

Introduction to Horse Racing

Perhaps you've been to the track before, or have dabbled in on-line wagering without ever taking it seriously or maximizing the enjoyment.

Sure, you can play the races by betting on your favorite horse names, numbers or colors and get lucky, but what most people don't understand is there is a method to the madness, and figuring out the results of a race based on the information provided, and processed, is fun and rewarding.

The premise of a race is simple -- the first horse to the finish line wins, but if you make a wager, predicting the outcome ahead of time is what gets you paid.

Horse racing is a fascinating game. At first glance, the information in the past performances of a race can be quite intimidating, but once you get a feel for how it works, and appreciate the majesty of the animals, horse racing can quickly develop into a hobby, or even a passion. With knowledge comes interest and with understanding comes intrigue.

As an on-air racing analyst for Churchill Downs, the home of the Kentucky Derby, and currently at Fair Grounds, I am emphasizing "new fan friendly" analysis on the air through the remainder of the season, so if you're new to the game and/or feel like you have a lot to learn, please tune in via twinspires.com, the Twin Spires App, or the Churchill Downs' Roku channel, where you can access both live racing and a full-day replays.

In the meantime, here is some fundamental information to get you started.

Understand the basic wagers - Ease your way into betting. Start with low-risk wagers like win (your horse must win), place (your horse can finish first OR second) and show (your horse can finish first, second OR third). Play \$2-\$6 per race, and get your feet wet. Once you've had success with basic bets & feel comfortable, you can then graduate to high-risk /high-reward wagers, and an increase in spending if your budget allows. Once you're at ease with the wagering process, bet to your personality. If you are conservative by nature, stick to lower risk bets and lower amounts. Exactas (picking the top two horses in order) are a good second step. If you are a thrill-seeker, open up your wagers to trifectas (picking the top three horses in order), superfectas (picking the top four horses in order), pick threes (picking the winners in three consecutive races) and pick fours (picking the winners in four consecutive races).

Learn to read the program - The information may look like a foreign language on the surface, but as an experienced fan educator, it takes me between roughly 15 minutes to teach someone the past performances. Once you understand what the information means you can begin to piece together the puzzle and formulate an opinion. A guide can be found at the front of the program, but having a mentor who can teach you can accelerate the learning process.

Connections – One of the simplest ways to evaluate the chances of a horse is to identify the human connections. Top jockeys and trainers win roughly 15-20% of the races. Betting horses who represent the best stables and/or are ridden by the winningest jockeys will likely help you cash more tickets, but because they are higher profile, bettors often gravitate to them, often decreasing the potential payouts.

Speed figures – In the past performances, the bold number is the speed figure. It tells you how fast the horse ran on that particular day, the higher the number the better. When evaluating horses, look at their speed figures at today's surface over a comparable distance in order to get a feel for their ability and how they fit in with the rest of the field.

Class – Imagine if the fastest horses were allowed to race against the slowest ones. That would be no fun. In order to keep horse racing competitive and thus bettable, there are a variety of "class" levels. Understanding how a horse "fits" in a particular race goes a long way towards determining their chances to be competitive. The class levels range from Grade I stakes on the highest end to \$5,000 claiming races (or lower at some smaller tracks) on the lowest. In a claiming race, horses are actually "for sale" for the designated price. If more than one owner puts in a claim for a horse, there is a random "shake" to determine the final buyer.

Distance and surface – Sprinters like to race over short distances. Routers prefer races around two turns where stamina is critical. Some horses prefer racing on dirt, others on turf, and a few North American tracks have a synthetic racing surface. Based on their past performances, ask yourself the question - is the horse I'm evaluating entered in a race over a surface and at a distance at which they have enjoyed success in the past?

Current form – When a Thoroughbred is happy and healthy, they tend to race about once a month. Has the horse you're evaluating been racing recently and if so, how have they performing? Horses who are running well (finishing in the top three) are said to be in good "form". Those who are off their game are in poor form. Often times a rest, a "drop" in class, a change in distance, surface or equipment can shake a horse out of a slump.

Blinkers – Horses using blinkers for the first time often show marked improvement. Blinkers are plastic cups that attach to a horse's hood to help prevent them from looking around and becoming distracted. Blinkers can help a horse focus on the task at hand. Taking the blinkers off a horse can also provide a spark.

