## Chapter 12

## Oddments

Although touched upon earlier, the back past performances (BPP's) have several other applications. This chapter will address these along with some other concepts that don't fit neatly into any specific category.

## Back Past Performances

With the exception of graded stakes, the Racing Form only displays a horse's last 10-12 races. Thus, its readers have little indication of the animal's performance or form cycles preceding those races. The career box may yield a clue, but it is no substitute for a careful look at these earlier efforts as they appear on THE XTRAS. By viewing a horse's last three years of performance, one may find evidence of certain cycles and patterns unavailable to the Racing Form reader. It could be a big final number 14 races back, a tendency to run a good race third time off a layoff when accompanied by a cyclical pace top, or a liking for a particular surface.

Take a look at the top two choices in the first race at Calder on December 31, 2000. In a five-horse field, two horses, Ronnies Answer at $4 / 5$ and Minnie's Brat at $2 / 1$, were vastly superior on raw figures (pages 163-164). Both were coming off layoffs, and Minnie's Brat had shown the ability to run some of her best numbers after a rest. Although I don't make a practice of betting $2 / 1$ shots, Minnie's Brat was also getting almost two points in weight. I felt $2 / 1$ warranted a
wager, and she got up by a neck.
The BPP's are also useful in evaluating distance and surface switches when the horse's last ten or twelve races exhibit little or no variation along these lines. For example, a 5yo that has been routing over the last year is entered in a sprint. It may be just an exercise to sharpen his speed, but then again, the horse may be able to sprint successfully. The career box in the Form will show his best lifetime figure at the sprint distance, but that may have been earned as a 3yo, when he had not reached his full potential. The handicapper needs to know how those earlier sprint numbers stacked up against the route numbers he was running at that particular stage in his development. One can use the same reasoning to evaluate prior off track performances and surface switches.

The sixth race at the Fairgrounds on February 27, 2000, illustrates the BPP's in action again. The Racing Form only showed Cyrus's (page 165) last ten races, just missing the strong turf efforts he had run late in his 3yo season. Also note that two of his last three races featured dirt spreads of ( -9 ), indicating his readiness for a return to the grass. The big favorite in the race, Yoto Speakes at $4 / 5$, was nothing special, having run one 72 between three 69's in his last four races. Taking full advantage of the number one post, Cyrus received a rail-skimming ride and lit up the board at $\$ 49.20$.

| EQUIFORM ${ }^{\text {TM }}$ Pg: 2 |  |  |  | RONNIES ANSWER (116) <br> FURLONGS DIRT |  |  |  |  |  | THE XTRAS ${ }^{\text {TM }}$ |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| 1ST CRC DECEMBER $31-51 / 2$ <br> 2 |  |  |  | 3 |  |  |  | 4 |  |  |  |
| D <br> CR <br> e <br> c | /69" |  | (77) 87 | $\begin{aligned} & \mathrm{CR} \\ & \mathrm{CR} \end{aligned}$ | $\begin{gathered} 69- \\ 63- \end{gathered}$ |  | (74) 80 $(74) 77$ |  |  |  |  |
| $\stackrel{\rightharpoonup}{N}^{C R}$ | 70 "w |  | (76) 77 |  | $67+w$ |  | (72) 76 |  |  |  |  |
| v CR | 58" |  | (80) 82 | CR | $60^{\prime \prime}$ |  | (66) 71 |  |  |  |  |
| ${ }_{\text {c }} \mathrm{CR}$ | 63- | 67 | (74) 74 | CR | 64 |  | (75) 62 |  |  |  |  |
| $t^{\text {CR }}$ | 60 |  | (78) 82 | CR | $65+$ |  | (80) 85 |  |  |  |  |
| $\left.\mathrm{p}\right\|^{\mathrm{CR}}$ | 67" |  | (81) 90 |  |  |  |  | CR | 166 |  | (75) 71 |
| A <br> CR | $64+w$ |  | (76) 81 |  | 68-w |  | $\text { (74) } 73$ | CR | $59+$ | 61 | (77) 80 |
|  |  |  |  | CR | 58 |  | (68) 84 |  |  |  |  |
| J |  |  |  | CR | $64 "$ | 67 | (73) 67 | CR | $64-$ |  | (73) 83 |
| J |  |  |  |  | $68+w$ |  | (75) 83 | CR | 70+w |  | (77) 82 |
|  |  |  |  | CR | 59" |  | (76) 82 |  |  |  |  |
| ${ }^{2}$ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | CR | 70 "w |  | (75) 76 |
| p |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | GP | 68 |  | (76) 80 |
| a |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | GP | 66- |  | (77) 82 |
| r |  |  |  | GP | $63+$ |  | (71) 75 |  |  |  |  |
| b |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 71+ |  | (82) 85 |
| J a |  |  |  |  | /65" |  | (76) 85 |  |  |  |  |
| n |  |  |  | GP | 67- |  | (77) 81 |  |  |  |  |




