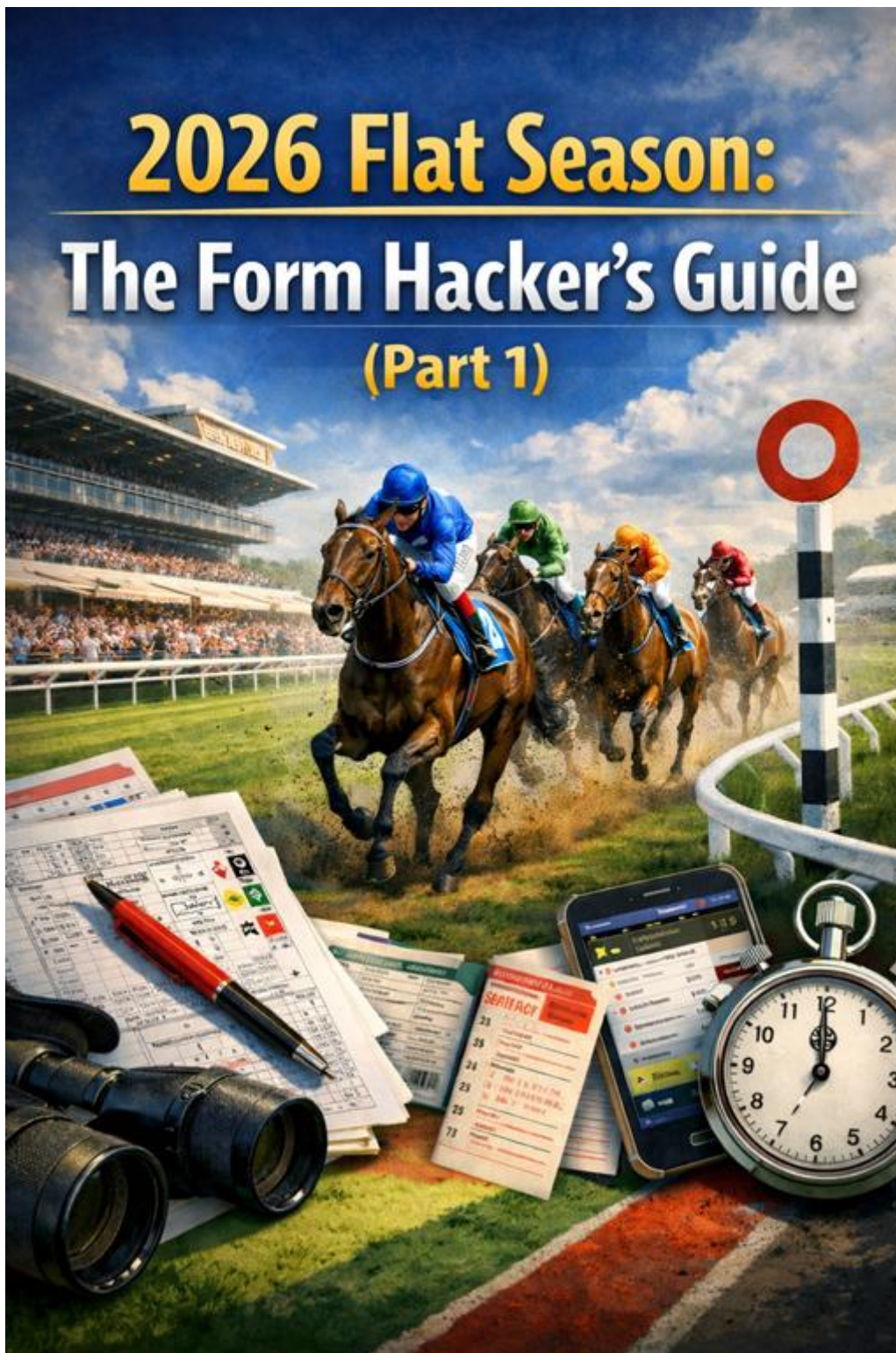


2026 Flat Season: The Form Hacker's Guide (Part 1)



DISCLAIMER

We understand that gambling can become an addiction that can cause great harm if not controlled. Despite the historical track records of the data contained herein, we respectfully remind you that you should only ever bet with an amount of money that you can comfortably afford to lose.