Pedigree – A horse's bloodlines (family history) can tell you what they were born to do, but based on pedigree and sales price, some horses disappoint while others overachieve. Horses that cost \$50,000 at a sale finish in front of million-dollar purchases more often than you'd think. Pedigree is often most valuable when researching first time starters, lightly raced horses, and horses trying something a task for the first time – a distance or surface switch, for example.

Physicality – Horses are animals, not machines. Signs of happiness include a shiny coat, good muscle tone and an alert, yet controlled, demeanor. Horses who woke up on the wrong side of the hay might be in a bad mood and not on top of their game mentally. If a horse is sweaty and/or rambunctious, they're wasting energy and are unlikely to perform well. There are some successful horseplayers who rely almost exclusively on visual clues.

Visualize – A phrase you will often hear from handicappers is “pace makes the race”. Pace is the tempo. If the pace is fast and contested early on, the leaders are likely to tire, giving a late closing horse a better chance to win. If the early pace is moderate, the front-runners are likely to have more energy at the end, and thus may prove tougher to catch. Identify the racing styles of each individual horse in the race and visualize how it might play out.

Arm yourself with OPPS (other people's picks) -- Most tracks and horse racing websites offer “expert” selections. If you're new to the game, take a copy with you and follow along. Tune in to the on-track television analyst. This person follows racing at the track you are watching day in and day out, and they verbalize useful information. In addition, listening to what they have to say about the horses, and following along in your track program, can help accelerate the learning process. It's more fun to have your own opinion, but when you're first getting started, don't be afraid to use the picks of others as a guideline and perhaps combine them with your own before making a wager.

Become a fan – Locally and nationally, horse racing is a year-round sport. The more you learn, the more immersed you'll become. Like any other major league sport, racing has stars fans can identify with – the jockeys, trainers, owners and most importantly, the horses.

Other guides

Follow the prep races leading up to Kentucky Derby Day, you can impress your friends with what an expert you are. The Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky is always held the first Saturday in May, but this year it has been pushed back to September 5.

<https://www.kentuckyderby.com/>

Brisnet, a premier horse racing past performance and analysis provider, is offering free data that you can access via the links below.

FREE Brisnet Premium past performances

<https://www.brisnet.com/product/past-performances/fpp>

FREE daily selections

<https://www.twinspires.com/bet/handicapping#/product/WDS>

For additional wagering and handicapping basics, check out the “Racing 101” second on the Churchill Downs’ website.

Racing 101

<https://www.churchilldowns.com/racing-wagering/wagering/racing-101/>

Figuring out a horse race is like piecing together a mental puzzle. Your job as an analyst is to visualize how a race will be run, and then to wager accordingly.

All of our brains process information a little differently so we arrive at our opinions in unique ways.

Everyone likes to be right and picking a winner can be a boost to the ego AND the bankroll.

That’s one of many reasons why horse racing is the greatest game!



Selections provided by Fair Grounds racing analyst Joe Kristufek, who has an extensive background in the horse racing industry as a handicapper, on-air talent, producer and fan development specialist. He is well recognized for his creative analysis and wagering tactics and he loves interacting with racing fans. **Follow on Twitter @JoeyDaKRacing.**

Selections subject to change due to track conditions and scratches. Tune into the paddock show for the most up-to-date information. Check program numbers for accuracy.

Joe's '19-20 Season Stats thru March 15

Races	Wins	2 nd	3 rd	Win%	WPS%
427	119	85	63	27.9%	62.5%

Saturday, March 21, 2020 – Louisiana Derby Day!

My first inclination when handicapping and wagering on any race is to try to beat the favorite. Find horses that you think are going to offer “value” when compared to their actual chance to run well in the race. In some races the favored horse, who wins roughly 30% of the time, might simply be too tough to try and beat. It’s important to take what the races gives you, and to maximize your bankroll based on your opinions.

1st Race – The Crescent City Derby

This race is restricted to 3-year-old horses who were bred in the state in Louisiana, and there appears to be several horses with a chance to win. I eventually settled on **#2 Langs Day**, who is perfect from two starts. In both of those races he broke poorly, but closed quite a bit of ground to win going away. He’s asked to run farther than he ever has before at a racetrack that is foreign to him (the first two starts were at Delta Downs) against tougher competition, but based on his first two races, it looks like he might have the most raw talent in the race. **#3 Atta Bouy** has improved noticeably in his last two races, and it looks like adding blinkers and stretching him out to longer races may have done the trick. He finished second behind Social Afleet in his most recent start, and that horse is scheduled to run in the \$1 million Louisiana Derby later today. **#5 City Park** is a deep closer who will need an honest pace in front of him in order to be effective. Two races back when the fractions were fast and the early leaders got tired, he rallied to win. Last time out, he got blocked behind a tired horse, and that traffic trouble severely compromised his chances.

