

Del Mar, The Polytrack, and You

by James Quinn

“Any horse able to complete the final quarter mile in 24 seconds or better should be considered an especially good bet the next time out.” *Colonel E.R. Bradley, preeminent owner, breeder, Kentucky Derby winner (four times), and successful gambler, 1920’s-1940’s*

Before Trevor Denman has sent the first horses on their way on opening day of Del Mar, July 18, 2007, the seaside game as we know it will have changed, and the handicappers hoping for success had best be prepared to make a couple of key adjustments. The new \$9-million Polytrack can be expected to alter the experience for all of us, and in one particularly traditional facet of the sport handicappers at major tracks have come to depend upon, the outcomes likely will no longer be the same.

The speed horses, the frontrunners and pressers, will not win as frequently as long term statistics predict, and they may not win more frequently than the horses most handicappers favor least, the one-run closers coming from the rear halves of the fields. Statistical significance cannot be asserted yet, but the preponderance of evidence supplied in the short run by Polytrack surfaces at Keeneland and Arlington Park especially, and supported by Cushion Track at Hollywood Park, indicates the speed horses may retain no distinct advantage on synthetic surfaces.

The matter is so fundamental to successful handicapping, it’s worth pursuing as a kind of first principle when adjusting to synthetic surfaces. Consider the statistical evidence provided by the national probability studies of Bill Quirin and Fred Davis, published in the early 1980’s, and relied upon diligently by a majority of regular handicappers ever since:

- At six furlongs, horses that run first, second, and third at the first call win twice as many races as they should.
- At six-and-one-half and seven furlongs, horses that run first, second, and third at the first call win slightly more than one and one-half as many races as they should.
- In routes of one mile to a mile and one-quarter, horses that run first, second and third at the first call win one and one-half as many races as they should.
- At all distances, horses that run in the rear halves of fields win roughly one-half as many races as they should, and in short sprints of five and six furlongs, they win less than 40 percent of their rightful share.

The Quirin data were based on a national sample of 5,339 dirt races and proved to be dynamite in the hands of handicappers, who proceeded to prefer frontrunners and pressers to win, while relegating the deep closers to the undersides of exactas and trifectas. Those handicappers have been doing the right thing, and as much as the probabilities may have shifted a trifle from track to track through the years, the essential dynamics of race outcomes remained the same; speed has been trump—until now.

The Keeneland experiment with a Polytrack surface for a few weeks in fall of 2006 and spring of 2007 favored closers so persistently, and proved so uncomfortable for speed horses, handicappers concluded the synthetic surface was simply biased. Then Arlington Park opened with its new

Polytrack surface on May 4, 2007, and after 91 races from May 4-20, the track reported its findings on the running styles that had been winning:

* Closers	36-91	=	39%
* Stalkers	30-91	=	33%
* Pressers	8-91	=	9%
* Wired	17-91	=	19%

Closers at Arlington had been winning significantly more races than frontrunners and pressers combined. I thought wistfully of my good friend and colleague Tom Brohamer, who has argued for decades that the best bets of all will be the pressers. No doubt the figure fanciers and pace analysts at Arlington Park this summer have been motivated to make an adjustment. I hope so.

None of this means the Del Mar Polytrack will favor closers and penalize the frontrunners and pressers. As others have observed, the Polytrack at Woodbine actually favored frontrunners and pressers for a time, although apparently the Canadian surface changed its colors in time. So even as the dirt of Belmont Park can be distinguished from that of Santa Anita, and both of those tracks from the dirt at Churchill Downs and that notorious dirt at Calder, the Polytrack of Arlington Park may be distinguished from that of Del Mar. And Cushion Track of Hollywood Park may be distinct in the running styles it has favored from that of the new Del Mar, or not.

Regardless, handicappers at Del Mar can keep in touch with the running styles that have been winning at the various distances in sprints and routes, respectively, by spending five to 10 minutes a day applying a simple technique called Track Profiles. Attendance at the races is not required, only consultation with the results charts. These appear in the local newspapers, and at drf.com.