## The Sandwich or Surround

The BPP's lead us to another concept, the sandwich or surround. By looking at clusters of previous races, one can draw some key inferences. After seven dirt races, having reached a final top of 71-, Megans Bluff (page 167) tried the turf for the first time, and responded with a 73 - over the Churchill Downs lawn. After a 70" dirt number at Thistledown, she reeled off three strong dirt performances at Arlington and Hoosier. When she returned to the grass in the Grade II Miss Revere Stakes on November 18 at Churchill, she made for an outstanding play. Most of the competition had recorded better grass figures than Megans Bluff's 73- (the rough equivalent of what one would see in the Form's career box). But the fact that she had run a 73 - on the grass, sandwiched by two lower dirt numbers, showed she was capable of matching or exceeding her recent dirt numbers in the Miss Revere. I figured her to run about a 75 ", which was better than anybody in the race. Also, she rated to be the controlling speed, and rider Mark Guidry patiently guided her to a wire-to-wire win, returning $\$ 14.60$.


## Combos

Slew City Liz (page 169) exhibits the same type of pattern. Note how much better her initial grass efforts were when compared to the surrounding dirt races. When she returned to the turf on October 9, 2000, at Santa Anita, she had more than the "surround" in her favor. None of the favorites had run better than a 72 " on the grass. In addition, she was receiving a positive jockey switch to Kent Desormeaux and more importantly, coming off a cyclical pace top on the dirt. Under a scintillating ride by Desormeaux, Slew City Liz closed with a rush to win by a nose at $13 / 1$. These combination patterns or combos are very powerful.

Speaking of combos, we referred to one in an earlier chapter, that being the new dirt pace top followed by a reversal for a first time or lightly raced router. Above, we illustrated the sandwich accompanied by a cyclical pace top. Another good one is a new pace top with a recent good turnback number. Mybestsolution (4/1) was the third choice behind even money Double Character and Jettason (7/2) going six furlongs at Aqueduct on January 15, 2001 (pages 170-172). He was coming off a new pace top along with a 70 turnback number, and had run a 69 final as a 3yo. He won by a neck, paying $\$ 10.60$.

Be on the lookout for these and other combination patterns.





## Equipment Changes

Equipment changes can often be the precursor of dramatic form reversals. In my opinion, blinker changes are generally misunderstood. The public, and some otherwise astute handicappers, assume that the addition of blinkers shows immediate positive intent. That may be, but then again, the trainer may be using them only as an experiment to focus the animal's attention. In fact, trainer statistics in the Racing Form indicate that the vast majority of trainers have a lower winning percentage with first time blinkers than their overall percentage.

On average, trainers do better with second time blinkers. For most horses, it takes some time to get accustomed to "the hood". Imagine a football quarterback who could only see a slice of the field. Blinkers would help him focus on hitting his downfield receiver. But, with limited peripheral vision, he would be much more vulnerable to crushing blows from defensive players that "blindside" him.

Getting bumped and jostled by other horses they can't see isn't a pleasant experience for most racehorses. If the focusing aspect of blinkers helps an animal get better early position, they may have a positive effect. Even though they may have had workouts with the blinkers on (required in most jurisdictions), most horses require a race or two to acclimate to the new equipment.

There are several different types of blinkers (full cups, half cups, etc), and a trainer may try different ones in an effort to ascertain the individual horse's preference.

