

Quarter Horse Race Handicapping for the Thoroughbred Player Page 1/2

If you are like most simulcast horse players, you run into quarter horse races all the time, particularly at night when flipping through the live tracks looking for action. Most thoroughbred bettors that decide to plunk down a few bucks on the *Q's* borrow their analysis from thoroughbred experience. When the quick race doesn't go their way, they proclaim that quarter horses are no different than dogs or slots and laugh it off as a lottery for horses. In fact, quarter horse races are more formful and less stressful to handicap than thoroughbreds. Favorites win at a 37% clip and while payoffs in the exotics tend to be lower, in return the *Q's* offer far less volatility than thoroughbred races.

My experience and knowledge of quarter horse racing runs very deep. Most of my adult years were spent living in Anaheim in the Disneyland area about 20 minutes from Los Alamitos racetrack and I spent a great deal of my time out there as you can imagine! In the quarter horse industry, Los Alamitos is one of two *Meccas* of the sport, the other is Ruidoso Downs in New Mexico. *Los Al* is the top quarter horse track in the world in terms of mutuel handle and purse distribution. The return of parimutuel racing to Texas during the last decade has had an important impact on the sport which has grown slowly but steadily in the west and south over the years. The sport has never caught on in the Northeast or Canada, but has become popular at some mid-western tracks such as Prairie Meadows.

Although quarter horse racing generates very little publicity in the sports media, far less than thoroughbred racing, it also remains relatively free of the scandal and drug concerns that often plague its bigger sibling. The issue of race fixing for instance is almost non-existent in quarter horse racing due to the explosive nature of the heats that leaves little time for underhanded actions or shenanigans by riders.

One problem here, I cannot document anything said in this article. I don't have a source of unlimited data for testing, but recently HDW has informed me that they can get access to the *Equibase* quarter horse files. I expect that we will be delving into it sometime in the year 2004. In the meantime, you will have to handicap using my simple method using a pen and the *Track Program*, *Daily Racing Form* or *Equibase* on-line past-performances. Don't be surprised if you get a few winners and find yourself hooked.

Quarter horse races take place at distances between 220 yards (1-furlong or 1/8 mile) up to 550 yards on the dirt straightaway. There are also races from 660 to 870 yards around the turn. The 870 is the common *marathon* distance for quarter horses and is just short of a 1/2 mile or 4.0f. Thoroughbreds can and do compete with the *Q's* in the mixed breed races at these longer distances. The most commonly run distances are 300, 350, 400 and 440 yards. The 440 yard distance brought about the name *quarter* horse because it is a quarter-of-a-mile race and is considered the *classic* distance for older stakes stars.

Timing of quarter horses is considerably advanced from thoroughbreds. All horses are individually timed from the gate to the wire in 1/100 seconds as they pass a light beam from start to finish. Beaten lengths are unnecessary for time calculations but are presented for visual handicapping in the PP's. The larger tracks, such as Los Alamitos, also time the last 220 yard interval for races that are 350 yards or longer and record additional beaten length and time intervals depending on distance. A good 440 yard time for a top quarter horse is 21.50. If that doesn't seem so fast compared to thoroughbreds, remember that *Q's* are timed from a standing start at the gate. Thoroughbred races are timed with a running start and that creates deceptively fast (if not downright inaccurate) fractional times. A fast quarter-horse competing in a typical thoroughbred sprint could run under 21 seconds for Fr1. Do not underestimate the explosive speed of these runners. They are literally the fastest horses on the planet. Very few thoroughbreds have ever been rapid enough from the gate to 1/4-pole to defeat a top quarter horse at a quarter mile.

In a sentence - early speed from the gate is everything. Quickness at the start and the ability to accelerate rapidly in the first 100 yards becomes critical to success. There are other concepts that need consideration; even front runners vs. closers and speed figures to think about, but the primary analysis factor is gate quickness and early thrust.

Quarter Horse Race Handicapping System Page 2/2

We'll use an easy 4-step process for manual handicapping. The simple method can help you to find solid contenders in a few minutes. We don't want to expand the analysis much further until we have computer data to work with and the ability to document the results.

Preparation

You will need a set of past-performances that include the start-call, speed index and running lines. You can download *Equibase* or *DRF* PP's on-line through various sources, or you can purchase the track program if you attend in person. Below is a typical *Q*-horse running line -

04Apr03 LA fst 350 tw 18.01 17.96 4 3 2-hd 4-nk Jockey,Joe LB 124 3.30 88 07

This is a past-performance line from a horse that competed on the 4th of April at Los Alamitos. The distance that day was 350 yards and the track was fast with a tail-wind (*tw*). This horse ran the race in the precise final time of 18.01 seconds. The winner ran 17.96. This horse was in post-position 4 and broke 3rd in the field (underlined break call 3) and was 2nd by a head at the first chart call. The horse finished 4th by a neck and on the far right, the 88 figure is the speed rating (speed index). The last item is the field size for that race, 7 horses.

Step-1

Peruse the last 4 running lines for each horse and mark or tag the 3 best races according to the horse's finish beaten lengths. In other words, mark the 3 races in which the horse finished least amount of beaten lengths behind the winner; we'll forgive one bad one if the horse has 4 or more starts shown. Don't worry about layoff situations or distance changes with these running lines right now - this is a simplified system - we would need a computer program to decipher further details anyway. Each horse now has three qualifying lines marked. Lightly raced entrants with less than 3 starts are ok with this method, mark whatever is available, but pass on playing maiden races that have several first time starters and lots of lightly raced runners.

Step-2

Look at the Break Call for each horse's 3 selected races. Compare the break position to the field size (far right of the running line) and circle the break call if the horse out-broke more than half the field. For example, if the horse competed in a field of 7, we want a circle if its break was 3, 2 or 1. In a field 10, we will circle those with a break-call of 4 or less. A quick gate horse will receive 3 circles with this step.

Step 3

Next, check the beaten lengths at the first call for the three selected races. Circle any or all of them if the horse was within 1-length of the leader. If the horse was exactly 1-length back, circle it. If the horse was leading, obviously it gets the circle. Again, a maximum of 3 circles per horse.

Step 4

Now look at the speed index figures for each horse's designated 3 lines. Find the highest figure from among all the horses and circle it. Now look at every horse and circle any speed figure from the designated 3 lines that is within 6 points of that highest one. If the highest figure in the field is 80, circle all others that are 74 or higher.

Now you have your program marked up with several circles. The horses with most circles are your top contenders. The maximum number of circles is 9 for any one horse. A runner scoring the max 9 circles will likely be a heavy favorite. Just as with velocity handicapping, we are often more interested in what a horse has done in the early going than we are in the finish. Quarter horses that consistently show fast gate breakaways and contending early speed are always dangerous and can take the race home in a heartbeat.

Email me if you have any questions about this method or quarter horse race handicapping.