

JUST AS MUCH QUALITY...



op/ed
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JUST AS MUCH 'QUALITY' AS THE TIMER INDICATED

A year ago, fractional clockings for the 1 1/8 mile Fountain of Youth S. appeared suspiciously slow, and the suspicions were well-founded: the timing beam was triggered prematurely, and a new set of official times was released. This episode also brought to light that Gulfstream Park's oval is 17 feet longer than the intended circumference, due to a surveying error which necessitated a complex adjustment in the timing of nine-furlong races.

The distance of this year's Fountain of Youth, won fashionably Feb. 28 by Quality Road, was shortened to one mile. And many are again debating the accuracy of the internal fractions.

The questions are not without merit. But in this case, the fractions are accurate as posted.

Horseplayers unfamiliar with the timing of Gulfstream races are dubious a quick sprinter like This Ones For Phil could have grabbed a clear lead in a speed-laden field with a seemingly slow :23.83 first quarter-mile. They are doubly dubious of the half-mile fraction of :45.55, which meant the leaders blazed through the second quarter in a sensational :21.72.

The first fraction is easily explained, or rather, it has an explanation. For most American thoroughbred races, the starting gate is positioned about 20 feet behind the pole marker at which the timing of the race begins. In other words, horses get a running start before the clock is triggered. But because one-mile races at Gulfstream start at the rear of a long backstretch chute, the starting gate is placed much closer to the starting pole to provide horses additional room to maneuver in the cramped area between the gate and the fence at the back of the chute. Horses don't get as much of a head start in one-mile races, resulting in slower opening fractions. This Ones For Phil's first quarter-mile actually wasn't so slow--through Mar. 1, it was the sixth-fastest opening quarter of 71 one-mile races at the current Gulfstream meeting.

The supersonic second quarter-mile doesn't have such a tedious explanation, but it doesn't need one, either. Digital timing of the replay confirms the horses indeed went that fast, with the four sixteenth-mile sections comprising that quarter-mile going in approximately 5.4, 5.4, 5.5 and 5.5 seconds. A big factor, of course, is that the second quarter is run on a straightaway as opposed to around all or part of a turn, which slows horses down.

A second quarter-mile in less than :22 seconds in one-mile races is unusual, but not unprecedented. At Aqueduct, which like Gulfstream is 1 1/8 miles in circumference and runs mile races around one turn, 15 races since 1994 have had such fast internal fractions.

It is also unusual for a three-year-old like Quality Road to race in close attendance to such a pace and still draw away through the stretch against graded stakes competition, but again, not unprecedented. On the same afternoon Smarty Jones won the 2004 Kentucky Derby, another brilliantly fast three-year-old named Medallist won Aqueduct's Withers S. by dueling through fractions of :22.50 and :44.06--a second quarter in :21.56--over a surface no faster than Gulfstream's on Fountain of Youth day, then opening up through the lane to win by daylight.

Medallist earned a 110 Beyer Speed Figure, compared to 113 for Quality Road.

Medallist, trained by legendary Allen Jerkens, could never carry his speed around two turns. For Quality Road, trained by Allen's son, Jimmy, the jury is still out.

Horseplayers don't have to question the Fountain of Youth fractions. Quality Road is indeed as talented as the teletimer indicated. The discourse should center on whether such a spectacular performance was too much too soon for a young colt, and also whether a horse with that kind of natural gas can be as effective at a mile-and-a-quarter.