Although blinkers on or blinkers off are the most common equipment change, there are several others. Aluminum pads, bar shoes, mud caulks, no whip, earmuffs, and the ultimate equipment change, first time gelding, can also impact a horse's performance. Judging the probable effect of these changes is not a science, and the best method to evaluate them is to study the particular trainer's ability in these situations.

Above The Harbor (page 175) began her career with two solid sprint races at Delaware Park, and then threw in a clunker going two turns for the first time. Trainer Robert Camac added blinkers in her next start, and she had worn the new equipment ever since, including her
last three starts for new trainer Del Carroll. On March 14, 2001, in the third race at Aqueduct, Carroll removed the blinkers.

Holly Jolly, coming off two sup-par efforts in stakes, was the oddson favorite, with Polly Moon $(7 / 2)$ as the second choice (see pages 176-177). I was amazed to see Above The Harbor at $9 / 1$. She was coming off successive new pace tops and had run her two best races without blinkers. The blinkers were coming off now, and so was the rubber band on my bankroll. Above The Harbor sped to the lead and withstood the late charge of Maria's Crown to win by a half-length.




## Excuses

Some astounding payoffs can be had by the careful analysis and interpretation of excuses in the running lines, and The Xtras can often help the handicapper uncover these nuggets.

The key to this exercise is to be totally objective. Wide trip, stumbled start, blocked, shut off, steadied, and my favorite, buck jumped, are just a few of the plethora of excuses that clutter the comment lines in every issue of the Racing Form. Determining when these excuses really are important and provide wagering value is not an easy task. Blocked, steadied, and boxed-in are probably the most overrated trouble lines. Unless a horse's momentum is severely compromised, the minimal restraint necessitated by these situations is often not decisive. In fact, sometimes it can work to the horse's advantage by preventing it from getting involved in a speed duel or by allowing it to conserve a little energy on a track favoring closers.

The wide comments are also ambiguous. No two chart-callers see a race quite the same way. One caller's four wide may be another's seven wide. And were they four wide for the whole turn, or just fanning wide as they entered the stretch? Was the outside part of the track good, bad or neutral? Was it four wide on the tight turns at Pimlico or four wide on the sweeping turns at Belmont Park? Does a particular animal seem to record its best numbers when allowed to run in the clear, outside of other horses? Until you know the answers to these questions, don't put too much emphasis on wide comments.

As I studied the eleventh and final race at Gulfstream Park on March 11, 2001, a maiden special weight race for three-year-olds, I noticed four horses were coming off new pace tops. Two of these were off extended layoffs, and one was off a double top, but the fourth one, Built Up, had raced just three weeks earlier while making a nine point pace move in his second career start. As I delved deeper into the PP's, I saw that Built Up had been checked and bumped at the break in his debut while running a $64 / 62$ " compression line. Then, in his second attempt, he met a similar fate, earning a $73 / 62+$. It is difficult to assess whether these kinds of mishaps are genuinely bad racing luck or just poor breaking tendencies specific to the particular horse.

As I glimpsed Built Up at $60 / 1$ on the tote board, another clue emerged. The heavy favorite in the race at $6 / 5$ was Bat Runner. Despite checking at the start from the outside post on February 17, Built Up had been only 1-1/2 lengths behind Bat Runner after four furlongs. I felt that this showed he wasn't completely overmatched, and started constructing some plays using Built Up. Unfortunately, most of my investment had him in the second and third slots, so that when he waltzed home at $\$ 200.20$, all I collected was a small win/place bet. I was a little disappointed that I hadn't put more on the nose, but thankful that the new pace top had pointed me in the right direction.

Drawing an outside post position can often be a major obstacle, especially for a speed horse negotiating two turns in a large field. These front-running types use a lot of energy trying to "clear" and get to the top, and if confronted with other speed from the inside, are often hung wide on the clubhouse turn while batting for the lead. This is a difficult setup to overcome, and often leads to a severe fade later in the race as the jockey realizes there is no hope. But when these same horses return and draw an inside post in a race without much early lick, the result can be quite different.

