

SYNTHETIC SURFACE BIASES

By Rich Nilsen

It's been over two years since the return of synthetic surface racing in North. In the fall of 2005, Turfway Park in Florence, Kentucky debuted Polytrack and since then several racetracks and training centers have either switched over to that surface or a similar, competing all-weather track.

It's widely known that the new synthetic tracks have helped level the playing field, particularly for horses lacking early speed. Statistics from the comprehensive Brisnet.com database certainly back up that perception in most cases.

Not all synthetic tracks are made the same, even those with the same brand name. The Polytrack at Del Mar, for instance, has a different composition than the Polytrack at Keeneland.

One famous handicapping author and speed figure guru predicted that Thoroughbred racing was destined for the way of harness racing. In other words, racing on all weather tracks would become very predictable and mundane, resulting in consistently low prices and a disenchanting audience. Nothing could be further from the truth.

No two synthetic tracks appear to be playing the same way, so the variety with the new surfaces will keep handicapping angles intact. Consequently, there will be even more new handicapping angles and theories that result from this transition that is occurring throughout the nation.

Due to the extremely high cost of switching out surfaces, it may be decades, if ever, before some of the smaller tracks make the change. As a result, for years to come handicappers will have to deal with the often perplexing issue of how a conventional dirt runner will negotiate switching surfaces. It is not easy, but when has handicapping ever been?

In this month's issue we're going to look how some of the new synthetic race courses are playing in terms of their predominant track bias.

SANTA ANITA

The Arcadia racetrack joined fellow Southern California track Hollywood Park in switching over to another version of synthetic track known as Cushion Track. Similar to poly, Cushion Track is a composition of silica sand, synthetic fibers, elastic fiber, rubber and wax.

The Cushion Track was installed this past summer and debuted at the Oak Tree meeting, and overall it was very well received by the horseman and riders. Withstanding temperatures that exceeded 100 degrees on occasion, the track remained very consistent in nature. However because of drainage issues that persisted, the Cushion Track was closed by Santa Anita management for a full week in early December to address this issue.

"We just feel we owe it to the horsemen to do everything we can to make sure the drainage system we have provides the same consistent surface we all expected and were guaranteed," Santa Anita President Ron Charles stated in explaining the decision. "Right now, I just don't think we're there. It's critical that we go into our winter meet knowing that when it does rain, the track

SPECIAL ARTICLE ADDENDUM
THE
HORSEPLAYER[™]
MAGAZINE
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2008 ISSUE

drains vertically and allows us to be back racing on a safe racing surface in a very short period of time.

Horseman supported this decision, but it will be interesting to see how this pans out. Other tracks, such as Turfway Park and Woodbine, have had serious maintenance issues in their attempts to “tweak” their synthetic tracks. That has caused concern about the future of all weather courses in this country.

SA - TRACK BIAS

The bottom line for handicappers is in understanding how the new tracks play, and adjusting to changes from the previous conventional, dirt track.

Comparing this summer’s Cushion Track meet to last year’s bias data for Santa Anita, we see a slight decline in the emphasis for early speed at the two most popular sprint distances, 6 furlongs and 6 ½ furlongs. In 2006 at 6 furlongs, 38 percent of the races were won in gate-to-wire fashion. The success rate of front runners dropped to 31 percent, based on the 67 races run at this distance. The need for good tactical speed has remained roughly the same.

The wire-to-wire rate actually rose at 6 ½ furlongs, as seven of the 21 races were won in this fashion (33%) compared to a nearly identical 32-percent rate in all of 2006. Amazingly, the average beaten lengths at the first call was 2.08, exactly the same average for 114 races last year.

At both 6 and 6 ½ furlongs, over 93 percent of the winners were within five lengths of the lead at the first call. It has proven difficult to win from very far back.

Twenty two races were contested at 7 furlongs, and only one horse was able to wire the field during the entire Oak Tree meet (4.5%). Last year 38 percent of the 56 races were taken wire-to-wire.

The most notable change has occurred with the post positions. Whereas in the past the rail and inside posts (1-3) were preferred, that has been the exact opposite case since Cushion Track was installed. Only six percent of the 6 furlong races were won from the one hole, and overall, the inside posts won few races than expected [an impact value of 0.51 for the rail and 0.93 for the combined inside posts].

The inside posts have been a detriment at most of the popular distances, from 7 furlongs up to 1 1/16 miles. Post one, for example, won roughly half as many races as expected [impact value of 0.53] in the 57 routes and only 4.5% of the 7 furlong races.

6 ½ furlongs was the only exception among the popular distances, as inside posts for whatever reason fared very well at that distance. It is also worth noting that this anti-inside post bias has not occurred over the Cushion Track at Hollywood Park.

There was also a significant change pertaining to the dirt routes, where it became more difficult than ever to score wire-to-wire. Only six of the 57 routes were won on the front end. Across all running styles the Cushion Track played fairly around two turns, with a slight edge given to deep closers. Stalkers with tactical speed, known as Early/Pressers, fared well as did mid-pack runners, referred to as Pressers.

SPECIAL ARTICLE ADDENDUM
THE
HORSEPLAYER[™]
MAGAZINE
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2008 ISSUE

Runners with outside posts (8 and beyond) actually performed best at both popular route distances. In 2006 over 23 percent of the dirt routes were won wire-to-wire and 66 percent were won by either Early types or Early/Pressers. That latter figure has dropped to 49 percent since the move to Cushion Track. That is a significant movement, again leveling the playing field for closers.

The Cushion Track route races are playing remarkably similar to your typical turf course.

