And maybe he has three seconds and four thirds at Dumbo, which would indicate he doesn't hate the place all that much.

Then again, maybe his owner lives across the street from Pluto and has his trainer point the horse for that specific meet. The trainer uses Dumbo to get the horse into some kind of form, then goes all out at Pluto.

Or Pluto races in January when the opposition in a particular class at many tracks is shaky, while Dumbo's meet is in mid-July and attracts tougher competition.

Or those three wins came in a weak starter allowance series last year at Pluto, and there's no similar series at Dumbo.

Or maybe it's just the randomness of performances. Maybe he could just as easily have won three races at Dumbo and none at Pluto.

If he's 3-for-9 at Pluto with no Beyers over 60 but is 0-for-13 at Dumbo with every Beyer over 70, is it really reasonable to think he prefers Pluto?

Determining whether a horse prefers one track to another is tricky. About the only advice I can give you for sure is this: Do not bet seriously on a big favorite whose best races were across town.

Conversely, it's possible that a horse can wake up when he's returned to the track where he's had success in the past. You don't want to use much imagination at 8-5, but at 8-1, why not?

Certainly, there are instances when horse-for-course becomes a major factor, such as at the bullrings (tracks with a circumference of less than one mile). Take, for instance, the short meet each summer at Ferndale, a tiny town in northern California with a half-mile track. Entrants come from such tracks as Pleasanton and Santa Rosa and Golden Gate, all of which have different configurations. Any horse who has already won or placed at the track should get a big boost in your handicapping.

The list below includes a number of other bullrings. Because there are many small tracks that race only a few days a year, or are unrecognized, this is not a complete list.

Arapahoe Park
Assiniboia Downs
Charles Town
Columbus
Delta Downs
Evangeline Downs
Ferndale
Fonner Park

Fort Erie
Grants Pass
Hastings Park
Horsemen's Park
Marquis Downs
Penn National
Ruidoso Downs
Santa Rosa
Timonium
Turf Paradise
Wyoming Downs