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Keeneland has averaged 9.56 starters for races on Polytrack since horses began racing on the all-weather surface in the fall of 2006.

# Don't let the big races fool you

## Longshots in Grade 1 races belie true picture of winners on Polytrack

By Jeremy Plonk

Whether it's a new handicapping challenge or a new pillow, often it takes some time before you achieve true comfort. When the Polytrack surface became reality on the main track at Keeneland during the 2006 fall meeting, no one knew exactly how long it would be until the horses, horsemen and handicappers could get that proverbial good night's sleep and rest easy.

The answer may remain inexact, but statistically the pair of race meetings held at Keeneland in 2010 certainly appears to have found that comfort zone. The average winning odds of horses on Polytrack at the 2010 spring and fall meetings ranked as the two lowest cumulative returns in the nine meetings held over the surface.

In fact, Keeneland's 2010 fall meeting marked the fifth consecutive fall season where the price on the aver-

age winning horse dropped. The 5.63-1 average odds of the winners were a far cry from the 8.31-1 odds seen during the inaugural Polytrack meeting in the fall of 2006. In addition, the average odds of the 2010 spring meeting's winners were 6.26-1, down considerably from the 2008 spring meeting record high of 7.04-1.

If these numbers still seem high from what you perceive a competitive race meeting ought to produce, consider that Keeneland's most recent meeting, the 2010 fall season, was far more dialed in by the handicapping public than three of the most popular, and bettor-beloved, winter-spring meetings held in 2011.

The public not only statistically has caught on to handicapping races on Keeneland's Polytrack, it has actually outdone itself compared to many of the current year's most popular dirt and turf meetings. Consider that favorites

won 41 percent of the races on Polytrack at the 2010 fall meeting, a number that all-weather cynics probably never thought was achievable. Combine that

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### Polytrack Era At a Glance

- Began:** Fall 2006
- Completed race meetings:** 9
- No. of races on Polytrack:** 1,116
- Average win odds:** 6.75-1
- Favorites:** 347 for 1,116, 31%
- Average field size:** 9.56 starters per race
- Leading trainer by wins:**  
Ken McPeck, 55
- Leading jockey by wins:**  
Julien Leparoux, 141
- Leading sire by wins:**  
Unbridled's Song, 22

PolyCapping, which gives expert horseplayers detailed information on the individual winners of every Keeneland race on Polytrack, is available at Keeneland.com. The free database is sortable and downloadable.

## Average winning odds at 2011 race meetings (through March 7)

Oaklawn Park	6.53-1
Gulfstream Park	6.41-1
Tampa Bay Downs	6.17-1

## Average winning odds at Keeneland in 2010

Spring meeting	6.26-1
Fall meeting	5.63-1

stat with a seldom-matched average of 9.95 starters per race on the Polytrack during Keeneland's 2010 fall meeting and you have a tremendous display of horses running true to form and handicappers understanding what it takes.

### Tide has turned

Keeneland has held 1,116 races over its Polytrack going into the 2011 spring meeting. Favorites have won 347 of those contests for a 31 percent average over the nine race meetings. But statistics from recent meetings show that the tide has turned for horseplayers.

Smart horseplayers know that a horse doesn't necessarily need to be an all-weather surface juggernaut or that proverbial turf monster to win at Keeneland. Of the 463 total races on

## Skewing the perception: The big race factor

Race category	Total Races	Winning Favorites	Percentage Winning Favorites	Avg Winning Odds
All Grade 1 stakes on Polytrack	24	1	4%	10.44-1
All races on Polytrack	1,116	347	31%	6.76-1
2010 races on Polytrack	239	87	36%	5.92-1

Polytrack during the spring, the winning horses most recently prepped on dirt 159 times, on an all-weather surface 133 times and on turf 110 times (with 61 first-time starters also winning). The past two spring seasons show an even tighter race among supremacy for the last-prep surface of Keeneland winners: 68 dirt, 64 all-weather, 62 turf.

### Piece of overall picture

Polytrack was meant to be a universal racing surface, and Keeneland's overall numbers certainly bear that out. No doubt, part of the national skew comes from fans and media members who don't follow the local racing daily. Observing just the results of track's biggest races has been misleading to the overall picture.

Only 10 of the 239 races on Polytrack in all of 2010 were won by horses at odds of 20-1 or more on the tote

board, though drive-by observers may only remember Stately Victor at 40-1 in the Toyota Blue Grass (G1) in the spring and Acoma at 23-1 in the Juddmonte Spinster (G1) in the fall.

It's statistically ironic, given what we know about the overall Polytrack numbers, that Wickedly Perfect became the first favorite to win a Grade 1 race on Polytrack at Keeneland when capturing the 2010 Darley Alcibiades. A 1-for-24 record in Grade 1 races for favorites goes a long way in distorting the perception of what has happened during the everyday racing programs at Keeneland. 🐾

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## Handicapping hints for spring

- In the **2-year-old races** this spring, focus on horses with workouts at Keeneland. Of the 35 races for 2-year-olds held in the Polytrack era during the spring season, 31 winners had a local workout most recently (including eight of nine winners in the spring of 2010). Also watch the toteboard: Only one winner of a 2-year-old race during the spring has been over 9-1 odds with 27 of 35 victors bet to 7-2 or less odds.
- **Gulfstream Park invaders** absolutely owned Keeneland's turf course during the 2010 spring meeting, winning 15 of the 33 races held. No other circuit produced more than five winners (Fair Grounds). While course conditions can change drastically due to weather, keep in mind that only five of the 33 turf winners during last year's spring meeting closed from more than five lengths behind after the opening half-mile.
- The **50-cent Pick Five** wager debuts this spring and should prove popular with horseplayers who felt uncompetitive in the Pick Six without a super-sized bankroll (page 22). Consider that a Pick Six ticket with just two contenders per race racked up a \$128 investment. Now a 2x2x2x2x2 ticket on the Pick Five would cost just \$16 on the 50-cent play. The average 50-cent Pick 5 payout at Gulfstream after the first two months of its 2011 meeting was a few coins shy of \$13,000, so you can win a lot for a little.
- **Top sires in 2010** on the Keeneland Polytrack were Distorted Humor and Smart Strike, each with six unique winners. Empire Maker had five. Successful Appeal also had five wins, but from three unique runners.