GOLDEN GATE

The Northern California racetrack became the first in that region to switch over to synthetic as management chose the move to Michael Dickinson's Tapeta surface. This same surface is in place at Presque Isle Downs in Pennsylvania, Fair Hill Training Center, and the prestigious Nad El Sheba in Saudi Arabia.

Early speed has remained an asset despite the surface change. From 73 sprints contested (as of November 25) a healthy rate of wire-to-wire winners have scored. No less than 34 percent of the races have been won on the front end. Granted it is not the 43 percent seen in 2006, but nevertheless a high rate.

Most of this drop in wire-to-wire rate can be attributed directly to large field sizes. Golden Gate has had far fewer five and six-horse fields since Tapeta was introduced. During one recent two-week stretch over 800 horses competed, resulting in an average field size of 8.36 runners. For as long as I can remember, that has been unheard of at any Northern California track.

"I like what I'm seeing," stated noted handicapper and Las Vegas Review writer Rich Eng. "Synthetic surfaces were mandated for California tracks for safety. If the by-product is to increase field size and, thus, overall handle, the courageous experiment is moving in the right direction. Someday soon, maybe you can even ask me who I like on the card at Golden Gate."

Interestingly, a couple of similar trends occurring on Cushion Track are also occurring on this Tapeta surface. Inside posts, particularly in the Golden Gate sprints, are a detriment, as is early speed going two turns.

From a small sample of 22 routes, only three horses (9.1%) have won wire to wire. Nearly 60 percent of the races have been taken by deep, one run closers (Sustained types), an abnormally high percent. The average beaten lengths of the winner at the first call are nearly five lengths. Last year at Golden Gate, that figure was 2.36 lengths, and 29 percent of the route races were won on the front end.

TURFWAY PARK

The Holiday meet, which begins each year right after the close of the Churchill Downs' Fall meet, has gotten off to an interesting start. At the most commonly run distance of 6 furlongs, early speed has been potent. Half of the 28 races contested have been won gate to wire, and the average beaten lengths of the winner at the first call is a very low 1.1 lengths. There is also an outside bias favoring the middle and outside posts. Only one of the 28 races has been captured by the horse breaking along the rail.

The track has been playing much fairer at the other sprint distance of 6 ½ furlongs, but the edge still lies with runners possessing early or tactical speed. The average beaten lengths of the winner at the first call is 2.8 lengths.

SPECIAL ARTICLE ADDENDUM
THE
HORSEPLAYER[™]
MAGAZINE
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2008 ISSUE

Things change dramatically around two turns over the Turfway Park Polytrack. Closers have dominated both at the one mile and 1 1/16 miles distances. Most of the routes are contested at one mile, which has seen only three (9 %) of the 33 races won on the front end. Only seven races thus far have been run at 1 1/16 miles, but six of those have been taken by off the pace runners (Pressers and Sustained types).

This is not unusual for the course here, as closers tend to fare better as the distances increase. [See how this track played shortly after it was installed by referring back to the Track Focus piece from the November 2005 issue of The Horse Player Magazine.]

ARLINGTON PARK

The 80th season of the famed Chicago racetrack brought us a new Polytrack era, and the results were very surprising. Again, we looked at the most popular distances, and the difference was negligible when compared to the 2006 data.

Frontrunners scored at roughly the same rate for all the one turn distances, including the flat mile. The biggest difference came at 7 furlongs, which saw a much higher rate of frontrunning winners (31%) versus last year (22%) when races were contested on the conventional dirt track.

Unlike the two California tracks discussed, inside posts fared well at Arlington Park and were actually preferred at the most common distances. This included the one turn mile, which notoriously in the past was often detrimental to the runners breaking along the inside.

DEL MAR

A new era was also seen this summer where the Surf meets the Poly. In dirt sprints the new course played fair. From 19 races only one horse went wire to wire at 7 furlongs, but 23 percent of all dirt sprints were won on the front end. Last year it was 30 percent. The decrease in frontrunning winners were made up by close stalkers who won at a higher rate than the prior season.

It was difficult to win on the lead around two turns. In 2006, 60 percent of the dirt routes were won by either Early or Early/Presser types. This dropped significantly to only 39.7% in 2007, as the route races were dominated by closers.

Post positions played fairly in the two turn races. There was a slight edge to outside posts going one turn.

KEENELAND

The changes in regards to the surface change at Lexington's historic track have been well documented. Once known for its "golden rail" that strongly favored inside speed horses and often dictated the outcome of the entire day's card, Keeneland is now a course where handicappers search out runners with the best late kick.

BRIS Late Pace Ratings measure a horse's closing kick from the pre-stretch call to the finish. These numbers, which appear on all BRIS Past Performances, are an invaluable tool especially for tracks like Keeneland. Handicappers are highly recommended to learn how to use these numbers in conjunction with the Race Shape figures also presented in the Past Performances.

SPECIAL ARTICLE ADDENDUM
THE
HORSEPLAYER[™]
MAGAZINE
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2008 ISSUE

SUMMARY

In so many ways the track bias trends for synthetic tracks are similar to turf racing. The shorter the distance, early speed holds up much better and in many cases is actually preferred. In races around two turns, it can be very difficult to win on the front end. It is much more of a level playing field, with closers winning their fair share of races, at the minimum.

There is nothing easy about this game, and the new all weather courses that are popping up throughout the country create new and exciting challenges. Real horseplayers embrace these changes and look forward to the many financial opportunities they present. Good luck in this new era!

Rich Nilsen is Marketing Director for Brisnet.com. The 8th place finisher in the 2002 National Handicapping Championship, Rich will be heading to Las Vegas for his fifth trip to the NHC. He also qualified this year at River Downs for the Coast Casino Horseplayer World Series.