For help with regard to a gambling problem, or more information on the subject, please visit: <https://www.gamcare.org.uk> or <https://www.begambleaware.org/>



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Introduction

Solving racing's puzzles, with or without being financially invested in the outcome, is one of life's great pleasures; and you're reading this because you enjoy doing just that.

But in a world filled with ever more distractions and calls on our time, the myriad pieces in the jigsaw can seem overwhelming.

The good news is that more is not always better. And, in this report and the part that follows, I'll share three 'form hacks' that you can use to put yourself miles ahead of other players when it comes to solving the puzzle.

This is *not* about backing the winner of every race. We all know that's impossible. Rather, it's about assembling the clues and identifying the likeliest contenders... which might not be the ones at the top of the betting lists.

In this first part, I'll introduce two angles into the flat racing form book, explain them, and then show how you can put them to work for you, for free.

Without further ado, then, let's get started.

Enjoy!

Matt Bisogno

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Form Hack #1: Winners and Losers at the Starting Stall

Most bettors focus on the final furlong of a race, understandably, when reviewing their wagers. But the reality, in flat racing especially, is that so much of what happens in a race is decided in the first ten seconds or so.

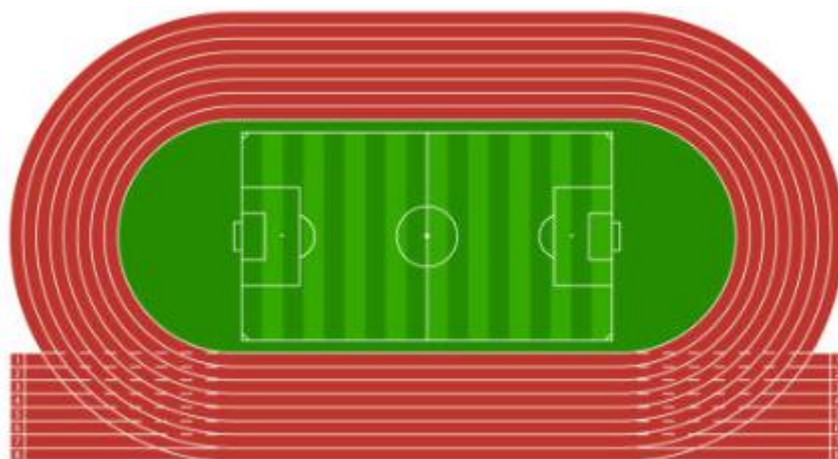
Once horses are loaded into the stalls, some already have an advantage over others; and some of those have a secondary edge, too!

Form Hack #1: Drawn to win... or lose!

One of the simplest, and still frequently overlooked, ways to get an edge is to rule out horses based on where they're drawn.

Like everything in racing, this is not an exact science and it's certainly true that sometimes we'll put a line through the horse that wins the race; but more often than not we'll eliminate runners that are prominent in the betting but have a lot to do to overcome their starting position.

Both horses and humans race, and both often do it on an ovoid (somewhat circular) track, normally with two bends and two longer straights.



One of the things about horses racing, as opposed to humans in track and field, is that horses do not – for what are probably obvious reasons – run in lanes. That means the horse drawn on the outside in a ten horse race is at least nine horse widths from the shortest route, the inside running rail.

If that sounds blindingly obvious, it's because it is! But bear with me...

