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Can Trakus data identify future winners?

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By **John J. Shufon**

Handicappers know the significance of a wide trip, especially in turf racing. A horse loses approximately one length for every path wide the horse is off the rail, so lost ground is critical in a game where winning is often decided by a nose or a head.

Collecting or obtaining data on ground lost historically has not been easy. Years ago, past performances would denote a wide trip by simply indicating “wide” in the comment line. Handicappers were forced to either attend the races and take detailed trip notes or keep an archive of charts for reference.

The task has become easier as video race replays are now readily available and chart callers are much more descriptive in their comment lines. Examples of typical comments today are “3 wide throughout” or “3wfirst; 4wsecond” or “6w into stretch.” However, these comments are the opinion of a chart caller and often are far from precise.

In recent years, the Trakus system has been adopted by most major tracks. Fans are familiar with the “chicklets” from the Trakus system that are displayed on TV screens during races and show the saddlecloth numbers and colors and the position of each horse.

Among the benefits of Trakus is that it provides accurate and useful ground-loss data. Trakus uses transponders in the saddlecloth of each runner, and the chip’s signal is picked up by a trackside antenna, and the horse’s precise location, speed, and distance are calculated.

The Trakus T-Charts, which are maintained on each participating track’s website, show time and distance measurements by segment and cumulatively for each point of call. The finish screen of the charts provides the actual distance run by each horse and computes a delta value that signifies the difference in ground covered by each runner relative to the winner. For example, if the second-place horse received a delta of 32, it means the horse ran 32 more feet than the winner, presumably due to a wide trip.

To evaluate the usefulness of Trakus ground-loss data for finding horses to bet back who have a good chance to be successful, turf races at two meets were selected for analysis: the 2013-14 Gulfstream winter meet and the 2014 Saratoga meet. Turf races were selected because of their relatively tight turns, where ground loss is particularly disadvantageous.

The methodology used to find qualifying horses:

1. The Trakus T-Charts on the track's websites were used.
2. Only two-turn races on turf were analyzed.

To find qualifying horses, the following criteria were used, based on the principle that a length is about eight feet:

- a. If the delta value for any horse was between 32 and 40 feet and the horse finished within four lengths of the winner, the horse was selected for follow-up; and
- b. If the delta value was 40 feet or greater and the horse finished within five lengths of the winner, the horse was selected for follow-up.

The methodology was designed to find horses who were in contention and might have even won had they not raced wide. It should be noted that only races where horses received a positive delta (wide relative to the winner) were selected for the study. Some leeway (two feet max) also was granted for horses who may have been just under the delta criteria if other traffic trouble warranted follow-up.

For the Gulfstream analysis, the run-back race had to occur within the time frame of that meet (Nov. 30, 2013, through April 6, 2014), but the start could occur at any track, distance, or surface. For Saratoga, the run-back race could occur either during that meet or during the subsequent Belmont fall meet (covering a cumulative time period of July 18 through Oct. 26). As with the Gulfstream analysis, the first race back could occur at any track, distance, or surface.

There were 117 total qualifying run-backs between Gulfstream and Saratoga.

Gulfstream Park results

The results of the study for the Gulfstream turf course can be summarized in one word: impressive. As Table 1 shows, of the 66 horses who qualified, 21 horses (32 percent) came back to win at an average pari-mutuel win payoff of \$10.08. The \$2 return on investment was a very healthy \$3.21. Twenty-one other horses hit the board at average odds of 3.70-1, and six non-winning run-backs won their next start at odds of just over 6.10-1.

The average odds for the 24 horses finishing off the board was 13.60-1. This relatively high value suggests that several of these horses may have been eliminated from consideration if traditional handicapping principles were applied, which would further increase the ROI.

Gulfstream Park winter meet: Turf (two turns)

HORSE	DATE	TRAKUS	TEMP.	DATE OF	WIN TEMP.	MUTUEL
		DELTA (FT.)	RAIL (FT.)	WIN	RAIL (FT.)	PAYOUT
Gala Award	12/07/13	39	96	01/20/14	60	\$4.00
Oroluca	12/08/13	41	24	12/22/13	108	\$18.00
Pegasus Star	12/14/13	41	36	01/23/14	36	\$4.20
Kenai Warrior	12/21/13	31	48	01/24/14	36	\$7.80
Valerie'sgreenjet	12/22/13	35	48	01/10/14	Off Turf	\$5.40
Win For Kitten	12/27/13	46	60	01/20/14	0	\$10.40