The objective is to record the position and beaten lengths of the winners at the first and second calls. In the age of exotic wagering, not a few dedicated handicappers have gone the extra step by recording the same data for the horses that have finished second. The running styles of the place horses often will vary from those of the winners. That's nice to know. The majority of customers will not know, which amounts to an edge for those that do.

A simpler and elegant variation of the procedure records the running styles of the winners and runners-up according to one of three designated styles:

E means frontrunners, or horses that have run on the front or within a half length at the first call,

P means pressers, or horses that have run within three-quarters to two lengths at the first call, and

S means sustained, or horses that have run more than two lengths behind the leader at the first call.

Biases can be designated as S (Speed), In (Inside), C (Closers), and Out (Outside), with a plus sign (+) to indicate a strong bias. Combinations are easily designated, such as S+, In, which refers to an extra strong inside speed bias. Bias designations will be partially subjective, based upon the handicapper's observation skills.

For the races at Hollywood Park on the weekend of the Hollywood Gold Cup (G1), the designations would look like this: (*) refers to the routes

Saturday, June 30

Biases

	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th	11 th	
Win		E		E*		E	S*		S*	P*	S	In
Place		S		E		E	S		P	E	S	

Sunday, July 1

	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th	9 th	
Win	E	E		S			E		E	S
Place	E	S		S			P		S	

On this weekend, the Hollywood routes were more likely than the sprints to be won by the horses rallying from behind the pace. Only Lava Man succeeded as a presser. Sunday favored speed in the sprints.

During Del Mar, your correspondent will be providing tallies of the daily running styles that have won and placed as part of interim on-line reports on the effects of the Polytrack, following Weeks 2, 4, and 6, with a final report following the meeting. Separate reports will summarize the positions and beaten lengths of the winners and runners-up at particular distances, such as sprints of 6-and-6.5-furlongs and the flat miles, of which Del Mar cards many.

On the matter of constructing track profiles intended to reveal the running styles of winners at the various distances, a measured word of caution applies, and with conviction. The handicapper's emphasis should remain on results, not on procedure.

The debut of Polytrack will be accompanied in the media and at trackside by an inevitable continuous din and discourse related to (1) the composition of the surface, (2) the effects of the kickback, (3) the complications of maintenance procedures, (4) the impact of hot weather, (5) the potential dissipation of the waxy coating as the meeting goes by, (6) the mysterious influence of the ocean's tides, and (7) the complex interactions among all of the above.

Smart handicappers will avoid the noisy debates with a vengeance. At the outset, let go of the synthetic esoterica only the few will understand and no handicapper can control. Concentrate instead on what the results tell, as best handicappers can interpret them.

If the jockeys testify that a firmer Polytrack affords the closers a more secure footing, and a looser Polytrack hinders their purchase, favoring the front flight, handicappers can pay attention. The morning's workouts may be noticeably faster than the afternoon's races, when the sun will be shining hot and loosening the soil. If extra watering has firmed the Polytrack, and has helped steady the off-pace footing, that's nice to know. In each situation, nonetheless, the carefully constructed track profiles will reflect the reality with greater reliability.

Track profiles that favor an inordinate number of closers aside, a second and disconcerting effect of the synthetic surfaces so far likely will persevere at Del Mar, and will be far more troublesome for handicappers to counteract. As opposed to form reversals that might be predicted by strict reliance on the fundamentals of handicapping, synthetic tracks have been characterized to a nagging degree by unpredictable form reversals. Even so, the troublesome problem has a bright side, and that too likely will continue in force throughout Del Mar, at least for handicappers who can make the opportunistic adjustments.

Form Reversals. The recent four-day carryover at Hollywood Park, June 29-July 2 rather reflexively was assigned to unpredictable form reversals generated by the virgin Cushion Track, notably as its wax coating was held to have eroded to a degree that was causing more aches and pains among the horses. Maybe maintenance problems and weather patterns had reared their ugly heads anew, creating a spasm of chaos.

On the other hand, the four-day carryover into Monday, July 2 proceeded from an unlikely scenario not attributable to Cushion Track. A just-claimed \$10,000 four-year-old in dull form was jumped multiple levels in class to \$40,000 by a low-profile barn and switched to a first attempt on the turf, at the mile and one-quarter, no less. At 85-1, the imposter stalked the 6-5 favorite and nailed him in the final stride. He paid \$172.80.