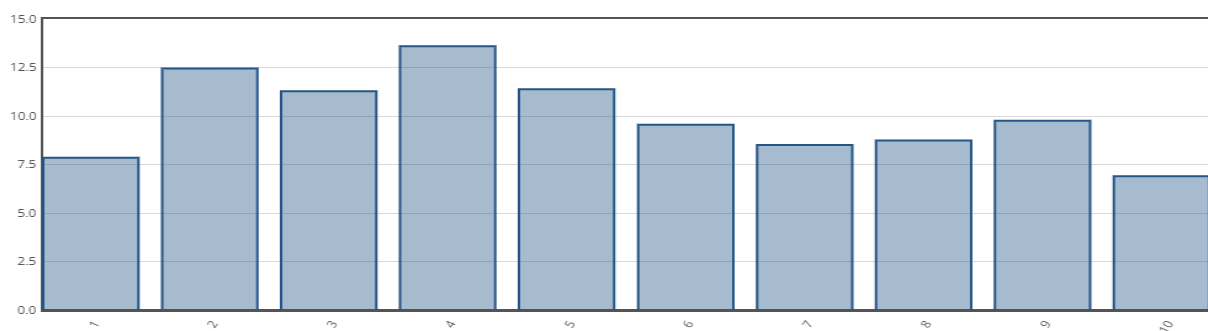
Let's suppose a horse is most of a metre wide, allowing for a jockey's legs either side and a small margin between one horse/rider and the next.

In fact, UK starting stalls have an internal width of 90cm, and a casing separating each stall from the next. So a metre per stall is probably very close to reality.

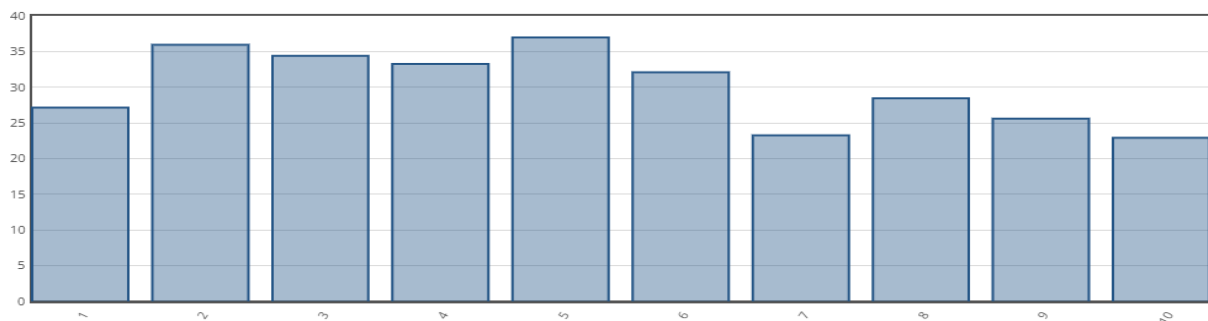
That horse drawn ten is, then, nine metres and change from the favoured inside rail. Horses drawn wide do win, of course, but here's something to think about – and a bit of a curve ball as well.

In ten-runner flat handicaps on a turning track (i.e. around a left- or right-handed bend), the win percentages, place percentages and percentage of rivals beaten look like this:

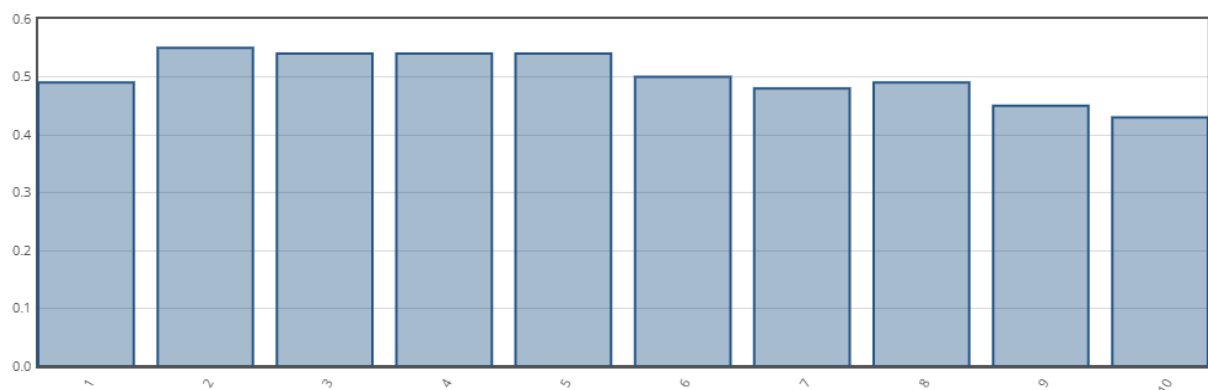
WIN



PLACE



PRB



There are a couple of things to say about this, which you have probably figured out from the charts above and which will be very clear from the table on the next page.