Joe’s selections – 2-3/5-8-1/7-4-6

2nd Race – Maiden special weight

Maiden races are restricted to horses who have never won. This particular race is restricted to fillies who are three years old, so males or older females are not allowed. The distance is one mile on the turf. As you can see by looking in the past performances, most of these fillies do not have a lot of racing experience. In a race like this, it’s extra important to take a look at the horses in the post parade to see which ones are acting professionally (good) and which ones are nervous and overwhelmed (bad). On paper, we have limited information to go on, so pedigree research and understanding the trainer’s approach are key in the evaluation process. After much consideration, I settled on **#11 Global Brand** as my top pick, and she’s a bit of a longshot at 10-1 in the morning line. She’s only run one time before and it was in a much shorter race. She closed a little ground late over a much shorter distance. When researching her pedigree, it tells me that her mother Marketing Mix earned over \$2 million in longer turf races. I’m thinking that maybe the trainer, Tom Proctor, gave this filly a race of experience and now that she’s stretching out to a mile, she’ll run a lot better. If her final odds are 6-1 or higher, I feel like the risk is worth the potential reward. For second, I selected another longshot in **#12 Sunset Stroll**, and once again her

pedigree played an important role. Her half sibling Room Service was a Grade I winner on turf, and this fillies' workouts date back several weeks, which tells me that she's ready to race. Her jockey Florent Geroux is the top jockey by win percentage, and chances are he wouldn't be riding if this horse didn't have a chance. In her only previous start, **#5 Flabbergasted** sat second early on before tiring just a bit to finish third of 11. That race was also a mile on turf, so she's already proven that she likes the trip. She also has speed in a race that doesn't appear to have many horses who race near the front, which makes her doubly dangerous.

Joe's selections - 11-12-5-13/3-6-7

3rd Race -- The Crescent City Oaks

This is the "sister" race to the Crescent City Derby, which was run as race one. It is restricted to 3-year-old fillies who were bred in the state in Louisiana. There appears to be a bit of a standout in here in **#8 Steph'sfullasugar**. She's won both of her career starts very professionally, stalking the early leaders while conserving energy and then taking over off the turn before drawing away. She just won a stakes race last time out by almost seven lengths over a similar distance, and the outside post should help keep her clear of any traffic. **#2 Quickfast N Ahurry** finished second in her first start, and when stretched out to today's distance last time out, she won going away. Her speed figures aren't as good as Steph'sfullasugar, but as a relatively inexperienced horse, there is a good chance she can improve, plus she gets a top jockey in the saddle. **#6 Vacherie Girl** won her first two races every impressively, but her last two starts have been a bit of a disappointment. Her trainer Steve Asmussen is a Hall of Famer, so perhaps he can get her pointed back in the right direction.

Joe's selections - 8/2-6/4-3-5

4th Race - Maiden special weight

Joe Kristufek owns an interest in #8 Templet with Brilliant Racing, therefore Grant LaGrange provides the analysis and selections for this race.

This race is not only restricted to horses who have never won a race (maidens), it's also restricted to three-year-olds. I landed on **#8 Templet** in this spot who is coming into this race off a very nice workout on March 13, indicating that he is in form and possibly prepared to run one of his better races in his young career. If you ignore his last race, you will see that he is a horse that usually likes to be close to the pace and has run well against steep competition. With the blinkers on today, he could be tough. **#4 Barleewon** has been facing Louisiana bred competition and will now be asked to face open company. With only two career starts under his belt, he's a horse with plenty of upside and also has a nice closing kick which is much more useful over the turf course. Another horse adding blinkers

and sometimes that's all it takes for these young horses to put it all together. **#9 Suggested** just missed breaking his maiden last time out losing by only 1/2 of a length. He's a horse who has some early speed and showed he is a fighter in his last race. If the lead is uncontested, he may get loose on the lead and could take them wire to wire.