Minus the outrageous upset, a triple carryover would have been cashed, no wagering records would have fallen, and although the synthetic surface would not have escaped the critical chorus, its reputation for a degree of disorder, as opposed to chaos, would have survived intact.

The example is not intended to sound disingenuous. As the lawyers like to say, let's stipulate that a heavy degree of upset has accompanied the races at the tracks on the front lines of the new synthetic surfaces. And that two of the races that contributed to the four-day carryover and its fantastic payoff to 13 fortunate punters can be considered illustrative of the problematic races that may cause the worst headaches during Del Mar.

Before revisiting those races, however, it's instructive to consider the following interesting information, which derives from the 91 races that introduced the Polytrack at Arlington Park. As I hope handicappers will agree, these amazing outcomes represent the bright side of the problems associated with the handicapping of synthetic tracks.

Average Exotics Payoffs to \$2.00, Arlington Park, May 4-20, 91 races

Daily Doubles:	\$136.08
Exactas:	\$114.83
Trifectas:	\$1,002.76
Superfectas:	\$12,613.78
Pick 3's:	\$2,621.90
Pick 4's:	\$11,058.80

The average payoff to win, by the way, was \$17.00.

If daily doubles and exactas that normally pay 10-1, 15-1, and 20-1 instead will pay on an order of 67-1 and 56-1, with trifectas paying 500-1, and the typical Pick 4's can exceed \$10,000, the unpredictable form reversals that generate the windfalls will be more than tolerated. They will be instead welcome, and what has resembled a curse to some might be converted to opportunities by many. Assuming comparable mutuels early at Del Mar, that's because the fantastic payoffs will remain largely within the province of the smaller bettors, and not so much the domain of the bigger bettors.

If the adjustment bigger bettors will make at Del Mar will be a defensive caution, the adjustment the smaller bettors must entertain is an aggressive offense. If bigger bettors will have more to lose on a less predictable Polytrack, the smaller bettors will have more to gain. The trick may be to anticipate the races where most unpredictable form reversals should occur, and to engage in a repetitive style of wagering that makes sense.

As to the unpredictable form reversals and upsets, two categories of races stand out, and both will dominate a number of the programs at Del Mar. The two are cheap races and—surprise, surprise--races for two-year-olds. The first is commonly understood to involve slow and inconsistent horses,

and encompass the claiming races below \$20,000 for 3UP, all claiming races limited to three-year-olds, all maiden-claiming races, and the starter allowance races for graduates of MdnCIm-\$40 and less that have never won two races.

No matter how impressive the most recent performances in these low-level races, handicappers willing to assume the performances cannot be repeated will be right far more often than wrong. The race favorites and most low-priced contenders will be practically crying out to be beaten by dubious horses at attractive to generous to ridiculous odds. This is traditional practice, of course, but the presence of Polytrack intensifies the probability the unpredictable form reversals will occur, even among cheaper horses that have run well previously on a synthetic surface. As elsewhere, the sluggish one-paced closers launching their late desperate runs to the wire, and sent away at double-digit odds, should get the Del Mar handicapper's unprecedented attention. Angles, trainer patterns, body language, and longshot stabs do apply.

In the finale of the four-day carryover on Hollywood's Cushion Track, the MdnCIm-\$32 sprint looked contentious but predictable, and at least four of the 13 runners had delivered a recent race near par. As first starters win less than 1 of 10 maiden-claiming races, least likely on paper was a first starter with no sharp works from a barn that wins with less than 10 percent of its firsters.

So, what happened? At 18.9-1, a sluggish first starter from the Paddy Gallagher barn (6%W with firsters) rallied from a dead-last 13th at the first call, and nipped a 9-1 lone frontrunner in the final stride. With no disrespect to the fortunate and sweetly enriched 13, by any standard of conventional handicapping, the upset was entirely unpredictable. Expect the outcome to be repeated at Del Mar.