I've put some 'conditional' colour coding on four columns to highlight my point. Those columns are the three we talked about, and also IV, which stands for Impact Value.

Quickly backing up, IV is how often something happens compared to 'normal' and a score of 1.0 is 'normal'. So, in this example, if all stalls won equally often, they would all have an IV of 1.0. But, as you can see, they don't

Stall 10 wins half as often as stall 4, it places 50% less often than stall 4, and it's IV – directly aligned to win% it should be said – is also half that of stall 4.

Stalls 6-10 have a hard time of it, as you can see.

Stall	Runs	Wins	Places	Win %	EW %	PRB	IV	SP P/L	BSP P/L	EW P/L	SP ROI	BSP ROI	A/E
1	497	39	135	7.85	27.16	0.49	0.78	-211.66	-169.19	-353.61	-42.59	-34.04	0.61
2	498	62	179	12.45	35.94	0.55	1.24	-119.11	-87.05	-141.50	-23.92	-17.48	0.91
3	497	56	171	11.27	34.41	0.54	1.13	-149.92	-100.92	-218.05	-30.16	-20.31	0.89
4	493	67	164	13.59	33.27	0.54	1.36	10.93	102.19	-61.84	2.22	20.73	1.11
5	492	56	182	11.38	36.99	0.54	1.14	-58.91	18.02	-66.75	-11.97	3.66	0.85
6	492	47	158	9.55	32.11	0.5	0.96	-97.28	-12.19	-150.67	-19.77	-2.48	0.82
7	494	42	115	8.5	23.28	0.48	0.85	-149.14	-34.53	-307.20	-30.19	-6.99	0.74
8	492	43	140	8.74	28.46	0.49	0.87	-64.79	38.63	-154.44	-13.17	7.85	0.82
9	492	48	126	9.76	25.61	0.45	0.98	-66.09	33.40	-153.33	-13.43	6.79	1.01
10	493	34	113	6.9	22.92	0.43	0.69	-113.63	-23.07	-230.99	-23.05	-4.68	0.74

But wait... what's that about stall 1? Those numbers are awful. Isn't that guy taking the shortest route home and, therefore, most favoured by the draw?

Clearly, no. So why is that then? The thing about the inside stall is the horse drawn there must get an almost perfect start in sprint handicaps. If it doesn't, it's going to be stuck in a pocket without any running room, and the jockey will need either a very lucky split to open in front of him or her, or to take back and go around horses. Neither of those scenarios are in any way optimal.

In US racing, the one box is considered very bad indeed, and it's weird – to me at least – that the UK press doesn't refer to it in similarly 'double-edged sword' terms.

Just to illustrate my point a little further, taking those same 10-runner sprint handicaps and looking only at the inside drawn runners, here's how they fared based on their run style (4 is led or on the lead, 3 is prominent, 2 is midfield, 1 is held up).

RS	Runs	Wins	Places	Win %	EW %	SP P/L	BSP P/L	EW P/L	SP ROI	BSP ROI	A/E	IV	PRB
4	71	12	31	16.9	43.66	26.50	40.52	39.12	37.32	57.07	1.23	1.69	0.56
3	110	10	41	9.09	37.27	-36.37	-27.32	-35.39	-33.06	-24.84	0.64	0.91	0.54
2	195	14	45	7.18	23.08	-111.29	-95.52	-196.60	-57.07	-48.98	0.55	0.72	0.49
1	110	2	14	1.82	12.73	-96.50	-95.68	-166.53	-87.73	-86.98	0.17	0.18	0.39

Holy cow! Of the 110 horses drawn in stall 1 that were held up, only two of them won! That meant a cataclysmic negative return on investment.

In contrast, those drawn 1 that were able to jump and run from the front won nearly 17% of the time and placed nearly 44% of the time – higher than any other stall for win or place percentages. And they were profitable to back blind... if your crystal ball was able to unfailingly tell you which stall 1 runners would lead!

