

Experts look for winners

Avid handicappers give tips on wagering during Keeneland's spring meeting

By **Jude T. Feld**

For at least a couple of centuries, a debate has raged. Is handicapping an art or is it science? It could be suggested that handicapping is really alchemy—a way of turning information about a horse's record into gold.

Here's how a few Keeneland regulars view the past performances and discuss some of the secrets to their success at the windows.

Favorite strategy

"Fans tend to over bet their favorite jockeys and trainers at Keeneland, giving opportunity to the patient player," said Dan Kenny, a daily player. "Oh how I miss Pat Day. Every once



Photo by Z

tastes as fresh as

spring!

From grilled seafood to exceptional pasta, everything on the menu at Bella Notte is prepared with care, using fresh and locally grown ingredients and served to please.

Now's the time to try the vibrant new tastes on our spring menu:

Risotto with Mint, Parmesan and Sweet Peas
Spring Terrine of Pork | Black Angus Beef Ribeye
Pasta with Pancetta and Spring Peas
Orange Scented Génoise Cake with Cream Cheese Mousse and Rose Petal Jam

any night. every night. why not tonight?

there's only one

**bella
notte**[®]

3715 Nicholasville Rd. Lexington, KY 40503
SUN-THURS 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. FRI/SAT 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.
(859) 245 1789 www.bellalexington.com



Photo by Z

Keeneland offers handicapping seminars on Saturdays to review the day's races.

in a while, he'd be on an odds-on favorite while my figures suggested that he might not finish in the top three. With the advent of trifectas and superfectas, these spots became significant investment material.

"Turf and two-year-olds define my basic Keeneland strategy. Keeneland's turf course is roomier than most, with nice sweeping turns that minimize the chances of a rough trip. One angle to watch for is a visiting jockey aboard a short-priced horse on the grass. It takes a few trips on Keeneland turf to understand the uphill portion down the backstretch.

"Many false moves have been launched from the half-mile pole. The incline often empties the tank of the ship-in, allowing some good prices to be had by backing a horse ridden by a local jockey like Robby Albarado.

"As a member of Four Star Sales (which sells Thoroughbreds at public auctions), I attend a lot of two-year-old sales and keep my notes on their works, especially noting those who

galloped out smoothly under their own steam. The cat has long been out of the bag when it comes to (trainers) Steve Asmussen and Todd Pletcher in these first 'baby' races. Since one or both saddle babies in every juvenile race, it seems you have to be ready to accept a 'short price rather than a long face,' but every once in awhile, I'll come up with a fuzzy from my workout notes who beats the chalk."

Pay attention

Gay Fisher of Mt. Brilliant Farm in Lexington says reading the conditions of the race is very important, as is checking the track for any bias.

"I pay close attention to the pace of the race," Fisher said. "I watch the first few races and see how running styles play out. Is speed holding or are closers doing well? With turf races, 'horses for courses' seem more important at Keeneland than other tracks. With baby races in the spring, I look for trainers who are good with two-year-olds and horses by precocious sires."

Closing time

"I look for a horse that attempted to make a closing bid last race out," said Ed Meyer, a regular Keeneland contest player who spends his summers working at River Downs in Cincinnati. "Closers and stalkers have held their own at Keeneland since the Polytrack has arrived. It plays a little kinder to their running style.

"Another angle I play is turf shippers from a big barn. Trainers don't

come to Keeneland to prep; they come for the money. The turf at Keeneland is superior, and any trainer worth their salt brings 'A' game runners to the spring meeting."



Photo by Z

Handicappers develop their own strategies for picking winners.

Horse and rider

Lexington businessman Lee Weber concentrates on two areas when wagering on Keeneland races.

"I struggled at the windows for 20 years at Keeneland, but over the last two years I have had success, including a major score in last year's Toyota Blue Grass (G1)," Weber said. "I have been employing two strategies. First, I look at horses that are shipping in from the top tracks of the country: Fair Grounds, Gulfstream, Santa Anita and Aqueduct. These horses are particularly interesting because they have run all winter. They own the momentum and have competed against top horses.