The second category of potential upset on Del Mar's Polytrack, however, is decidedly uncommon, but fantastically intriguing. Sprints for the two-year-olds traditionally rate among the most predictable of races, and Del Mar will be carding dozens of them. Speed figures inexorably have carried the cause. The swiftest juveniles win, and the great majority of these feature high quotients of early speed. The first timers their connections will be eager to back will be the swiftest of the swift. The Polytrack, however, may prove uncomfortably tiring to the juveniles that run too fast out of the gate. To the extent this phenomenon repeats itself, the Del Mar two-year-old program may be turned upside down.

As it came to pass, on the Saturday of the June 30 double carryover on Hollywood's Cushion Track, the ungraded Landaluce Stakes would be won from the rear by a two-year-old from a low-percentage barn that nobody beyond its connections could possibly prefer. Perhaps the result will prove an anomaly (the Beyer Speed Figure of 80 actually matches par), but no one should forget that in the season's first sprint of six furlongs for good horses, a rank outsider named The Golden Noodle came rushing down the lane to win going away. The Golden Noodle paid \$68.60, and another carryover had been sealed.

Then, in the July 4 Hollywood Juvenile Championship (G3), no fewer than six of the 11 runners had won from several lengths off the early pace. Two of those latecomers finished one-two in The Juvenile, nostrils apart, and the winner paid \$15.20.

During the first two weeks of Del Mar, handicappers might record a separate Track Profile that describes the running styles of the first and second finishers in the sprints for two-year-olds. If longshots have been winning from more than two lengths behind the pace as frequently as do the frontrunners and pressers, maybe the two-year-old game at Del Mar will have changed its colors.

In reaction to the unpredictable form reversals, the adaptation to the wagering might be a renewed focus on the "key" horses. Key horses are defined as mild to moderately priced non-favorites, say from 5-2 to 6-1, that handicappers decide have an especially strong chance to win. Key horses can

be expected to stick out like a giraffe's neck once, sometimes twice, on a card. They will be found more often in claiming races above \$20,000 open to 3UP, in the non-winners allowance series, in the stakes, and in grass routes. The horses have achieved a certain level of class and consistency, or look to possess high potential, such that best efforts are not as likely to be repelled by the vagaries of Polytrack. If the key horses previously have impressed on a synthetic surface, better still.

Key horses are so christened because they become the keys to the exotic vaults. Beyond reliable selections to win, key horses are best linked to a number of the exotic pools in the same and surrounding races. In deference to the form reversals stimulated by Polytrack elsewhere, and this is the secret of success, handicappers must prepare to cover *all* the double-digit horses that might upset in the various pools. As mounting evidence has persuaded most of us, on Polytrack the late runners in dubious form must be included nonetheless. The cost goes up, but so does the prospect of success, and of a season's score. When the key horses come shining through, handicappers should expect as well to cash the related exactas, trifectas, Pick 3's, and Pick 4's, at least occasionally.

This is a desirable way to attack the races where a pattern of grinding out a predictable level of success is unlikely to occur, as on racing's most prominent event days, or when betting to win on a synthetic surface that generates an atypical rate of upset. Handicappers must expect their win percentages to drop, so the payoffs must compensate. Handicappers accustomed to winning one of three should now expect to win one of four, maybe as few as one of five key races they choose to play.

The recommended remedy to the form reversals of Polytrack becomes a tactic within the means of virtually everyone. Once or twice a day, link the key horse to the unpredictable outsiders. To repeat, late runners in dubious form may be especially desirable in the other legs of serial bets and on the undersides of exactas, trifectas, and supers.

Turf to Polytrack. Probably the horsemen should be credited with making the swiftest, shrewdest adjustment to the new synthetic surfaces. As quickly as three days into the Hollywood fall season of 2006, southern California horsemen began to enter their turf horses on Cushion Track in impressive numbers. The grass horses would experience a kinder footing in combination with a pace more compatible with the slower fractions of turf races. The trips would be more comfortable too, without the customary kickback of hard dirt nuggets.

How well has the experiment worked so far?

Arlington Park has reported horses moving from turf to synthetic surfaces have been winning at 13%, but the statistic remains difficult to interpret. The correct statistical analysis compares the percentage of winners having a characteristic—turf to Polytrack, for instance—with the percentage of starters having the same characteristic. If 10 percent of the starters will be horses switching turf to Polytrack, the turf horses would be expected to win 10 percent of the races. If turf horses have been winning at 20 percent instead, the chances of turf horses winning on Polytrack would be considered unusually good. The reported 13% winners would be insignificant.