This is not cherry-picking. In the table below, I've widened the number of runners to between eight and twelve. Same patterns manifest.

Stall	Runs	Wins	Places	Win %	EW %	PRB	IV	SP P/L	BSP P/L	EW P/L	SP ROI	BSP ROI	A/E
1	2061	245	693	11.89	33.62	0.52	1.16	-302.82	-1.13	-544.09	-14.69	-0.05	0.87
2	2052	278	755	13.55	36.79	0.55	1.32	-211.88	54.51	-344.68	-10.33	2.66	0.95
3	2053	236	712	11.5	34.68	0.53	1.12	-613.72	-446.18	-875.64	-29.89	-21.73	0.86
4	2040	256	721	12.55	35.34	0.53	1.22	26.95	506.77	-171.06	1.32	24.84	0.96
5	2050	224	688	10.93	33.56	0.51	1.06	-388.34	-95.89	-683.48	-18.94	-4.68	0.85
6	2032	185	613	9.1	30.17	0.49	0.89	-587.71	-300.50	-921.27	-28.92	-14.79	0.77
7	2007	189	562	9.42	28	0.48	0.92	-468.29	-66.42	-868.54	-23.33	-3.31	0.82
8	2019	177	584	8.77	28.93	0.48	0.85	-459.37	-87.31	-761.94	-22.75	-4.32	0.79
9	1542	127	400	8.24	25.94	0.47	0.85	-384.39	-151.76	-707.31	-24.93	-9.84	0.83
10	1084	90	257	8.3	23.71	0.45	0.9	-157.05	116.82	-364.25	-14.49	10.78	0.9
11	609	45	136	7.39	22.33	0.44	0.84	-88.50	85.13	-184.97	-14.53	13.98	0.91
12	253	15	49	5.93	19.37	0.45	0.71	-118.17	-89.57	-175.71	-46.71	-35.40	0.75

Stall 1 is not quite so hamstrung this time, but on both EW% (win/place percentage) and PRB, it under-performs stalls 2-4 once more. And the outside stalls again have it all to do.

There is another reason that the widest stall of all has such a poor record, almost regardless of field size, and it is this: every other runner in the field has something on either side of it – either the rail and a horse for the stall 1 runner, or a horse and a horse for all others bar the widest drawn.

Watch a few races and you'll quickly see how frequently the widest drawn horse swerves away from the field, forfeiting further ground it can ill afford to concede.

But it gets worst still in some cases. Below is the stalls arrangement for a 12-runner race at Lingfield. The horse drawn 12, which was the 11/4 favourite, was actually fifteen stalls from the rail! Note the empty inside stall and the two wheeled elements at the end of each set of ten stalls.




He didn't start terribly, but he still veered slightly to his right, away from the field:



Look where he is in relation to the horse that was drawn in 10 (blue and white silks), look at the edge those drawn from inside the wheeled partition have on the rest of the field.

In the end he finished 6th, beaten four lengths and never nearer. What chance did he have when conceding so much ground?

Here's another example, taken from today's racing as I write this. Gundogan was drawn on the wide outside – stall 9 of 9 – and had a 'held up' run style: he'd been waited with in each of his last three runs and raced midfield in the three before that.

1  Gundogan 14 13/8
(9) Age: 5 | Weight: 9-9 | J: Rossa Ryan | T: A W Carroll | OR: 54
Twenty runs since his last win in 2024 but he arrives in good nick, fourth of 11 in 6f handicap at Southwell 14 days ago. Ought to be thereabouts.

Not only that but he was on a losing run of 20. Twenty! And he was sent off as the 13/8 favourite!!

I mean, you didn't need to be Einstein to want to look for another horse in this race... or to lay the favourite.

Gundogan finished a well beaten 5th of the nine runners:

5th  1 ¼ 1 Gundogan 13/8f
(9) 5 9-9
T: [A W Carroll](#) J: [Rossa Ryan](#)
tchd 6/4  My Stable

One final point to note is that, while inside stalls perform better on those 'proximity to first place' metrics, we as punters need to think about the bottom line.

