

Below the surface

Handicappers believe Polytrack creates more exciting racing at Keeneland

by Steve Bailey

On weekends in April and October, more often than not, you'll find Dustin Harrison roaming the Keeneland grounds trying to pick a winner.

The 28-year-old Lexington resident has spent a lot of time—and a lot of money—at the picturesque Central Kentucky racetrack over the years, but he's never had more fun—or experienced more success at the windows—as he did during last fall's meeting, the first to be run on Polytrack.

"I thought the Polytrack was great because it gives every horse in the field a fair shot," said Harrison, who owns and operates Classic Cut Lawn and Landscape. "For years, you knew the early speed had a really good shot to win, so those horses got bet down to nothing and it was hard to get a price on a winner.

"The Polytrack changed that completely. Horses were coming from off the pace and even closing from the back to win, which you never saw before. It



On opening day of Keeneland's 2006 fall meet, Lordly (No. 9), owned by Keeneland Trustee Louis Lee Haggin III, won the first race run on Polytrack.

allows you to really handicap a race and not just focus on the speed horses or the horses in the inside post positions."

Keeneland became the third North American track to run a live meeting on a

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Photo by Z

The dramatic rise in the number of starters was among the factors that produced more competitive racing during Keeneland's 2006 fall meet.

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synthetic surface when it opened its 2006 fall meet on October 6.

Turfway Park in Florence, Kentucky, installed the surface in August 2005, and Woodbine in Toronto, Ontario, began running on Polytrack—a material made of synthetic fibers, recycled rubber and silica coated with wax mixed with sand—last summer. Arlington Park in suburban Chicago is set to install the surface in time for its live race meeting, which opens on May 4. Del Mar near San Diego will debut its new Polytrack surface when it opens on July 18.

Levels the playing field

After one full Keeneland meet on the Polytrack, most handicappers agree with Harrison: The surface promotes much more balanced and much more exciting racing.

“It certainly negated the speed bias that Keeneland had been widely known for,” said Jeremy Plonk, a writer and editor for *The HorsePlayer* magazine. “What we’ve seen with the Polytrack—at Keeneland and at other tracks—is that the races are run more like turf races as far as strategy goes.

“You’re not seeing the quick fractions that people had come to expect at Keeneland. Instead, you saw more modest early fractions—:48s and :49s and change—with a bunch of horses turning for home and making a mad sprint to the wire over the final quarter.”

Veteran handicapper Mike Battaglia, who sets the morning lines at Kentucky’s racetracks, has watched hundreds of races over the Polytrack and has been amazed how it seems to have leveled the playing field.

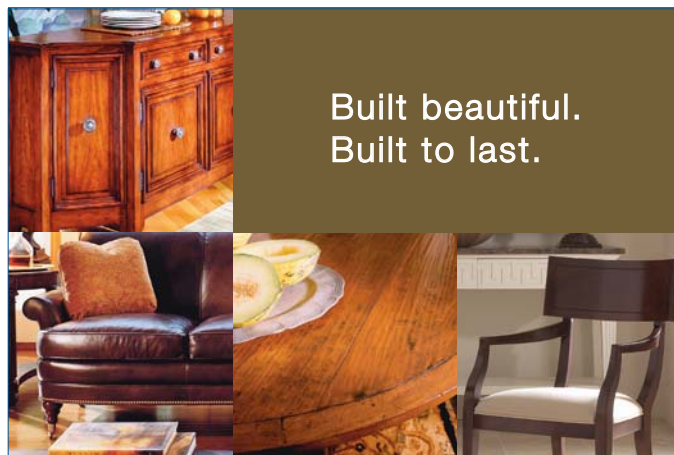
“The first thing that players have to realize is you can’t look at a horse’s old form at Keeneland,” Battaglia said. “Throw out all those old past performances. There is no advantage for horses with early speed anymore. In fact, it was a definite disadvantage at Keeneland last fall. Horses on the front end did not do well at all, which was a 180-degree switch from the way it used to be.

“The fields were much more bunched up and trying to just position themselves for the stretch run. No leads were safe and no horses were too far back. We saw horses get up at the wire that were eight or ten lengths back at the top of the stretch, which historically has been unheard of at Keeneland. It brings strategy back into the equation and gives a lot more horses a chance to win.”

Measures of popularity

Ed DeRosa is the news editor at *Thoroughbred Times*. He has been studying Polytrack since it was first installed at Turfway and keeps his own database of races and times on the surface. DeRosa believes the evening of the playing field is not only better for the horses and their connections but also for bettors.

“Trainers and owners are going to want to run their horses on the Polytrack because it is safer and a much more fair surface,” DeRosa said. “So you are going to see bigger fields and better, more exciting races. For the handicapper, it’s significant because the bigger fields are going to allow for better options at the window. Bigger prices mean bigger payouts for the bettors.”



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Final statistics from the fall meet back that up. According to Keeneland, the number of starters rose dramatically—to 1,613, up from 1,437 in 2005 and 1,399 in 2004—while field size also increased 10.02 compared to 9.21 and 8.97 in previous years. Meanwhile, winning margins decreased, giving fans greater rooting interests in the stretch. The average winning margin (winner to second-place finisher) was 1.63 lengths compared to 3.86 in 2005 and 2.9 in 2004. The average number of lengths separating the field (first to last) was 16.42 this fall compared to 29.4 in 2005 and 27.9 in 2004. Average winning times also were faster compared to the previous two years.

At the mutuel windows, Keeneland set records for attendance and handle.

“It’s a winning situation for everyone,” DeRosa said. “More exciting racing means more money for the track and more money for those who are able to pick the winners.”

In good form

So what should experienced and novice handicappers alike look for this spring?

“One thing we noticed at Turfway was that after the first meeting, when the surface had had time to settle, we saw the horses with the early speed do a little bit better,” Battaglia said. “Now that the Keeneland surface has been down six or seven months, you might see a few more winners on the front end.”

“It’s never going to go back to the way it was before at Keeneland, but it’s something to watch over the first few days of the meet. Is the early speed holding a little better or are horses still consistently coming off the pace to win?”

Plonk said he will be taking particular notice of the jockeys and how they adapt to the surface.

“On any surface, pace always makes the race,” Plonk said. “Since these races on the artificial surfaces are being run so much like turf races, jockeys that have a good record on the turf should transfer that form over to the Polytrack. Or jockeys that prove early in the meeting that they are excelling over the surface will be ones to watch throughout the meeting; they are the ones putting their horses in the best position to win over the final quarter.”

Harrison said he can’t wait to get back to the windows and try his luck again.

“I feel like I can sit down and study the numbers and it really means something now,” Harrison said. “Now everybody is not going to be piling their money on the horses with the highest speed figures. The money will be more spread out because the racing will be more fair—and I’m hoping that means more money in my pocket.” 🐾

Steve Bailey is deputy news editor for *Thoroughbred Times*.

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