"Then, I look at jockey-trainer combinations: Bobby Frankel and Rafael Bejarano, John Velazquez and Todd Pletcher, Kent Desormeaux and Bill Mott, Eddie Castro and Martin Wolfson, Robby Albarado and Neil Howard. The jocks typically work these horses in the morning, have a good feel for them in the afternoon and they work hard to win for the trainers who support them. I also take a look at whoever Garrett Gomez is riding. He ships in and rides a lot of winners."

Off the pace

"I love Keeneland's turf course," said handicapper Les Instone. "I think horses coming from off the pace have



Photo by Z

Every Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Keeneland tailgaters can stop by a wagering tent located just inside the Gate 2 entrance on Versailles Road. The tent provides mutuel windows, program sales and TV monitors.

continued on page 22

Experts look for winners

continued from page 21

a distinct advantage on the uphill stretch, especially in two- or three-turn races.”

Profitable situations

Equibase handicapper Ellis Starr uses a specific approach.

“In my Keeneland handicapping, I ask myself two questions: “Does a horse have a race in its past that if repeated today it could win?” as well as “Can it run that race today?” As such, I am not necessarily looking for horses with the best last-race effort or speed figure. Instead, I am looking for horses that will run their best race today.

“The nuances of Polytrack require a horse to be fit to win, and so regardless of recent form on whatever track the horse has most recently run, if a horse is not likely to improve, even off a winning race, it may not be a contender. This tactic often reveals some vulnerable favorites, which in turn helps to make for some very profitable situations. Inversely, horses that are on a pattern for improvement may be overlooked in the wagering because the public at large is often a race late or a race early in its judgment of when winning form might be forthcoming.

“Another useful angle at Keeneland over the past few meets is to pay particular attention to horses making their



Photo by Z

Keeneland's website (www.keeneland.com) features a section with useful information for handicappers.

second start at the meeting. This usually occurs in the last week to 10 days of the meet. Horses making their second starts usually run much stronger than in their first effort. Their trainers would not be bringing them back in less than a month if they weren't fit and ready to run a big race.”

History lesson

“When I play races at Keeneland, I pay particular attention to horses that have raced well there in the past,” said Tom Law, managing editor of *Thoroughbred Times*.

“In turf races, I try to stay away from either pure front-runners or stalker-types. Horses can win gate to wire on the Keeneland turf, but I'd rather have a horse coming from the back of the pack in one of those 10- or 12-horse turf races late in the program to save my day.”

Polytrack fitness

TVG analyst Christina Olivares thinks Keeneland players should be wary of “need the lead” types.

“Gate-to-wire winners are tough to come by at Keeneland,” Olivares said. “I look for horses coming in second or third off a layoff, especially if they have a race over the track.

“Horses cutting back from a route early in the meet to a sprint late in the meet can be valuable commodities, given that the fitness they've gained running two turns on the Polytrack is some of the best training they can possibly receive. As far as pedigree goes, and I have to thank (trainer) Mr. (Greg) Foley for this, horses with turf pedigree on their dam side seem to do well on Keeneland's Polytrack.”

Intellectual puzzle

Art, science or alchemy, one thing is certain: Handicapping the races at Keeneland is an intellectual puzzle. Hopefully, some of the preceding ideas and angles will help you fit the pieces together and come up with a longshot winner—and maybe even a life-changing payoff. 🐎

Jude T. Feld, who won 23 stakes as a trainer, is a racing publicist and bloodstock consultant in Lexington who develops simulcast promotions for Keeneland.



IT'S A GRAND NEW DAY.

TAKE A SNEAK PEEK AT THE NEWLY RENOVATED GUESTROOMS AT HYATT REGENCY LEXINGTON

Newly renovated guestrooms include the Hyatt Grand Bed™ complete with plush pillow-top mattress, 32-inch flat panel HDTV, iHome clock radio, state-of-the-art work center, and guest bathroom with updated shower and natural stone vanity. Feel the Hyatt Touch®. For reservations, call 800 233 1234 or visit lexington.hyatt.com.

