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Nyquist or Songbird?

By Bill Finley
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When Nyquist crossed the wire in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile in 1:43.79, there appeared little doubt that he was an inferior horse to the Juvenile Fillies winner Songbird -- at least on that day. Both ran over the same track at the same distance and Nyquist's time for the mile-and-a-sixteenth was 1:43.79, 1.06 seconds slower than Songbird's time. The Beyer figure for Songbird was a 99, far superior to Nyquist's 89.

None of this was exactly a surprise since Songbird was being touted as a potentially great filly while Nyquist didn't seem to excite anyone, despite his undefeated record. But dig a little bit deeper and the head-to-head comparison between the two from Breeders' Cup Day tells a different story.

There are two schools of thought when it comes to making speed figures. The group that compiles the Beyer numbers does not take into account ground loss on the turns or the total distance a horse covered. The two "sheets" companies, Thoro-Graph and Ragozin, adjust their numbers, taking into account the ground lost on the turns. If you believe in the Beyer way of doing things then, yes, Songbird was clearly faster, clearly better. If you believe that you have to take into account the total distance covered when assessing how fast a horse ran then you won't find it hard to believe that Nyquist was actually the faster horse.

Trakus, now used by virtually every top track in North America, has taken the guess work out of analyzing how far a horse ran. The microchip put into the jockey's saddle gives you the precise

amount of distance each horse covered in a race. The horse floated five wide on both turns will have obviously run a longer race than the horse who hugs the rail throughout.

Bloodstock agent Elizabeth Blythe wrote in to point out that Nyquist, because he was wide on both turns, covered significantly more ground than Songbird did. The filly hugged the rail throughout and covered 5,666 feet. Nyquist covered 5,747 feet.

Do the math and it took Nyquist .01805 seconds to cover a foot while it took Songbird .01817 seconds. Is that a big difference? No. Is it a difference? Yes? Nyquist's average speed in the race was 37.7 mile per hour, while Songbird average was 37.5 miles per hour.

If the science and data are available there's no reason not to use it. Who ran the better race? There are dozens of different ways to define that and considering how visually impressive Songbird was, maybe she was the better horse. But when it comes to who ran the faster race the answer is Nyquist.

Jerry Brown, the owner of Thoro-Graph, agrees. He said he's not overly impressed with either horse but agrees that Nyquist is the faster of the two. On the Thoro-Graph scale, the lower the number, the faster the race. He gave Nyquist a 2-3/4 and Songbird a 3-3/4.

"It's simple logic that when you are wider on the turns than your competition you are running further than them," he said.

There are plenty of questions left for Nyquist to answer, most notably whether or not he can go a mile-and-a-quarter in the Kentucky Derby. Time will tell. In the meantime, he's not being given his due.

http://espn.go.com/horse-racing/story/_/id/14109185/was-faster-nyquist-songbird