

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!