

Chapter 9

Lightly Raced Horses

One of the more surprising discoveries of our research involves lightly raced *dirt* horses (lightly raced turf horses will be covered later). As expected, we found that pace numbers were crucial in evaluating lower level maiden claiming races, especially when the horse with the best pace number(s) was dropping from a maiden special weight event on the same circuit.

Maiden claiming races are often captured by horses with a touch of class that are able to get the lead early and, thus, discourage the perennial losers. Be hesitant to dismiss any animal that rates to secure an early uncontested lead in these events, even if its final numbers look weaker. A decent mutuel may be in the offing.

The big surprise came when we analyzed maiden special weight and preliminary allowance races. In these affairs, early pace was not nearly as important and, to our amazement, we found that standard pace analysis wasn't very enlightening. In fact, with horses that had only one or two races, using conventional pace methods could be downright misleading.

There are various reasons for this phenomenon. First of all, many trainers don't go all out with their first-time starters (or second- and third-timers for that matter). These trainers prefer to give them a race or two before cracking down.

In New York, trainer Nick Zito typifies this approach. Having won the Kentucky Derby with late developers Strike The Gold and Go For

Gin, Zito has a low strike rate with first-time starters. He elects to let most of them “stretch their legs” while getting exposure to the components of real competition (dirt kicked in their faces, running between horses, etc). Zito will have a live first-timer now and then, but it is not his forte.

Turf legends like Charlie Whittingham and Mack Miller were of the same ilk, able to get a horse to peak for a specific engagement, but rarely willing to sacrifice long-term goals for short-term laurels. By studying how different trainers handle their younger stock, the handicapper will be able to more effectively predict the performance of these newcomers.

On the major circuits, the frequent presence of several first-time starters sporting high auction prices and flashy pedigrees adds more uncertainty. If ready to roll in their debuts (check the trainer’s proficiency with first-timers), these types can wreak havoc with any pace analysis. Although trainer tendencies, pedigree analysis, and healthy tote board action can provide clues, we have found some patterns that consistently provide value in these situations.

Plunge Lines

The first pattern, which is more powerful in maiden claimers, is the drop-off or **plunge line**. When a first-time starter runs a pace number that is 15 or more points better than its final number, it was either (a) giving an honest effort or (b) out for exercise and not “asked” for anything in the latter stages of the race. These “pop and stop” types can run dramatically improved final numbers next time out by rationing their energy more evenly and/or facing weaker competition.

Both Coach Tobacco and Secret Liaison (page 103) ran plunge lines in their debuts. After running 76/55 in a maiden special weight event, Coach Tobacco dropped into a maiden claimer three weeks later to post a \$56.50 upset. Secret Liaison also began in a maiden special race, running an 81/63. When she returned two weeks later at the same level, her 91 two-furlong number coupled with an (81) pace number looked dominant, and she never looked back to the tune of \$45.80.

The plunge line is particularly lucrative with one-number horses

that are dropping from an open maiden special weight race to a maiden claimer while possessing the “boss” pace number.

Before discussing the really surprising discovery mentioned earlier, let’s refer to traditional pace handicapping as a backdrop. Look at the following fractional splits of imaginary horses A and B.

Horse A	22.0	45.1	1:10.3
Horse B	22.5	45.8	1:10.3

Conventional pace theory would suggest that, all else being equal, Horse A, due to his superior early pace ability, would usually defeat Horse B. Remember, **EQUIFORM** pace numbers should be primarily used to evaluate **condition**, not pace match-ups. In any event, the standard theory does have some validity when dealing with older, experienced horses. Their general abilities and running styles are well established and, in this scenario, match-up analysis has some merit. But who would pretend that they could pick representative pace lines for a bunch of second- and third-time starters. We humbly admit that our crystal ball told us to “ask again later”.

However, we did discover another pattern (or line) that is quite revealing regarding second-time starters (sometimes, even for third- or fourth-time starters). Before elucidating this pattern, we will touch upon another important concept, energy distribution. Our research shows that most horses, especially routers, run their best final numbers when they distribute their energy evenly. If a horse has run a 73 final number accompanied by an (85) pace number, he will probably run a better final number down the road when he runs a lower pace number.

This is not news. Several others have reached the same conclusion, and the research is well documented. The more energy expended early, the less available later. Or, in handicapping parlance, as pace numbers increase, the associated final numbers tend to decrease. Of course, this is not universal but, on balance, it is a sound conclusion. Horses do usually maximize final time by distributing their energy evenly throughout the race. That is why several top jockeys, notably Pat Day, exhibit such splendid timing.

Despite some questionable rides on Easy Goer, a personal favorite of ours, Day is a master of pace and energy distribution. Give us a race loaded with speed at 6-1/2 or 7 furlongs, with Day on a competitive stalker or closer, and he will rarely disappoint. Of course, neither will Bailey, Stevens, or Eddie D. But when it comes to rationing the speed of a frontrunner, Day is the master. He allows them to run naturally in the early part of the race, getting them to the top, but then, when pressured by other horses, he does not push his mount too soon. In fact, oftentimes, another horse will overtake him for the lead, but Day will come charging back on the inside to win. Day either has a PhD in energy distribution or an intuitive sense of how to get a horse to relax. He understands better than most riders that the efficient distribution of energy maximizes final time, and he possesses the uncommon skill to pull it off.