Grant's selections – 8-4-9

5th Race – Optional claiming/allowance

If you're new to the game, the conditions of this race are likely a little confusing. It is restricted to Louisiana-bred horses who are at least four years old. They either haven't won two allowances races in their career, or if they have, they are offered up for a claiming price of \$20,000. These kinds of races are often very wide open, and this one is no exception. When evaluating the potential pace, I notice quite a few horses that like to go to the lead, so my first inclination is to look for a horses, who horses, who like to rally late. I gave a slight edge to **#9 State Treasurer**, who hasn't run since mid-October. He ran 14 times last year, so chances are he needed a little vacation. His best speed figures are as good as any other horse in this race, and at morning line odds of 6-1, I'm thinking the risk is worth the potential reward. **#5 Charge the Line** is coming off an impressive win at the exact same class level and distance, so he is obviously at top contender. **#13 Bistraya** is listed as an "also eligible", which means he needs another horse to scratch out in order to make it into the race. He's a consistent horse who comes in off of a recent win over one mile at Delta Downs. He's cutting back in distance to six furlongs here, so stamina obviously shouldn't be an issue.

Joe's selections –9-5-13-8/4-12-7

6th Race – The Costa Rising

This race is restricted to older Louisiana-breds, and many of the horses entered prefer sprinting on the turf, which is what they get to do today. **#6 Afleet Ascent** has done a little bit of everything in his 22-race career, but his recent second in a turf sprint in a tough race that was not restricted to Louisiana-breds caught my attention. If not for a compromised start and a very wide turn into the stretch, he may have won that day. **#1 Treys Midnight Moon** cuts back from longer distances races, but he likes the turf and was third in this race last year. Shaun Bridgmohan is an excellent turf jockey and the rail post position may work in his favor. **#9 Yankee Seven** has only run once on turf in his eight-race career, but he continues to improve. As a 4-year-old, he's younger than most of these, but he likely has more upside.

Joe's selections – 6-1-9/16-13-2-3-11

7th Race – Maiden special weight

Joe Kristufek owns an interest in #5 Steely Danza with Brilliant Racing, therefore Grant LaGrange provides the analysis and selections for this race.

Another maiden special weight race restricted for 3-year-olds, this time going 1 1/6th miles over the main track. **#9 Cernan** has improved on the brisnet speed figure scale in each of his three career starts, last out putting up a career best 81. With the ability to sit just off an honest early pace, he could get a perfect trip and a 3-year-old who is on the improve is always dangerous. **#5 Steely Danza** was ultra impressive on debut, running second to a horse who went on to compete on the Kentucky Derby trail. He's a huge 3-year-old, and may still be figuring things out on race day but when he finally puts it all together, he will be dangerous. This will be his first try at the 1 1/16th mile distance, and if he gets clear running and can put that long stride to use, today may be the day he graduates out of the maiden ranks. **#7 Mystic Guide** is a wildcard horse as I like to call it. He's only run one time in his career and has never been two turns. We're not sure just yet what kind of a horse he will be and whether or not he will get the distance, but he is very well bred and has trainer Mike Stidham in his corner. He has been working consistently leading into this race and after a troubled trip on debut and still being able to finish third, he seems to be a horse with a ton of talent. Keep an eye on the odds and consider using him on any tickets.

Grant's selections – 9-5-7

8th Race – The Tom Benson Memorial presented by Dixie Beer

This race is restricted to older females and it will be contested at 1 1/16 miles on turf. A stakes winner earlier in the Fair Grounds racing season, **#5 Notapradaprice** lost all chance at the start last time out. A mare that likes to run up close early, she lost position into the first turn and was forced to race from the back of the pack. She was wide the entire race, and very wide off the turn into the stretch, and the turf course that day favored horses who saved ground on the rail. The effort was much better than it looks on paper, and at odds of 8-1 in the morning line, the price should be right. **#1 Dream Passage** has been remarkably consistent her entire career and she loves this distance on turf. She has speed and the rail draw, so she can either be on the lead, or very close while covered up. **#2 Altea** invades from Florida for Chad Brown, who is one of the top horse trainers in the world, particularly with turf runners. This mare has won just twice from 17 lifetime starts, but she ran perhaps the best race of her career last time out. Horses from this barn win a lot of races, but the odds on their horses are usually shorter than they should be.