Until more evidence accumulates, handicappers should appreciate that the running styles of turf horses appear to be highly compatible with the running styles of numerous winners on Polytrack and Cushion Track. In southern California, turf horses switching to the synthetic surfaces may benefit from another underestimated advantage. In general, a \$40,000 turf horse has competed in races of a higher quality than similar \$40,000 races on the dirt. The class edge is real. If the turf horses switching to Polytrack also will be dropping a level in class, as from \$50,000 to \$40,000 perhaps, the class edge may be significant.

Conformation may be a positive factor too. Body language experts have testified that turf horses benefit from dish-like feet that glide over the grass in a paddling motion, as opposed to the smaller rounded hooves that dig more deeply into dirt surfaces in an up-and-down motion. The paddling motion seems better suited to the synthetic surfaces than to the dirt. Handicappers with keen observation skills may be able to spot turf runners that should go well on a synthetic surface at the paddock and walking ring. As ever, demand legitimate odds, of 8-1 and higher. Favorites and low-priced contenders will not win often enough.

The turf to Polytrack translation has been accompanied too by a heightened regard for the sires whose progeny have performed exceedingly well on synthetic surfaces. Arlington Park handicapper Joe Kristufek has published a list of sires whose progeny have won at 17 percent on the maneuver. Although no Cal-bred sires appear on the list, stallions familiar to southern California handicappers include Cat's Career, El Corredor, Favorite Trick, Hennessy, Mr. Greeley, Rubiano, Seeking the Gold, Smart Strike, and Stormy Atlantic.

Kristufek also provided a short list of the exceptionally strong sires on synthetic tracks. Alphabetically, these include Belong To Me, Chester House, Chief Seattle, Honour and Glory, Skip Away, and Slew City Slew. Memorize the names. It's reassuring to find champion Skip Away on a positive list of pedigree performers at last.

Speed & Pace Figures. The inexorably multiplying numbers of figure handicappers that have come to depend upon pace figures as a razor's edge that begs success may face the most profound adjustment of all. Dozens of races on Cushion Track at Hollywood Park have demonstrated beyond dispute the long preferred balance as between pace figures and speed figures—above par pace figures, par or better speed figures—no longer can be counted upon to prevail. Top horses should continue to prevail, all right, but unexceptional, ordinary, and common horses, practically all, will be likely to fade through the stretch if they have run too fast to the pace call. On days when the speed has been floundering, many horses exhibiting high pace figures may finish out of the money, frustrating the pace analysts completely.

No matter the brand of pace figures invoked, from the Quirin-style figures, to those published by Bris, or Today's Racing Digest to the new Moss Pace Figures of Daily Racing Form, the preferred balance of speed & pace has changed as illustrated here: (Par is 103)

Dirt tracks 105 103 Synthetic tracks 99-103

More often than not, traditional pace analysts playing on Cushion Track would prepare to favor horses capable of exceeding par early and matching par late (105-103), but more often than before the horses running slightly slower than par early and par or better late (99-103) have been winning the races. The variations in the numbers will be numerous, but the recommended balance on Cushion Track, and by extension on Polytrack, finds the pace figure lower than the speed figure, roughly by two lengths.

It's a complicated topic, and it's true still that frontrunners and pressers having pace figures more than a couple of lengths shy of par will be poor bets, notably when moving ahead in class and facing faster, better horses. At the same time, handicappers should continue to admire the young and lightly raced prospects capable of recording improved combinations of speed & pace figures while moving ahead in non-claiming class. These represent the potential division leaders. And as always, the youngsters to abandon will be those that cannot attend a faster pace, and still finish fast. In other words, the basic patterns with developing horses should persevere on the Polytrack.

A dedicated pace play that might be forsaken on synthetic tracks is the maiden-claiming contender dropping in claiming price and possessing one of the top two pace figures in the field, regardless of

the horses' speed figures. It remains to be seen at Del Mar, but these cheapies may be destined to fade badly on Polytrack. The same may happen to maiden special dropdowns with high early speed or superior pace figures.

