

## Is Post Position Important?

Every racetrack publishes consolidated information related to post position results. Those results are often segregated by race distance and if you purchase past performance data from most public sources the data becomes even more refined. However, some very good gamblers chose to ignore the data because it is not as refined as they would like, or because they feel it is irrelevant. Maybe you are one of those handicappers and if you are, have you ever wondered why post position data and biases are commonly published by most of the past performance services? The answer is that it's not irrelevant, and though it is far from the most credible piece of handicapping information you will ever utilize, it is a piece of the handicapping pie, if you want to profit over the long haul of course.

Let's consider the importance of post position by discussing the physics of a race and a racetrack. A six furlong race covers 3,960 feet. A charted length of a horse in horse racing is 8 feet. Let's just say something (anything), could allow a horse to gain or lose 2 lengths at the finish line, or 16 feet. Would it matter? After all, 2 lengths or 16 feet is only 0.4% of the entire race length.

I am now going to tell you something that I bet many of you do not know by first asking a question. How many horses across North America win a race by 2 lengths or less? The answer is that 6 out of every 10 races, or a whopping 60%, are won by 2 lengths or less. Those two lengths or 16 feet make a difference 60% of the time. In fact, just last weekend on Saturday (February 15, 2013), every single race at Santa Anita was won by 2 lengths or less! So now whadaya (MN Speak) think? Does something that only represents a 0.4% probability shift matter?

To understand post position importance we need to understand the physical construction of a race track. If a horse runs a "two turn" one mile or longer race within four feet of the rail, they will end up running a

race that is 22 feet shorter than a horse that runs in the exact same race 8 feet from the rail. This is not an opinion but simple geometry.

In horse racing, each path is defined as the width of a race horse with a rider aboard. The rail, or the one path, is the shortest route to the finish line because of the two semi-circles that exist in both turns on the racetrack. Every path out from the rail path adds approximately 11 feet per turn to the race distance for any horse traveling in that path.

So a six furlong, one turn, race would add 11 feet in distance to a horse running in the 2<sup>nd</sup> lane or path, versus the rail. We would add 22 feet (2¾ lengths) to the distance the horse in the 3<sup>rd</sup> path or lane would have to cover to reach the finish line, and so on. To use an extreme example, and I've had my horses do this, if a horse runs in the 4<sup>th</sup> lane/path, or three wide throughout the race, and it was a two turn mile or more race, that horse would run 66 feet (8¼ lengths) further than a horse who hugged the rail the entire race! This is why so many riders immediately tuck their horses in near the rail to "save ground" when running those two turn races.

All of this is again simple math, considering a mile and 1/8<sup>th</sup> track....but here's the complicated part. Not all tracks are a mile and 1/8<sup>th</sup>, they are often banked in the turns differently, horse conformation determines the physical ability of the horse to negotiate banked and tight turns, and horses on the outside can actually run faster than horses on the inside rail due to the physical stress dynamics. This extra speed often compensates for the extra ground covered. In addition, post position affects horses differently based on their ability to accelerate and take a favorable position. For some horses, reining them in to save ground can be more damaging, mentally and physically, than just letting them go. In addition, track conditions matter. Most tracks drain moisture to the inside which changes the typical harder/faster inside lanes into sloppy and slower routes.

So, with all of this said, and the immense number of variables associated with post position, we should probably just ignore post position and focus on other more important handicapping factors, right?

In fact, a good probability handicapper takes every probability they can find and incorporates it in a system. They know that probabilities

never guarantee outcomes, but that over time, they can accurately predict results. The post position data, by track, by distance, by condition and by surface gives the probability handicapper information for the average horse that has run at that track under certain conditions. “Some information is always better than NO information”, and once several bits of such information are gathered, projections start to gain power.

In 2013 at Minnesota’s Canterbury Park, 32 races were run at 7 ½ furlongs on the turf. Post positions one through three won 17% of the time. Horses starting from post positions eight or higher won only 3% of the time. In other words, the probability of winning from those inner positions was 5 to 6 times that of outside post positions! Crazy, right?

Over the years I have learned that tracks like Canterbury, a one mile dirt track, have naturally tighter turns. They also start the 7½ furlong turf race just before the clubhouse turn (though Canterbury does not have a clubhouse at that turn). The starting gate placement doesn’t allow horses with unfavorable outside posts positions any time to gain ground saving positions in the turn. The post position probability data reaffirms this at Canterbury. However, it really doesn’t matter why it was so difficult to win from those outside posts. What matters is that the probability data is fact.

By comparison, Canterbury had 154 six furlong races in 2013 and while there was some degree of bias, 16% of horses from the one to three post positions won, while 9% won from post position eight or further out. This is a very different result than the 7½ furlong turf race results.

For one last example of probability variation in post positions, here is a recent set of results from Gulfstream. This table allows people to see an example of side by side variation and a post position bias.