Stall 4 does seem to have magic powers: it comes out profitable in a raft of different studies I've undertaken along these lines. It's optimally positioned to allow a jockey options regardless of whether his/her horse has the tactical 'gate speed' to be on or very close to the front.

And, as can be seen both from the microcosm of 10-runner sprint handicaps and from the wider 8-12 runner dataset, when horses drawn pretty high – but not in the car park – win, they tend to pay well. For those with the stomach for it, and/or if you just like one berthed away from the rail, it might still be worth chancing to smaller money.

Form Hack #1 TAKEAWAYS

Where a horse is drawn is very important in sprint handicaps on a turning track. Specifically:

The widest draw is almost always a negative. Note horses that are able to win from the widest stall in 10+ runner races, because they are often worth backing again next time.

The inside stall is a strong negative unless a horse has the speed to get prominent early on.

Stalls 2-4 usually have an edge in these races, with stall 4 seemingly the most blessed. (Not a very scientific observation here, I grant you!)

Form Hack #2: Mapping the Race

We touched on this a little in Form Hack #1, but now we're going to really get into it because it's super important. In fact, it remains one of the best edges most punters are not using. Predicting which horses are likely to be on or close to the lead usually offers a solid way to eliminate pretenders and shortlist contenders.

The colourful table below includes data from just shy of 10,000 races that collectively contained 100,000 runners. It shows performance in handicap races on the flat (turf and all-weather) at up to one mile, contested by 8-12 runners in the UK and Ireland over the last five years.

It is ordered by run style. To remind you, 4 means a horse led or contested the lead; 3 means a horse was prominent or pressed the leaders; 2 means a horse sat in mid-division or 'in touch'; and 1 means the horse was held up or missed the break or was otherwise at the back of the field.

RS	Runs	Wins	Places	Win %	EW %	PRB	A/E	IV	SP P/L	BSP P/L	EW P/L	SP ROI	BSP ROI
4	13085	2018	5371	15.42	41.05	0.57	1.2	1.51	3145.45	6569.88	5015.97	24.04	50.21
3	21488	2619	7664	12.19	35.67	0.53	0.94	1.2	-1881.48	2237.02	-2992.25	-8.76	10.41
2	28662	2769	8546	9.66	29.82	0.5	0.79	0.95	-7809.28	-2788.00	-13433.61	-27.25	-9.73
1	31197	2263	7366	7.25	23.61	0.45	0.68	0.71	-12081.35	-7032.50	-21879.09	-38.73	-22.54

I've included the colour coding almost right across the table because it's so uniform. There is no question whatsoever that the best place to be in these races is on the front. Front-runners win just less than one in six races, and place in more than two in every five races.

Crucially, they are wildly profitable to follow. And there are far fewer front-runners and pace pressers than midfield and held up runners!

Prominent racers win clearly the next most races, in percentage terms, and have the next highest each way percentage (and percentage of rivals beaten, and every other metric). There is an undeniable linearity here: a direct correlation between being close to the front of the pack early doors and all positive metrics.

The question then is, **how do we predict which horse or horses will lead?**

And this is where things get a bit trickier. (If it was easy, those P/L numbers wouldn't look nearly as rosy).

The answer is that we need to build an image of how the race is likely to be run before it's been run. And the way we'll do that is by reviewing the last four races for each horse in a race and scoring them.

Naturally, it will take a few tries before it becomes second nature but, once you've put that small bit of time into it in the first place, you'll be able to score a 12-runner race in five minutes tops.

Let's get to it. You can use any racecard that includes in-running comments.

They look like this:

prominent, led and disputed after 1f, ridden over 2f out, headed 1 1/2f out, no extra 1f out, kept on one pace

Or this:

Prominent, led towards near side after 2f, headed over 1f out, weakened final 110yds (jockey said gelding hung right throughout) (op 9/1 tchd 13/2)

Or this:

Prominent, led and disputed after 1f, ridden over 2f out, headed 1 1/2f out, no extra 1f out, kept on one pace op 9/1 tchd 13/2

It's best to use a site where you can 'hover over' the form line to get the information you need as that's the quickest.

