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Book Review

Blinkers Off: New Frontiers in Form Cycle Analysis

Cary Fotias is the creator of The Xtras, a sheets-type publication. In *Blinkers Off: New Frontiers in Form Cycle Analysis*, he explains why he believes his Xtras are superior to any other figures. And though much of the book reads like an extended commercial, there is enough solid handicapping advice to make the book worthwhile even if you never buy a single one of his sheets.

Like most of us, Fotias started off with some basic handicapping books, bought some systems, spent some time making his own numbers, and dabbled. Eventually, he writes, he became a sheets player and did well with them in conjunction with other tools such as breeding, bias, pace, and trainer patterns. But he finally gave up using the sheets because, he writes "There is no indication of the varied circumstances under which the figures were earned. The sheets do not capture the dynamics of a race."

Fotias kept experimenting and finally came up with The Xtras (his website is www.equiform.com). Most of this self-published 197-page book (about 80 of which are taken up with Xtras) is devoted to examples, under varying handicapping circumstances, of how his product can help players make more money at the track. As usual in these things, lots of winners who paid big prices are included along with an explanation of how you could have picked them using The Xtras.

He explains a number of factors are involved when trying to figure out exactly what a horse did during a particular race. A horse begins from a standing start, accelerates, then eventually decelerates. Velocity numbers (such as Fotias uses) can provide a fairly good picture of what happened. But not a perfect picture. Looking at just the second quarter of most races, Fotias asks "How tight is the turn? How steeply is it banked? Does the animal's normal motion and physique allow it negotiate different types of turns with the same agility? Anyone who tells you he can reduce all of this to one perfect "energy number" probably has a bridge in Brooklyn he can let you have real cheap."

Fotias continues with an interesting discussion on the problems of dealing with ground loss. He points out that while a horse may cover more ground (roughly one additional length for each path outside on the turn), giving extra credit for ground loss ignores a possible dead-rail bias. It also ignores the fact that a horse on the outside may benefit from a severe bank on the final turn

which means he's helped by centrifugal force. Fotias's own numbers include adjustments for such factors as weight, but not for ground loss.

The author goes on in a thoroughly professional and insightful manner to discuss such topics as biases, jockeys, trainers, post positions, and form cycles.

Deducing which horses figure to be in top form today and which are probably on a declining cycle are the most important factors in handicapping, according to Fotias. "Envision each previous race as part of a constantly evolving process of improvement and decline," he says. "Class, pace, distance, final-time ability and all other factors are relevant, of course, but they all must be evaluated in relation to the horse's current condition."

One of the ways to predict improving condition is to note the horse's early effort. When a horse runs a *new pace top* - going faster than he's ever gone before, even if he finishes well back - it's a sign that he may be rounding into form. According to Fotias, the majority of horses who show such a new pace top make a forward final-time move in their next race (or two). This contrasts with horses who've just made a new final-time top, most of whom regress as our research in the February issue showed.

Fotias also discusses what he calls the cyclical pace top (where a veteran seems to be coming back to his best). Also, the delayed pace top (in which a horse runs a new pace top, then has an intervening conditioning race such as turf race, before going on to run a big number. His sheets include each horse's ratings for six furlongs, useful when a horse is coming out of a longer race to gauge whether he can keep up with the faster pace of a shorter sprint.

Fotias coins the term *reversal* for a horse who runs a better final figure than pace figure on dirt for the first time in its career. Fotias says this is a great pattern for a young router.

On the subject of the young, in maiden claiming races, Fotias concentrates on lightly raced horses with big pace numbers, even if their final numbers are not that great. However, when it comes to straight maidens, he says that conventional pace analysis is not as useful because many horses are given educational trips in their first race or two, and the presence of some possibly well-bred first-time starters further confuses the issue.

The importance of varying energy distribution plays an important part in Fotias's handicapping. He points out, for instance, that a lightly raced debuting non-claimer who ran evenly (e.g. a 68 pace number and a 68 final number) is more likely to improve than a first-timer who ran a 68 final off a 79 pace. The reason? Fotias says these even runners probably have more latent ability, and

more potential to improve than a horse who may have gone all out in that first race. The most likely bad favorite - the first timer who ran fast early and late, then is returned quickly against tougher competition.

Fotias emphasizes that you should look at a horse's *performances*, not simply his wins and losses.

As for turf racing, Fotias notes that, unlike dirt racing, late speed is far more significant than early speed. He looks for horses that run similar final numbers while running *lower* pace numbers, the idea being that such a horse is improving his finishing ability. For instance, he'd favor a horse who ran 69/70 over one who ran 65/71, going for the better finisher over the horse who has a slight final time edge.

Under all circumstances, Fotias recommends not playing the horse who just ran a big final number but, instead, to go to the bigger odds horse who is likely to move forward. Certainly, nothing wrong with that advice.