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Bo-Rail? Not exactly

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Jockeys are lauded every day for saving ground on the turns and criticized for taking a circuitous wide route to the finish line. Owners, trainers and bettors love nothing more than a rail-hugging trip, the shortest path to the wire and often a key ingredient to getting to the winner's circle. In fact, the belief that Calvin Borel is a rail-skimming daredevil with no equal in that category has helped make him one of the most acclaimed jockeys in the sport.

But is the legend of Calvin Bo-rail really a myth? According to a set of statistics compiled by Trakus, Borel, at least at Keeneland, is more likely to hug the outer fence than the inner one.

Thanks to Trakus, a system, now available at seven North American thoroughbred venues, that tracks the precise positions horses are at on the racetrack at every instance in the race, the collection of data and statistics in the sport is starting to move out of the Dark Ages. To find out which jockeys save the most ground, which go the widest and how much of a factor ground loss is in the outcome of a race, the Trakus team recently compiled an interesting set of stats for the three tracks that have had the system in place the longest, Keeneland, Del Mar and Woodbine.

Over the four meets prior to the on-going one at Keeneland, Borel is one of the worst when it comes to saving ground. In six-furlong races on the Polytrack, he came in 23rd out of 24 riders when it came to saving ground. In mile-and-a-sixteenth races, he was 22nd out of 24.

(In fairness to Borel, he may ride differently at Churchill Downs, where his rail-hugging tactics in the Derby are the stuff of legend. Because that track has had Trakus for only a relatively short period of time stats were not yet available).

At Keeneland, the king of saving ground is actually jockey James Graham. Graham came in first in the mile-and-a-sixteenth races and second in six-furlong events. Not surprisingly, betting to win on Graham's mounts shows a flat bet profit in both categories.



Borel has made a reputation as a rail rider at Churchill. Is that reputation deserved at other tracks around the country?

The Trakus numbers suggest that saving ground at Keeneland is vital. The winners of six furlong races covered, on average, 3997 feet. The runner-ups, on average covered 4,001 feet. That shows that saving a mere four feet on the turn often made a difference. Ground loss was also a factor in two-turn Polytrack races at Keeneland, where the winners covered 5,682 feet on average, a foot less than the runner-ups.

Woodbine also has a Polytrack surface but the numbers show that that track plays much differently than Keeneland. At Woodbine, going a bit wide is actually a good thing. For instance, in Woodbine sprints, winners on averaged traveled 4,011 feet, while horses than finished fifth traveled and average of three fewer feet. In routes, horses that finished last actually traveled on average, less ground than the winners did. Clearly, inside paths are not to place to be at Woodbine.

According to the Trakus numbers, during 2011 no rider consistently took a wider path than Patrick Husbands -- and he finished second in the jockey standings. Leading rider Luis Contreras came in 17th out of 21 jockeys when it came to going wide in mile-and-a-sixteenth races.

The only numbers available for Del Mar were those from Polytrack sprint races at the 2012 meet, but they also tell some interesting stories. Aaron Gryder was the best among Del Mar regulars saving ground, while Alex Bisono had the worst marks for going wide.

Shug's Turf Monsters: When you think turf trainers you think Christophe Clement, Jonathan Sheppard, Chad Brown, maybe Graham Motion. But has anyone ever had a better year with grass horses than Shug McGaughey? McGaughey has won 13 stakes this year, 12 of them on the grass. He has won grass stakes with six different horses.

John Who? Russell Baze has been the leading jockey in the nation in terms of highest winning percentage every year since 1966 ... or so it seems. But it looks like Baze is going to get beat this year by Finger Lakes regular John Davila Jr. He's winning at a 35 percent clip, while Baze's win rate is 33 percent.

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