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CHANGING THE FREQUENCY IN RACING

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Changing the Frequency in Racing

People can speculate over what has been the major change in thoroughbred racing over the past thirty years. Has it been the increase in legal and perceived illegal drug use, the rise of simulcasting, the increase in exotic wagers, more year long racing circuits, the increase in turf racing, the decrease in 2 year old racing, or the disappearance of the casual, proverbial \$2 betting fan from the racetrack?

While I think that simulcasting has changed the game more than anything else, one added significant factor that attracts little mention is the change in the layoff patterns of horses. We have witnessed a major change in the frequency in which horses return to competition after races. Thoroughbreds today take far more time to rest between races than they did 30 years ago. There was the former belief that horses had to be raced frequently to be kept in shape. You needed a recent start to be a contender. Now whether it is due to drugs, a general weakening of the breed, or the belief fostered by the “sheets” people (See <http://www.thorograph.com/index.php> and/or <http://www.thesheets.com>) that horses need significant time off to recover from major racing efforts, horse simply take far more time off between races.

A look at Travers Day in both 1973 and 2003 can show what has happened. On Travers Day in 1973, 77 horses that had previously run participated in the nine races held that day. On average, the starters had been off 19 days.¹ Considering all the starters, the median starter was running on 11 days rest. Only seven of the 77 horses (9.1%) had been off more than 30 days. Only three of the 77 horses (3.9%) were racing after more than 45 days of rest. More than two thirds of the horses ran on 14 or less days of rest. Thirteen of the 77 horses (16.9%) ran on seven days or less of rest.

Contrast that with 2003 Travers Day. On a 12 race program, 122 horses had started previously. On average, the starters had been off 55 days, and the median number of days off since a horse’s last start was now 29. 49.2% of the starters had been off for more than 30 days. No horse ran on a week’s rest or less. Only two horses ran on 10 days of rest or less. Only 5 out of 122 horses (4.1%) ran on 14 or less days of rest. On the other hand, 31 of the 122 horses (25.4%) had 45 days of rest or more.

There has been a sea change in the way that thoroughbred racing has been approached. Thirty years ago, two-thirds of the starters were racing on two weeks of rest or less. Now, that figure has been reduced to 4.1%. The median time between starts went from 11 days in 1973 to 29 days in 2003. Horses in 1973 frequently ran on a week of rest or less. Now virtually no horses come back to race within a week. Few horses in 1973 in August raced off more than a month’s layoff. Now practically half of the horses are racing after rests of a month or more.

¹ Any long layoff can inflate the average number excessively. The median days since the last race is probably a more useful number.

This change has obviously large implications for racing. Race track handicappers were once taught to favor frequency in their selections. Horses coming off layoffs were to be disfavored. How do you handicap when most of the horse are coming off layoffs? How do you treat the rare horse that comes back to run within ten days of his last race?

Racing secretaries also have to be hard pressed to come up with fields. If horses are racing off 29 days of rest rather than 11 days of rest, how many more horses do you need to stable at your track in order to assemble full fields? If a horse started every 11 days at a four week meet in Saratoga in 1973, you might expect that horse to run twice at the meet. Now, with horses starting every 29 days, you might expect only one start during a six week Saratoga meeting.

Also to be explored is the effect of this added rest period on the horse. Are horses healthier because of the added rest? Are they breaking down less? Are they running faster? Is the current American thoroughbred capable of running with only 11 days of rest? Why haven't race day medications and improved training medications made it possible for horses to run with greater frequency? Should tracks be carding fewer races in order to handle this reduction in the frequency of racing starts?

This change in the frequency that has been one of the major changes affecting American thoroughbred racing over the past three decades. It is time that we begin to understand and address the implications of changing this frequency.