Even in sprints, an inside draw, coupled with a tactical pace advantage can be very advantageous. Look at Marketchase in the fifth race at Gulfsteam Park on March 5, 2001 (page 180). After breaking from the eleven post in a route in her 6yo debut, Marketchase moved to the inside in her next start and won at 8/1. Stepped up a notch in class, she was entered again at seven furlongs, drawing the two post. My Guy Norman, in the one hole, was a stone closer, and Marketchase was coming off a cyclical pace top (80) with the best recent pace number in the race. She emerged victorious again, paying $\$ 15.60$.


## Soft Wins

It is sometimes tricky to evaluate a horse when a victory is earned with an "off" final number. A soft win occurs when a horse wins a race with both its pace and final numbers below its recent bests. Look at Miss Vermont Jet (page 182) as she appeared in the third race at Hialeah on April 9, 2001. She had some competitive final figures, and although she won her previous race, it had come off a precipitous drop to the $\$ 5,000$ level on March 17. The 73 pace number and the 64 - final number she recorded in that March 17 win were both well below the 77 pace and 68- final she had run in her last dirt race. She also had a 77/69- back in January. The weaker numbers on March 17 were all she had to run to win that particular race. Miss Vermont Jet probably could have run faster that day, but the softer company did not require it (why win by eight lengths when two will suffice).

Miss Vermont Jet was claimed out of the March 17 race by trainer Henry Collazo. The public didn't fully appreciate that Collazo had "called the bluff" on the big drop to $\$ 5,000$, and was now exhibiting his confidence by jacking her right back up the ladder to $\$ 25,000$. The soft win had partially concealed her true condition, and Miss Vermont Jet eked out a victory at 9/1.

Now look at Until Sundown (page 183). After running a compression line of $78 / 75$ in his debut, he ran a $72 / 70+$ when stretched to a route in his second start, and broke his maiden by a comfortable four lengths. This soft win should take nothing away from his ability to equal or exceed his opening effort in his first start versus winners. On April 11, 2001, Until Sundown showed up in a NW1 at one mile at Santa Anita. That opening 75 laid over the field, and he responded with another facile win at $9 / 5$.



## Bests

Over the years, we've found a mechanical method that produces consistent profits. The selections generated by this method don't occur very often, but are nice spot plays to have in one's arsenal. The rules are simple. Look at the last three final numbers (on today's surface) of all the entrants that have raced within the last 60 days. If the horse with the best final number in the last three races is $10 / 1$ or better, make a bet. The $10 / 1$ cut-off is used for average field sizes. In small fields (six horses or less), we accept $8 / 1$, but demand $12 / 1$ if more than ten horses are running.

The fifth race at Aqueduct on April 19, 2001, at six furlongs, matched seven 3yo New York bred colts (three of which appear on page 183). On The Xtras, it looked like a competitive race, with each horse having some chance. But for whatever reason, the crowd zeroed in on Just Justin (2/1) and Brocco Bob (5/2).

When looking at the last three final numbers of each horse, Sharelyn's Gold's 69- was tied for top prize with Secret Pro (5/1). She had bounced to a $64+$ off that double top, but when I saw her at $12 / 1$ a couple minutes to post, I had a best play. It's not often that one gets this kind of price on a Scott Lake horse with decent numbers. After Sharelyn's Gold rallied to win, I still didn't understand why he had been such a big price, but $\$ 30.40$ was music to my ears.

As mentioned, these plays don't occur that frequently, but in the ninth race on that same Aqueduct card, another best play surfaced. Miz Koddington (page 185) is the kind of horse most handicappers, including me, give the immediate heave-ho. Five year old mares that are $0 / 21$ with weak connections hardly inspire confidence. But, Miz Koddington's 62" three races back was best. In addition, she had a forward going pattern until her last race, when she stumbled at the start. She also had decent pace ability, which is always a plus in weak state-bred races. In fact, she was on a pretty good line, a delayed cyclical pace top. Did I bet her? No. Should I have? Yes. Under time pressure, I hadn't noticed the poor break in her last effort or that she had run a cyclical pace top two back. Still, I should have played her on the best theory. It is difficult to break old thought processes, even for people who know better.


