

## **Distance Switches**

If a horse is stretching out for the first time, does his breeding and running style presage a big effort? Often you'll see a horse, particularly an inexperienced one, race on a schedule. For example, typical is sprint-sprint-route for a horse's first three races; the first two races are to get the horse acclimated to the sport, the third is to get him to try to win. The same is often true for a layoff router—he'll get a sprint prep or two before being asked for his best at his preferred distance.

Bettors often mistakenly favor closing sprinters their first time in a route; generally these are bad bets, because the slower pace of the route will dull their closing kicks. In sprints, the dropoff in energy from the first quarter to the last is severe. A 6-furlong time of 22, 45.1, 1:10.3 means the horse ran 22 seconds early and 25.2 seconds late. Closers are moving into the slowest fraction of the race, as the leaders tire and decelerate. In a route race, the first quarter is usually much slower, and the deceleration is not as sharp—so the closers aren't helped by the distance. What *does* help them is a battle for the lead, a suicidal pace in which a one-mile race goes in 22.2, 45.3, 1:10.4, and 1:38.1. Now our hero is closing into a sluggish 27.2 quarter, so his optical illusion close makes it appear as if he's turned on the afterburners when in fact he's simply plodded past exhausted foes.

Just because a horse gained ground in a sprint doesn't necessarily augur a big finish in a longer race. Worse, these horses are often way overbet because the stretch gain last out is obvious in the *Form*, and public handicappers constantly point out that "the big finisher last time should like the extra distance." Well, why should he? A swim star who finishes fast in the 400 meters may be nowhere around in the 800. Simply being able to close may not mean much. A better bet to succeed on the stretchout: a horse whose sprints show him as even-paced.

Not every horse who's stretching out for the first time deserves a detailed analysis. Take the horse who's been going off at long odds for each of his first five lifetime starts, all in sprints. Now the trainer tries him at 1 1/8 miles. This smacks more

of desperation than planning. The horse has already shown he can't sprint, so the trainer is simply taking a shot, hoping the extra distance will wake the horse up.

Overall, sprint to route is not a very successful play, according to the stats from every race in the U.S. and Canada from 2014 through 2017. The results for turf and synthetics stretchouts seem more promising than a stretchout on dirt, as the return-on-investment column indicates:

<b>SPRINT TO ROUTE</b>							
<b>Type</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Wins</b>	<b>W%</b>	<b>P%</b>	<b>S%</b>	<b>ROI</b>	<b>IV</b>
All	131489	14968	11%	23%	35%	0.73	0.94
Favorites	13125	4855	37%	59%	72%	0.85	2.85
Odds < 3-1	21113	6982	33%	56%	71%	0.85	2.45
Odds 8-1 up	69033	2444	4%	10%	18%	0.65	0.30
Odds 20-1 up	35780	585	2%	5%	10%	0.58	0.15
Dirt route	66601	7832	12%	24%	37%	0.68	0.92
Turf route	34539	3316	10%	20%	29%	0.76	0.89
Synthetic route	9498	1168	12%	24%	36%	0.87	0.97
Won last race	13418	1927	14%	28%	41%	0.69	1.15
Fin 1-2-3 last race	41524	6628	16%	31%	45%	0.75	1.29

How about if we go the other way—route to sprint? If the horse has previously done well in sprints, or his pace figures in routes would make him competitive in a sprint, you may be onto something. Otherwise, it could be a negative: no route race was available, the trainer wants to sharpen the horse's speed, the horse has been quitting at longer distances, or perhaps the trainer wants to make the race go for another horse from his barn. The faster pace of the sprint is usually enough to spell doom for the turnbacks. You might occasionally find a turf horse who's been a runaway at a route and who may do better at a sprint, and there are always those animals that seem equally fast (or slow) whether it's a sprint or a route. But for the most part, this is not an angle worth pursuing:

<b>ROUTE TO SPRINT</b>							
<b>Type</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Wins</b>	<b>W%</b>	<b>P%</b>	<b>S%</b>	<b>ROI</b>	<b>IV</b>
All	116321	13152	11%	23%	36%	0.73	0.94

Favorites	12563	4456	35%	57%	70%	0.82	2.82
Odds < 3-1	19567	6239	32%	54%	70%	0.83	2.44
Odds 8-1 up	60021	2275	4%	10%	20%	0.68	0.33
Odds 20-1 up	30456	528	2%	5%	11%	0.60	0.15
Dirt sprint	66932	7660	11%	23%	36%	0.74	0.93
Turf sprint	21752	2524	12%	23%	35%	0.73	1.07
Synthetic sprint	10008	1192	12%	24%	37%	0.80	0.98
Won last race	8389	1196	14%	28%	42%	0.74	1.13
Finished 1-2-3 last race	29992	4797	16%	31%	46%	0.78	1.30

One thing about distance switches—there are no rules. Every case is different. Try to figure *why* the horse is switching distances today, and whether it's a positive move. Even then, you still have the rest of the field to consider.