If the dropdown pace-figure spot play is no longer reliable in maiden-claiming company, a majority of these slow and slower races become wide open. Virtually anything can win, as did the Paddy Gallagher longshot in the contentious carryover finale at Hollywood Park on July 2.

A minority of regular handicappers prefer to construct hands-on personal speed figures, and just about everybody will be curious to know whether Del Mar's fractional and final times will be slower than what has been normal, and by how many lengths. An examination of the daily track variants on Hollywood's Cushion Track after 52 days of the spring-summer meeting has revealed the typical sprint variant to be Slow 2-4 lengths, with the most extreme variant a Slow 6.

Routes on average have been Slow 3-6 lengths, with the most extreme variant Slow 9 (once). Only on five racing days at Hollywood Park were the sprints faster than normal, and none by more than three lengths. These data can be considered quite agreeable, and reassure figure handicappers the Cushion Track has not distorted the running times, and the corresponding speed figures, in any disconcerting manner.

Handicappers who want to compare Del Mar's running times on Polytrack with normal times of recent seasons (2) can rely upon the following class-distance fractional and final times for males 3&UP to estimate variants. Following convention, the fractional times are presented in tenths of seconds, the final times in fifths of seconds. The Beyer Speed Figures for the class-distance par times are presented at the far right.

	6f	6.5f	1M	8.5f	Beyer
Maiden	44.7 110.0	44.7 116.2	111.2 137.2	111.5 144.1	88-87
Alw, NW1	44.5 109.2	44.5 115.4	110.9 136.4	111.2 143.3	96-93
Alw, NW2	44.3 109.0	44.3 115.2	110.7 136.2	111.0 143.1	101-97
Stakes	43.9 108.2	43.9 114.4	110.2 135.2	110.5 142.1	108-107
C1m-\$10	44.9 110.2	44.9 116.4	111.4 137.4	111.7 144.3	83-83
C1m-\$12,500	44.8 110.1	44.8 116.3	111.3 137.3	111.6 144.2	87-85
C1m-\$20	44.6 109.4	44.6 116.1	111.1 137.1	111.4 144.0	91-89
C1m-\$32	44.5 109.2	44.5 115.4	110.9 136.4	111.2 143.3	96-93
C1m-\$50 +	44.3 109.0	44.3 115.2	110.7 136.2	111.0 143.1	101-97

Naturally, new class-distance pars will be constructed for Del Mar's Polytrack following the meeting.

Normal deviations about par typically range from Fast 1-3 to Slow 1-3, a range of 6-7 lengths. Provided the daily track variants for Del Mar's Polytrack will be similar to those of Hollywood's Cushion Track, and not aggregated in wildly extreme or disturbingly incoherent patterns, handicappers can be confident the resulting speed figures, Beyer's or otherwise, should provide reliable estimates of how fast the horses have run.

Although Polytrack running times should be expected to be slower, and certain one-dimensional speed horses almost certainly will be disadvantaged, speed is still and ever will be the hallmark of class. The other critical attributes of class are two, stamina and determination, and these attributes should prove more decisive on the Polytrack, at least much of the time. Speed figures reflect speed extremely well, but may or may not reflect the other attributes of class, particularly at longer distances and at higher class levels, a condition that will render the figures on Polytrack more painstaking to interpret.

Del Mar's executive vice-president Craig Fravel does not hesitate to comment on behalf of the track on the delicate matter. "Del Mar makes no apology for a track surface that may not be as kind to the speed horses."

Many handicappers, including me, no doubt concur. A strategic benefit attending the shift to synthetic surfaces at several of the nation's major tracks may be a resurgent regard for the improvement of the breed, based upon matings on farms and purchases at sales intended to produce racehorses possessing greater degrees of speed, stamina, and determination in combination.

The Importance of the Final Fraction. The final adjustment to Polytrack should be considered an imperative, and is readily accessible to anyone who cares. If late speed might win as frequently as early speed, handicappers adapt by exhibiting relatively equal concerns for the early fractions and the final fraction. The final fraction can be calculated by the most casual of customers, and by all experienced handicappers, however averse they may be to the math.

