

## **TURF SPRINTS**

*by Steve Thygersen*

Here it is in a nutshell - it is all about the sprint, and nothing about the turf. Routers (turf and dirt) are not normally good bets in turf sprints because most (but not all) lack the tactical speed necessary to gain position early, middle or late. As a general rule, sprinters stretching out are a better bet than routers cutting back because they have that tactical speed. So what is "tactical speed"? It is the ability to accelerate at any point in the race to gain position or to run down the wingers up front. Have you ever noticed that a dyed in the wool frontrunner that is always out front and then misses the break suddenly becomes one hell of a closer? That tactical speed can be applied anywhere in the race; if they don't use it early, then they have it late. If you are a one paced type, God help you in a turf sprint; you will run a nice, even 6<sup>th</sup>... The bottom line? Any solid sprinter is to be feared in a turf sprint, screw the Tomlinson's, it is about the sprint and NOT about the turf. You don't need Sadler's Wells over a Kingmambo mare to win a turf sprint. You want someone like Tribal Rule, Unbridled's Song, Yankee Gentleman or War Front as your sire – a confirmed speed freak. As a whole you don't want a long winded turf route pedigree, you want that acceleration. Here is a classic example of a turf route sire that can't hit the wire in turf sprints, English Channel. Do you know how many English Channels have ever won a turf sprint? Yep, not a single one, e-v-e-r. Over 100 runs and not one of them have done it. Do you know how many English Channels have won a dirt sprint? That would be one, Hon. De Leon, at Belmont. That is it out of over 250 sprint races. Like I said, it is all about the sprint and nothing about the turf and although EC's are pretty good (24%) in turf routes, he does not get sprinters.

### **WHICH WAY DID THEY GO GEORGE?**

The predominant winners running style in turf sprints is closing, and then stalking and finally the rare frontrunner. The stats for 5F turf sprints are pretty uniform across all tracks (we used Del Mar, Gulfstream, Keeneland, Belmont and Saratoga) - 20% Front, 30% Stalk, 50% Close. The exception to that rule is soft turf; when the turf is soft frontrunners rule the day, probably on the order of 60% front, 30% stalk, 10% close.

### **RAIL AND GEOMETRY**

The other consideration is the rail position, which can have a significant impact on the results depending on the size and geometry of the turf track. As the rail is moved out there are two considerations: 1) you are now running on turf which hasn't been chewed up and 2) as the total track width narrows it becomes harder for closers to get a lane, a very important consideration as turf sprints are usually a major traffic jam at the top of the stretch (watch any downhill race as they hit the crossover).

While we are talking about track geometry let's talk about how that geometry affects runners. There is one track that is a living breathing laboratory on the difference between smaller and bigger turf tracks and that is Belmont Park with the Inner and Widener courses. One is pretty tight in the turns and the other has big, sweeping turns. Many, many times I have seen an Arch or Kris S type not run well on the Inner but destroy the field on the Widener. Why? Well take a look at where the two tracks are torn up at the end of the meet for a clue. The Inner turf track is torn up from about 7/8 through the turn to the first 20 yards of the stretch, but the Widener is torn up the last ½ of the turn to just the very top of the stretch. Huh? It is pretty easy – on wide sweeping turns horses have more confidence in the footing and will begin their moves in the turn, where on the tighter Inner course they kind of bide their time until they are coming out of the turn and then they dig in. Just another note on big horses and tight tracks – many times it will look like they are fading in the far turn and then make up ground from about halfway down the stretch. That is because they want no part of that tight turn and will naturally back themselves off to ensure they have solid ground under them. Then once they straighten out and regain their confidence they start running again. Watch for a performance line like that on a horse that has always run on the Inner and is now stretching out on the Widener. Stand by because your "fader" will power his way to the front in the turn and win going away at a distance that seems to be out of his reach.

## **PONIES AND MOOSES**

Who runs well on soft turf, small horses or big horses? It depends on the track, the tight turns favoring smaller horses and the sweeping turns a plus for the Rock Hard Ten antlerless mooses. BUT, the larger horses seem to be more sure footed in the straights than their smaller counterparts as they can sink their hooves in and grab more solid ground. If you want to see a horse shut down and refuse to run – let them slide around a corner and they will let you know in no uncertain terms that they are done.

## **RIDING THE RAIL**

When is the rail a good thing or a bad thing? First the rail has more bad things than good. Why? Because it has the most wear and tear from racing and also because it is where all the water drains to after it rains – which means it could still be a swamp down low when the 3 path and out are actually firm. I can't tell you the number of times I have seen a horse surging towards the front, cutting in to the rail and then stopping like they have been shot. Start watching turf sprints on off turf and figure out what is going on down low. If the rail routinely swallows runners, then you need a horse and a pilot that use the middle of the track. When the rail position is out, the wide closers run into a problem because the 7 path at a rail position of 0' ain't nothing like the 7 path at a rail position of 21' – essentially the wide closers have to run out there in the "rough", the turf that is rarely used and the ground beneath it is not packed down like the inner routes. But remember that you can have a rail at 0' that is swallowing every horse that runs the rail, and then they move the rail to 7' and now the rail runners are running in the old 3 path and can now run quite well on the rail.

When you get towards the end of the meet, the turf track starts looking like a YMCA camp golf course hosting a gopher convention – there are chunks missing everywhere, there are bigger dust clouds in a turf race than a dirt race (watch Gulfstream in March if you don't believe that) and there is just nothing the track super can do, it is just tore up. At Belmont this spring, the turf tracks took it on the chin and were so bad that every horse at the top of the lane looked like it took a bad step.

## **ROUTERS OFF LAYOFFS**

Look out for a high class router who is coming off a layoff and shows up in a turf sprint. They are just trying to get a run in them and they have almost no chance at winning. The giveaway is usually a trainer with a high overall turf number but a crappy turf sprint number. Take a look at Dick Mandella's stat some time and you will see what I mean. When you see a marathoner like Champ Pegasus entered in a 5F turf sprint after being off for 8 months – trust me, he is not a threat. He should actually be back soon and I wouldn't be surprised to see him in a turf sprint. From a training point of view it makes sense, the least stress you can put on them is a turf sprint.

## **SHORT REST**

Here's another thing about turf sprints, don't sweat them coming back on short rest, most can handle a 7 day turn.

## **AGED TURF SPRINTERS**

Don't turn your nose up at some 9 year old turf sprinter, they are just as deadly (or more so) than the colts – Chamberlain Bridge, California Flag, Matt the Giant, Carson Hall, they will eat your lunch if you decide the senior citizens can't handle the load. And don't freak about not having many (or any) works – when you are that old the world can kiss your rosy red... They don't need it; a turf sprint does not require a 100% fit horse to win. The old ones are also good off of layoffs.

## **TOMLINSONS**

There are Tomlinsons for turf and there are wet dirt Tomlinsons, but nothing for wet turf. Use the WET Tomlinson or even better, a horse with a high Poly score, but don't worry about the turf number.

Here is the ideal horse to bet in a turf sprint – he is by a second tier (probably local) sprint sire who has crap turf Tomlinsons (like a 165) but who has a superior wet Tomlinson (like a 390). They go at huge odds and they are deadly. There is one we just figured out this year, Utopia, a New York sire. They are pretty good sprinters, may have a win on the Aqueduct inner track during the winter, but their record overall is poor. Now let them line up in a turf sprint or a dirt sprint in the slop and it is show time at really big odds. Here are some of the ones we tagged so far this year – Lady Utopia (\$142), Jitney, Mr. Algebra, Hlao Roo, My Jopia – there were others but I am old and feeble and can't remember.