So what we're going to do is make a grid, like so. I've used the first sprint handicap of the season, at the Curragh on 15th March:

#	Name	LR	2LR	3LR	4LR	Total	Average
1	Jon Riggins					0	#DIV/0!
2	Usuario Amigo					0	#DIV/0!
3	Smoke The Out					0	#DIV/0!
4	Go Out					0	#DIV/0!
5	Merisi Diamond					0	#DIV/0!
6	Green Icon					0	#DIV/0!
7	Mickey The Steel					0	#DIV/0!
8	Secret Magician					0	#DIV/0!
9	Two And Two					0	#DIV/0!
10	Tai Tam Bay					0	#DIV/0!
11	Winemaker					0	#DIV/0!
12	Salacious					0	#DIV/0!

You don't need to enter the horse names, you can just work with the saddle cloth numbers if you prefer. And, because I'm using Excel here ([here's a download link to this spreadsheet](#)), I've added *total* and *average* columns at the right side.

To be clear, along the top LR means 'last race', 2LR is 'second last race', and so on. You can choose to include more or fewer previous races; I've found four is usually enough, and three is often fine.

OK, let's fill this out, starting with horse #1, Jon Riggins. His last four comments were:

edged right from stalls, tracked leaders on nearside, ridden from 2f out and every chance from 1f out, no extra inside final furlong and dropped to 5th close home

rear, 10th halfway, headway under 2f out, stayed on in 2nd inside final furlong, kept on closing stages, no chance with winner

towards rear, 8th halfway, under pressure over 1f out, no impression, weakened inside final furlong

towards rear, ridden and switched right 1 1/2f out, not clear run and slightly hampered over 1f out, kept on one pace

Scoring those, then, I'd have "tracked leaders" as a 3 (prominent) in his LR; and then "rear" and "towards rear" as 1's for his 2LR, 3LR and 4LR.

Hopefully that's pretty clear. Sometimes it's a bit more ambiguous and a little judgement is needed, but it's normally clear like this.

So I'll add those to my table:

#	Name	LR	2LR	3LR	4LR	Total	Average
1	Jon Riggins	3	1	1	1	6	1.5
2	Usuario Amigo					0	#DIV/0!
3	Smoke The Out					0	#DIV/0!
4	Go Out					0	#DIV/0!
5	Merisi Diamond					0	#DIV/0!
6	Green Icon					0	#DIV/0!
7	Mickey The Steel					0	#DIV/0!
8	Secret Magician					0	#DIV/0!
9	Two And Two					0	#DIV/0!
10	Tai Tam Bay					0	#DIV/0!
11	Winemaker					0	#DIV/0!
12	Salacious					0	#DIV/0!

Easy.










Now I'll quickly whizz through the other runners.

#	Name	LR	2LR	3LR	4LR	Total	Average
1	Jon Riggins	3	1	1	1	6	1.5
2	Usuario Amigo	1	2	1	1	5	1.25
3	Smoke The Out	3	4	4	2	13	3.25
4	Go Out	1	2	4	1	8	2
5	Merisi Diamond	2	1	3	2	8	2
6	Green Icon	2	1	2	1	6	1.5
7	Mickey The Steel	4	4	2	2	12	3
8	Secret Magician	2	2	1	4	9	2.25
9	Two And Two	4	2			6	3
10	Tai Tam Bay	4	2	4	2	12	3
11	Winemaker	2	2	2	1	7	1.75
12	Salacious	2	1	2	2	7	1.75

Because I'm using Excel, I've again put that fancy colour coding on so you can clearly see where the expected pace runners are. Note that horse #9, Two And Two, has only had two previous races so we have less info on him.

We can see that the pace horses are Smoke Them Out, Mickey The Steel and Tai Tam Bay; and perhaps Two And Two though it's hard to say.