COACH TOBACCO (120)			
6 FURLONGS DIRT			
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AQ	55	(76)	81

SECRET LIAISON (117)			
6 FURLONGS DIRT - Three Year C			
3			
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HO	63	(81)	91

AFFAIRINTHEFOREST (117)			
6 FURLONGS DIRT - Three Year C			
3			
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HO	70"	70	(78) 83
SA	70+	68	(76) 78

FLYLIKETHWIND (117)			
6 FURLONGS DIRT - Three Year C			
3			
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HO	70-	(68)	57

EQUIFORM™ Pg: 36			
RON CHERRY (117)			
7TH RACE HOL MAY 13TH - 6 FURLONGS DIRT - Three Year C			
2		3	
SA	67"	67	(74) 78
SA	66	(72)	79
DM	63+	(69)	74
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SA	69+	67	(73) 65

Compression Lines

So what does all of this have to do with second time starters? Well, just as the plunge line describes first-time starters who dissipate excess energy early in the race, the **compression line** isolates horses that evenly distribute their energy in their debuts. The compression line defines horses that run dirt spreads of 4 points or less in their opening race (i.e., between -4 and +4). These compression horses are ready to explode and often “light up” the tote-board.

The beauty of these compression horses from a wagering perspective is that standard pace analysis usually leads its practitioners elsewhere. Consider the following two imaginary first-time starters, who broke their maidens going seven panels in MSW events at Belmont Park. Let’s assume they ran on the same day, carried equal weight, got the same inside trip, and ran the same final time over a surface that didn’t change. As can be seen by the Equiform numbers below, Horse A set a much quicker pace:

	Final	6F	4F	2F
Horse A	71	71	(80)	84
Horse B	71	70	(71)	74

If these two horses were to meet in a preliminary allowance race a few weeks later, traditional pace handicappers would favor Horse A due to his superior pace number. However, when evaluating one-number horses, this is simply not the case. Second-time-out compression horses, with a competitive final number, will usually defeat other one-number horses with a better pace figure.

The empirical evidence piqued our curiosity, and we sought a rational explanation for this counter-intuitive result. Horses that win first out have usually been geared up to deliver a top effort. With this in mind, we revisited the “bounce” theory and wondered if it might somehow apply to first-time starters. After all, if a horse often bounces after a big effort off a layoff, why couldn’t it bounce off its first race? In a sense, first time out could be considered to be running off a layoff.

Then, we looked at the relative distribution of the pace and final numbers of first-time starters. Horses running compression lines in their opening race backed up much less frequently than horses that didn't. Compression horses, whether they won their first race or not, usually have more latent ability. They will often exhibit dramatic bursts of energy at some juncture in their second start, sometimes even dueling superior pace figure horses into defeat. Their energy has been bottled up or "compressed", and, when asked to release their reserves, their performances can be devastating.

The seventh race at Hollywood Park on May 13, 2001, nicely illustrates the explosive potential of compression horses. In a six-furlong event for three-year-olds and up, bred in California, *Affairintheforset* was installed as the 4/5 favorite, with both *Flylikethewind* and Ron Cherry at 4/1 (see page 103). *Affairintheforest* was on a decent line, improving both his pace and two furlong numbers in his second start, while improving slightly to a 70" final. Ron Cherry had shown steady progress in his four starts, and was coming off a six-week layoff after recording a 69+. Both of these horses had done nothing wrong in their brief careers, but neither one had the next out potential of *Flylikethewind*, who had run a 68/70- compression line in his debut. Although apparently overmatched in the pace department, *Flylikethewind* breezed right to the top under jockey Alex Solis and held off a late rally from the favorite to win by a head, earning an 81/74". When lightly raced compression horses get the lead, they are tough to run down.

Horses that run compression or plunge lines first time out are likely to improve in their second starts. Remember, a plunge line denotes at least a 15 point drop-off, while compression is 4 points or less. However, the pace/final number distribution of most first-timers falls somewhere in between, and they are trickier to evaluate. But even with these types, we have found a pattern that is quite useful as it allows us to wager *against* several impressive debut winners.

Negative Spreads

The **negative spread** defines a first-time starter on the dirt who runs a positive spread greater than four points, but less than 15 ($4 < \text{dirt spread} < 15$), while running an acceptable race for the class level. On the major circuits, an acceptable race is defined as a 65 or better final number (at lesser tracks, this acceptable final number is lower).

When first-timers run fast early *and* late, they normally regress second time out. Here are some representative negative spreads (with the pace number first) for these types of horses.

4F	Final
83	72
77	69
75	66
77	70

Several horses that run negative spreads first time out do return to win and/or improve their final numbers. Maybe one ran a 76/70, but was eased up in the final eighth of a mile, while winning by 10 lengths. Had this animal been kept to the task, it may have run a 76/73 and become a compression horse. We are not in the business of speculating on such matters. What we do know is that these negative spread horses, if not given a rest (preferably 30 days or more), are poor wagering propositions, especially if the spread is in the seven to ten point range. They probably gave an honest effort first time out and, the bigger the final number, the more likely to back up.

Compression horses also make good plays against faster final figure horses off tops. In the second race at Aqueduct on April 14, 2001 (see page 108), the odds-on favorite, Hollywood Bull, had run a big double top off a sixteen-month layoff and would probably bounce. Longonot (at 5/1) was also off a double top. Meanwhile, High Commissioner (5/2) had run a 72/69- compression line in his debut, was getting seven pounds from Hollywood Bull, and rated to move forward. As it turned out, I didn't make much on the race as I bet Southern Classic (at 26/1

off a new pace top) along with High Commissioner. High Commissioner won by almost five lengths while Southern Classic, after being bumped at the start, ran dead last.

HIGH COMMISSIONER (115)

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GP	69-	65 (72) 71

THE XTRAS™

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