Joe's selections – 5-1-2-8-9

9th Race – The New Orleans Classic (G2)

This race is for older horses who possess both talent and stamina. The purse is \$400,000, so the horses entered here are fast and classy. **#8 By My Standards** pulled off a big upset last year's Louisiana Derby at odds of 22-1. He ran 12th in the Kentucky Derby, and then came up with a hoof issue, which forced him to go on vacation for nine months. He won his return race at Fair Grounds by six lengths "as rider pleased", which means he barely had to exert himself. He comes into this race off a bullet workout (fastest workout of the day at that distance) and I think he has a chance to develop into one of the better horses in the country. I can't wait to see him run today. **#9 Gun It** cost \$2.6 million as a yearling. He has the bloodlines to be a very good horse, but he's been slow to come around. He ran the best race of his life last time out, and with another step forward, he could pull off the upset. Based on his resume, **#6 Silver Dust** is the horse to beat. He's won multiple graded stakes races and he's enjoyed quite a bit of success at Fair Grounds. **#3 Fearless** is undefeated in two starts and he's run fast races, but he faces a much more experienced group of horses here and he's never faced the long stretch run that he'll encounter today. If he wins this race, he's really good.

Joe's selections – 8/9-6-3/5-1-7-4-2

10th Race – The Mervin Muniz Memorial (G2)

This race is also for older horses who possess both talent and stamina, on turf. To speak to the quality of this race, last year's Horse of the Year Bricks and Mortar won it. There is no horse quite to that quality in this year's edition, but it is stacked with talent from top to bottom. **#1 Dot Matrix** might not have the class of some of these, but he's got an advantageous rail draw with tactical speed, should get the right trip and the morning line price of 8-1 is inviting. **#12 Synchrony** is the horse to beat. He's a multiple graded stakes winner who loves Fair Grounds, and with a win he'll eclipse \$1 million in career earnings. He's a late runner, so there are two major concerns – the outside post and a turf course that should favor speed. You may remember Instilled Regard from his fourth place finish as a huge longshot in the 2018 Kentucky Derby. Recently, he's found his niche on turf. He won a Grade II race on the grass two starts back in Florida and was most recently second in the Grade I Pegasus World Cup Invitational. That kind of class must be respected.

Joe's selections – 1-12-6/8-9-2/4-3-7

11th Race – Twinspires.com Fair Grounds Oaks (G1)

This race is restricted to 3-year-old fillies, and many of these horses have Kentucky Oaks aspirations. The top four finishers will earn points towards a spot in the Kentucky Oaks (100-40-20-10), which has been pushed back to Friday, September 4. This is one of those cases where it might not be a good idea to try and beat the favorite. **#6 Finite** has won five races in a row, four of them stakes, and the last two of those were at Fair Grounds. She earned the highest speed figure of her career in her most recent start, and based on her workouts since, there is no reason to think she won't perform just as well today. **#4 Bonny South** has improved with every start and she took a huge leap forward when adding blinkers for the first time last out. The filly who ran second behind her that day has since returned to win a stakes race of her own. **#3 Tempers Rising** finished behind Finite in her last two races. She's run well, just not good enough. She's going to have to improve and Finite is going to have to regress in order for her to have an upset chance.

Joe's selections – 6/4/3/5/1-2

12th Race – Twinspires.com Louisiana Derby (G1)

This race is restricted to 3-year-olds, and many of these horses have Kentucky Derby aspirations. The top four finishers will earn points towards a spot in the Kentucky Derby (100-40-20-10), which has been pushed back to Saturday, September 5. A full field of 14 will run a 1 3/16ths mile distance that none of these horses have tried before. When evaluating the pace scenario, there doesn't appear to be much front end speed, which should work in the favor if **#3 Wells Bayou**. He battled through fast fractions last time out and still held on for second behind a talented rival. The fractions shouldn't be nearly as taxing today. **#10 Enforceable** has been a force this season at Fair Grounds, winning the Lecomte and finishing second in stronger division of the Risen Star. He's a seasoned late runner who should be able to handle the added distance without a problem. **#13 Silver State** finished just behind Enforceable in consecutive stakes races here at Fair Grounds. Based on his pedigree and the human connections, he is the kind of horse who should only improve with experience. Maybe today is the day.

Joe's selections – 3-10-13-12/16-8-1-14