The result is on the next page:

POS. (DRAW)	HORSE / SP TRAINER / JOCKEY	AGE	WGT	OR	TS	RPR	MR
< 1 (8)	 3. Smoke Them Out > (IRE) 8/1 T: T G McCourt > J: Sadhbh Tormey > ⁷	4	9-5	75	63	82	-
Made all, pushed along 2f out, jockey dropped whip 1f out, faced challenge final 110yds, kept on, just held on (op 7/1 tchd 13/2)							
< 2 (6) nk	 10. Tai Tam Bay > (IRE) 9/4F T: Eddie & Patrick Hartj > J: Jessica O'Gorman > ⁷	5	8-4 b	60	47	65	-
Midfield, headway on far side of group halfway, went second inside final furlong, pressed winner final 110yds, kept on, just held (op 3/1 tchd 16/5)							
< 3 (12) 1¼ [1½]	 7. Mickey The Steel > 6/1 T: Joseph Anthony Murray > J: Wesley Joyce > ³	8	9-1 tp	67	50	69	-
Prominent, lost position over 1f out, rallied inside final furlong, kept on final 110yds, no match for first two (op 7/1 tchd 15/2)							
< 4 (7) shd [1¾]	 12. Salacious > (IRE) 8/1 T: Josh Halley > J: Andrew Slattery >	3	8-7 ² 1	70	47	67	-
Midfield, outpaced halfway, soon hung right, rallied and headway from over 1f out, kept on final 110yds, not pace to challenge (op 17/2 tchd 7/1)							
< 5 (3) ¾ [2½]	 9. Two And Two > (IRE) 7/1 T: Daniel McLoughlin > J: Nathan Crosse >	3	8-12 h ¹	75	49	70	-
Started quickly, prominent, went second over 1f out, weakened gradually inside final furlong (op 15/2 tchd 9/1)							
< 6 (5) 1¼ [3¾]	 5. Merisi Diamond > (IRE) 10/1 T: Thomas Coyle > J: James Ryan >	7	9-9 t	72	48	67	-
In touch with leaders in centre of group, no extra from over 1f out (op 9/1 tchd 6/1)							
< 7 (4) 2½ [6¼]	 4. Go Out > (FR) 14/1 T: Daniel James Murphy > J: Shane Foley >	4	9-9	72	39	59	-
In touch with leaders on far side of group, weakened from over 1f out (op 12/1 tchd 16/1)							
< 8 (10) 3¼ [9½]	 11. Winemaker > (FR) 17/2 T: H D McGuigan > J: Reese Holohan > ⁷	6	8-1	57	13	33	-
Midfield, dropped to rear halfway, soon hung right and weakened (op 12/1)							
< 9 (1)	 2. Usuario Amigo > 28/1 T: Richard John > J: W. Hill >	5	10-0	77	22	44	-

Our top three finished 1-2-3 with the paciest horse on the map, **Smoke Them Out**, winning at 8/1, making all of the running from the start. And note that the horse with fewer runs, Two And Two, ran honourably in 5th of the twelve runners.

The trifecta paid £/€297 for £/€1.

Of course, it doesn't always go as perfectly as this, but if we have a fair idea which horses will be in the front part of the field early and which will be at the back, it's a huge advantage over those who are still guessing or, worse still, not even thinking about pace at all.

You can [download the pace calculation spreadsheet here](#).

Form Hack #2 Takeaways

Run style, or pace, remains hugely under-valued in racing. The tempo of a race, and horses' position in the pack, decides the winners and losers within the first furlong and a half of many – perhaps even most – races at a mile or shorter.

Betting without an idea of how things will play out adds an unnecessary layer of risk to what is already a risky pursuit!

Of course, we won't always be right about draw and run style: any horse can win any race from almost any early position. But as I said in my introduction, we're not trying to predict the winner of every race; that is a fool's errand.

Instead, we're aiming to find the horses whose chance might be greater than the available odds. If we can hone our skills in that direction, we're well on the way to losing less, which is a vital step towards breaking even, which in turn is a stepping stone to making a profit.

Importantly, we'll have a lot of fun – and derive a lot of satisfaction – from the process.

Good luck!

Matt

p.s. stay tuned for Part 2, coming very soon, which contains the missing piece almost all punters ignore... at their peril. It's actually pretty simple, but because of where it comes in the thinking processes it is so widely overlooked.