Pleasant Cat	12/28/13	36	72	02/08/14	24	\$7.20
Allstar	01/04/14	40	84	01/17/14	Off turf	\$7.00
Miss Besilu	01/05/14	40	84	02/08/14	96	\$5.60
Smooth Daddy	01/11/14	32	96	02/22/14	0	\$35.80
Big Sam	01/15/14	37	0	02/12/14	24	\$11.20
I Am Now	01/19/14	46	0	02/23/14	72	\$8.60
VV Goodnight	01/19/14	51	0	02/22/14	12	\$10.00
Charade	01/25/14	35	96	02/15/14	84	\$4.40
Thunder Run	02/01/14	64	36	03/07/14	36	\$6.00
Brickyard Kitten	02/05/14	31	36	03/05/14	108	\$10.80
Market Outlook	02/09/14	36	24	03/23/14	108	\$3.60
Barzini	02/23/14	40	0	03/12/14	0	\$6.00
Noor Un Nisa	03/05/14	32	36	03/23/14	48	\$27.20
Acquisition	03/06/14	40	36	03/23/14	48	\$4.00
Hakama	03/15/14	32	0	04/06/14	96	\$14.40
AVERAGE		39	43		47	\$10.08

Saratoga results

The results of the Saratoga run-backs, presented in Table 2, are not as impressive as at Gulfstream but certainly are decent and confirm the benefits of including Trakus ground-loss data when handicapping. Of the 51 horses who qualified based on the criteria, 13 horses (25 percent) came back to win at an average win mutuel of \$9.83 and a \$2 ROI of \$2.51. Twenty other horses hit the board at average odds of 4.80-1, and 10 non-winning run-backs won their next start at odds of just over 6-1. The average odds for the 18 horses finishing off the board was 9.30-1.

Saratoga meet: Turf (two turns)

HORSE	DATE	TURF	TRAKUS	DATE OF	WIN	MUTUEL
		VENUE	DELTA (FT.)	WIN	VENUE	PAYOUT
Abaco	07/19	Inner	40	08/23	Main	\$10.60
Honor The Kitten	07/21	Inner	53	09/18	Main	\$6.60
Rapsallion	07/25	Inner	42	10/16	Kee dirt	\$7.20
Romans Paradise	08/01	Inner	41	08/27	Inner	\$7.80
Firespike	08/02	Main	53	08/30	Main	\$5.30
Bella Kateri	08/08	Inner	33	09/11	Main	\$4.00
Long On Value	08/08	Inner	32	09/13	Cby turf	\$7.40
Defining Product	08/08	Inner	42	10/02	Main	\$26.80

Alakazan Alakazan	08/10	Inner	69	09/17	KD turf	\$5.00
High Heel Kitten	08/14	Inner	51	10/05	Inner	\$7.50
Balderdash	08/23	Inner	38	09/17	Main	\$25.20
Dreamboat	08/24	Inner	46	09/08	FL dirt	\$5.20
Gustnado	08/30	Main	36	09/27	Inner	\$9.20
AVERAGE			44			\$9.83

Summary

Table 3 summarizes the results of qualifying horses for the two meets, and the run-backs collectively won 29 percent of their next starts, with an average win payoff of \$9.98. Approximately two-thirds of the run-backs hit the board, a percentage that interestingly is consistent across both venues. The cumulative \$2 ROI for the 117 races is a respectable \$2.90.

Achieving a flat-bet profit given such diverse circumstances without the benefit of conventional handicapping is certainly noteworthy. In addition, 16 non-winning run-backs won their next start at average odds of 5.50-1. This means 50 horses, or 43 percent of all qualifying horses, won one of their next two starts.

	GULFSTREAM PARK TURF	SARATOGA TURF	TOTAL
	(TWO TURNS)	(TWO TURNS)	TOTAL
NO. OF RUN-BACKS	66	51	117
NO. OF WINNERS	21	13	34
PERCENT WINNERS	32%	25%	29%
AVERAGE MUTUEL PAYOUT	\$10.08	\$9.83	\$9.98
\$2 ROI	\$3.21	\$2.51	\$2.90
NO. 2ND OR 3RD	21	20	41
PERCENT 2ND OR 3RD	32%	39%	35%
PERCENT 1ST, 2ND, OR 3RD	64%	65%	64%

To the question of whether Trakus data can be used to find winners, the answer is a qualified yes. Complementing that data with traditional handicapping methods should improve on the results achieved.

Shufon is a retired analyst and bureau director from the New York State Department of Transportation. He is an avid recreational horseplayer and an original member of Epona Racing Stable.

Top left position photo:

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