Using the past performances, subtract the fractional time at the pace call from the final time of the race. The difference equals the final fraction of the race. The pace call occurs after four furlongs in sprints of six-to-seven furlongs, and is the second call in the points of call. The pace call occurs after six furlongs in routes of a mile to nine furlongs, and is the third call in the points of call. The pace call at the infrequently run mile and one-quarter occurs after a mile (also the third call in the points of call).

To find the final fraction of the horse, modify the final fraction of the race by one fifth of a second for every length the horse gained (or lost) from the pace call to the wire.

If a maiden race has been run in 45 flat to the pace call, and 110 flat at the wire, the final fraction of the race is 25 seconds. If the good horse Hot Tip has been fifth at the pace call, beaten five lengths, but finishes second at the wire, beaten two lengths, Hot Tip has gained three lengths during the final fraction. One length is equated to one-fifth of a second.

Hot Tip's final fraction is estimated at 25 seconds minus three lengths, or three-fifths, which equals $24 \frac{2}{5}$ seconds. Half-lengths can be rounded up to a full length, but not quarter-lengths. As will be seen immediately, Hot Tip's final fraction is good, but unexceptional.

Using Del Mar's par times presented above, maidens 3UP typically complete the final fraction at six furlongs in $25 \frac{2}{5}$ and in routes of one mile in $26 \frac{1}{5}$ seconds. Stakes horses typically complete the same final fractions in $24 \frac{3}{5}$ and 25 seconds. The \$20,000 claiming horses typically complete the same final fractions in $25 \frac{1}{5}$ and 26 seconds.

Which calls to mind after all these years, in a kind of recycling process, the keen observation of the inimitable Colonel E.R. Bradley, that any horse capable of completing the final fraction of a race in 24 seconds or better probably deserves to be bet next time. The Colonel was an inveterate bettor, and a good one, and he proved to be correct about the final fraction. Those unusually strong closers do win, and they win again. Handicappers at Del Mar should not hesitate to follow the Colonel's bountiful advice. The technique should prove particularly helpful in evaluating off-pace horses moving from Hollywood's Cushion Track to Del Mar's Polytrack.

To project the good Colonel's observation to the other prominent distances, at 6.5-furlongs and a mile and one-sixteenth any horse able to finish in 31 seconds or better may be a good thing next time. At 7-furlongs and a mile and one-eighth, the guidepost to an impressive final fraction would be 37 seconds or better.

For the horses moving from turf to Polytrack, handicappers should require the final fractions of the good turf races be faster than 12 seconds a furlong, regardless of the distance, and the fast finish

should have occurred at today's class level or higher. Keep in mind the fractional times of turf races generally will be slower, and the turf horses now running on Polytrack may run well behind the pace, but they typically will be running faster than they do on the grass.

An especially favored bet by a number of class analysts finds the probable early pace likely to destroy the chances of the horses in the front flight, pressers as well as frontrunners, such that mid-pack and late runners will be more likely to finish one, two, and even three. When this happens, as it has so often on Polytrack and Cushion Track, the exactas and trifectas typically will pay much more than they should, the wagering public having a general disregard for the horses rallying from far behind.

And when the key horses have been "keyed" to win in exotics, the top two-three closers more often than not should be covered to finish second and third, absolutely if the track profiles on Polytrack have revealed the late runners have been doing almost as well as the speed horses.

The Del Mar Experience. Handicappers like me have been loath to subscribe to the old saw that the next best thing to a winning day at the races is a losing day at the races, but the Del Mar experience comes closest to making the point. With the ocean air wafting throughout the grounds, the atmosphere and attitudes on track convey an indelible aspect of liveliness and even sexiness missing at other places. No matter the results every half-hour, the bustle of the racing day remains one of fun and games.

From Pacific Beach northward to majestic La Jolla, through the village of Del Mar itself, to Solana Beach, north to Encinitas, the beachfronts will be pulsing with the outdoors activities of mornings and a clubby style of nightlife following the races. The revitalized downtown areas around Petco Park extend to its denizens and tourists alike a wonderful array of restaurants, clubs, and shops to suit all tastes. The vicinity is fabulous for walking and gawking. The perfect night to go follows the Pick-4 score that has guaranteed a winning season, and might have been less than half as great if not for the presence of Polytrack.