**Gulfstream Park**  
**From 11/30/2013 Through 02/17/2014**  
**Post Position Stats**

(For Races Under 1 Mile on the Main Track)														
Positions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Starts	182	182	182	182	182	172	135	95	50	20	9	4	1	1
Wins	32	25	22	28	20	21	21	9	2	1	0	0	0	1
Win %	17.58	13.74	12.09	15.38	10.99	12.21	15.56	9.47	4.00	5.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
(For Races 1 Mile & Over on the Main Track)														
Positions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Starts	125	125	125	125	125	112	89	54	34	16	12	7	4	2
Wins	20	28	16	16	12	11	11	6	2	1	1	1	0	0
Win %	16.00	22.40	12.80	12.80	9.60	9.82	12.36	11.11	5.88	6.25	8.33	14.29	0.00	0.00
(For Races Under 1 Mile on the Turf Track)														
Positions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Starts	63	63	63	63	63	63	62	59	45	37	24	11	4	1
Wins	4	7	3	8	10	11	6	6	6	2	1	0	0	0
Win %	6.35	11.11	4.76	12.70	15.87	17.46	9.68	10.17	13.33	5.41	4.17	0.00	0.00	0.00
(For Races 1 Mile & Over on the Turf Track)														
Positions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Starts	152	152	152	152	152	152	150	146	128	98	62	37	13	7
Wins	22	23	10	14	8	14	16	15	13	9	4	3	0	1
Win %	14.47	15.13	6.58	9.21	5.26	9.21	10.67	10.27	10.16	9.18	6.45	8.11	0.00	14.29

In every case, except for sprint races on the turf, the one and two posts enjoyed anywhere from a 50% to a 90% favorable bias against the outside posts. This is not a huge bias, but using this post position information properly will allow handicappers to not just evaluate “today’s” post positions, but to evaluate a horse’s past performances. If for example, a horse was showing improvement but had a poor race when breaking from an awful post position (i.e. Post 8 in a 7½ furlong turf race at Canterbury), and is running from the 2 post position today, you would want to dramatically adjust your winning probabilities? Of course you would.

There are other elements of post position analysis that are simply hard to find in the data. I have learned to make adjustments to my analysis based upon certain theories. Though I typically hate to do this, preferring to always use data if possible, when data neither supports or disputes a belief it has to at least be considered. Considering the

common horse racing myths I have dispelled over the years, you can understand my hesitation. Nevertheless, the natural post position advantages do not always exist and frequent observations have caused me to adjust for the following:

1. Horses on the complete outside of the field, say the 8<sup>th</sup> post position in an 8 horse field, can actually gain advantage in sprints. This is particularly true with horse that bursts from the gate, and young maiden horses. Having no horse on one side seems to allow less immediate pressure to be placed on the outside post horse. Though they may move out to the right a bit once the gate opens, their momentum and mental soundness is not affected by this slight move. I know several good trainers and jockeys who actually prefer the outside post when racing babies and unseasoned horses.
2. There are horses that simply fear the rail. This fear may come from some bad experience early in the horse's racing career, or just be a natural fear. It doesn't matter because past performance charts and race films allow you to discover this anomaly. Good trainers, who know their horses, will ask jockeys to actually run off the rail in the 2<sup>nd</sup> lane if possible. The one post can be a detriment to these horses.
3. Regardless of post advantages, the "shape of the race" is important. Horses coming from favorable post positions, but surrounded by horses with similar running styles, may expend much more energy early in the race to gain favorable racing position. Consequently, a good post advantage can disappear in seconds, and may be secondary to the shape of the race. (See "The Shape of the Race" for more information.)
4. Conditions are constantly changing. You have to pay attention to post position and track lane trends. I particularly look at this information early in a track's racing season. You need to

determine if the “trackman” has modified the surface, which they often will do during the offseason or when the track has been closed to training/racing for a few days. In addition, moisture conditions are not limited to the condition listed on the day of the race, but may vary over several days.

5. Certain horses do not run turns properly. This is particularly true when they are young or inexperienced. To keep them from “getting out on the turn”, trainers and jockeys want to position these horses with another horse on their direct outside.
6. You may find certain lanes, at different points on the racetrack, to be deeper and slower than they were at different times in a season. Even improperly managed sprinkler systems on turf courses can affect this variation.
7. Good public past performance services will segregate some of the post position data by week. Changes in post position favorability can be found but this is where really good jockeys, who not only have physical talent but intellectual expertise, pay off a hell of a lot more than a random draw favorable post position. Top jocks may even walk the track in the morning to look for any changing conditions, and thus overcome post position disadvantages. (See “Do Jockeys Matter, or are they just Passengers” for more information.)

Over the years, I have seen many handicappers ignore post positions, and have done so myself at times due to laziness. In truth, little bias may exist in some circumstances but I can also assure you that they do exist. Once you understand them, some tracks, some surfaces and some horses can be predicted to yield vastly different results based upon post position changes allowing thoughtful handicappers to take advantage of the uniformed or lazy.