

# PONIES 24-7

VOLUME 11 / ISSUE 3 / 2025  
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## Mike Renfro

Former NFL Football Player And Now  
Part of the CJ Thoroughbreds Team

## Lisa Knight

Where the Horses  
Were Waiting

## The Racer's Edge

A Handicapping Primer



# PONIES 24-7

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show, email Larry Simpson at, [theponies247experience@gmail.com](mailto:theponies247experience@gmail.com)



# AT THE POST



## WELCOME BACK!

Welcome back to another great issue of *PONIES 24-7*. For those who missed our last issue which was released in early August, we spoke about how the ride continues for our *'Ponies 24-7, THE RADIO MAGAZINE'* Show, as in early Summer the show became exclusive to a fourth FM channel, FM 102, Bolton and this new addition now compliments our three original broadcast points, FM 101, Orangeville, FM 101 Milton, and FM 92 South Simcoe. Live streaming on demand still remains, at:

[ORANGEVILLETODAY.CA](http://ORANGEVILLETODAY.CA),  
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[BOLTONNOW.CA](http://BOLTONNOW.CA) accordingly.

Of course, with the addition of this fourth station, it also came with a significant 'bump' of new listeners who continue to receive their *'PONIES fix'* on Saturday mornings! At last count and of course the numbers change every week, our show numbers quickly hit *'North'* of 250,000 avid horse racing enthusiasts, a number that includes both live listeners and those that are streaming the Saturday morning broadcast at 8 am Eastern with several more thousand enjoying *'Ponies 24-7, THE RADIO MAGAZINE'*, in an after air podcast format on platforms including Spotify and Apple Music, probably any platform that you listen to your podcasts on.

**AND PEOPLE SAID THAT FM RADIO WAS DEAD!**

On the contrary, we believe that there is something to be said for terrestrial radio which comes with its own advantages-easier accessibility for the listener, there is a nostalgic connection with people, it remains a great medium for advertising and best of all, FM Radio is free for those

tuning in! *'Ponies 24-7, THE RADIO MAGAZINE'*, continues to introduce the great sport of horse racing to a plethora of new listeners on Saturday mornings and now in our fifth season, the show offers 60 minutes of action-packed interviews, handicapping selections and informative content for horse racing fans everywhere. We also remain the only Canadian FM Radio Show, covering the sport of horse racing and one of only a few shows across North America. And we are not just in it for, to put it in a horse racing term, a *'half-mile'*, instead we continue to introduce the radio show to new markets, including a major recent push towards the American horse racing market- so you could say, that it is our intention to go the full mile!

In the meantime, please continue to listen to *'Ponies 24-7, THE RADIO MAGAZINE'* and don't forget to tell your friends about us-they will be happy you did and enjoy this edition of our *PONIES 24-7* digital magazine and some more, great editorial content, including an interview with former NFL football player Mike Renfro, who is part of CJ Thoroughbreds and owners of Tom's Magic, the recent winner of the Breeders Stakes at Woodbine.

Finally, don't forget about our library of past shows and magazines at [www.ponies247.com](http://www.ponies247.com), to satisfy your *'PONIES fix'* and if you are interested in advertising on the show, or the magazine, or maybe both, as we do offer economic *'bundled'* programs, please reach out to me at the email below.

Until next time,

Larry Simpson  
[theponies247experience@gmail.com](mailto:theponies247experience@gmail.com)

## EDITOR Larry Simpson

Larry Simpson is an avid and passionate writer, horseplayer, handicapper, and marketer for both Thoroughbred and Standardbred racing. He has published and edited several horse racing journals, conducted handicapping seminars for both breeds and is a major proponent for the education of new racing fans through publications like *PONIES 24-7*, and initiatives that develop 'fresh' demographics for racing, produce cultured bettors and promote the value of the horse racing advertising space!



## LIVING THE HORSE RACING LIFESTYLE

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### ABOUT THE COVER

Breeders Stakes winner Tom's Magic,  
leads the field en-route to victory at  
Woodbine recently.  
Michael Burns Photo



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In Conversation with Larry Simpson

# MIKE RENFRO

Former NFL Football Player And Now Part of the  
CJ Thoroughbreds Team

Photos by Michael Burns unless otherwise noted.

Photo by Britt Todd



After 11 years playing with the Houston Oilers and Dallas Cowboys Mike Renfro hung up his cleats in 1988, where he then turned his attention to Thoroughbred racing and eventually buying his first horse, a Louisiana-bred gelding by the name of Dr. Death, who would go on and win Louisiana -bred Horse of the Year. A winner on the ‘grid iron’ and on the track, Mike would take a position with Lone Star Park for 12 years and then move on to a role as Vice President of Business Development at CJ Thoroughbreds, with Corey and CJ Johnsen.

Recently, Mike guested on the ‘Ponies 24-7, THE RADIO MAGAZINE’ Show for the first time, where one of the main discussions centred on a three-year-old colt by the name of Tom’s Magic, who was set to run in the the King’s Plate at Woodbine in August and a race that resulted in a second place finish for the son of Justify.

*(Note- The following interview has been edited and updated for our readers.)*

**PONIES 24-7:** Well Mike welcome to the show for the first time, let’s talk first about Tom’s Magic and what makes him such a special horse?

**MIKE RENFRO:** Well Larry, we think that he is special and we are going to find out in just a few hours. He’s obviously an Ontario-bred and that’s why we are here and he’s won a couple of stakes races over the turf racing in the U.S. but he seems to be all business which I think accounts for him being special. I actually only got to watch him one time live and obviously I haven’t missed any of his races by watching them

on television, but he just goes about his business the right way. He’s a typical young horse, a three-year-old that has won a couple of races and competes every time, with one exception in a race at Keeneland where he got a little softer track and finished back a bit, but other than that he just seems to be very professional. We have had this race (King’s Plate) planned for quite awhile, actually ever since he won his second stakes race at Fair Grounds, last March and we have stuck with the plan and we are just so happy to be here at Woodbine today.

**PONIES 24-7:** Before Tom’s Magic Mike, what did you know about Woodbine?

**MIKE RENFRO:** Nothing, *(Laughs)*. Well I say that but obviously I have been a racing fan for a number of years, especially the late ‘80’s when I bought my first horse and I knew that Woodbine was a spectacular racetrack, but I just never had a chance to visit until this weekend. I’m learning quickly though about Woodbine, actually I am on the backside as we speak and I’ve been at racetracks all across the U.S. and Europe and I’m trying to learn more about the history behind Woodbine and in particular the Queen’s and now King’s Plate. It’s a fabulous place here and we are just so excited to be here and having a horse we consider good enough in the King’s Plate. Actually, you could say that we are ‘pinching ourselves’!

**PONIES 24-7:** What would it mean to yourself Mike if Tom’s Magic happened to win the King’s Plate later today?

**MIKE RENFRO:** Well, it would be awful special that’s



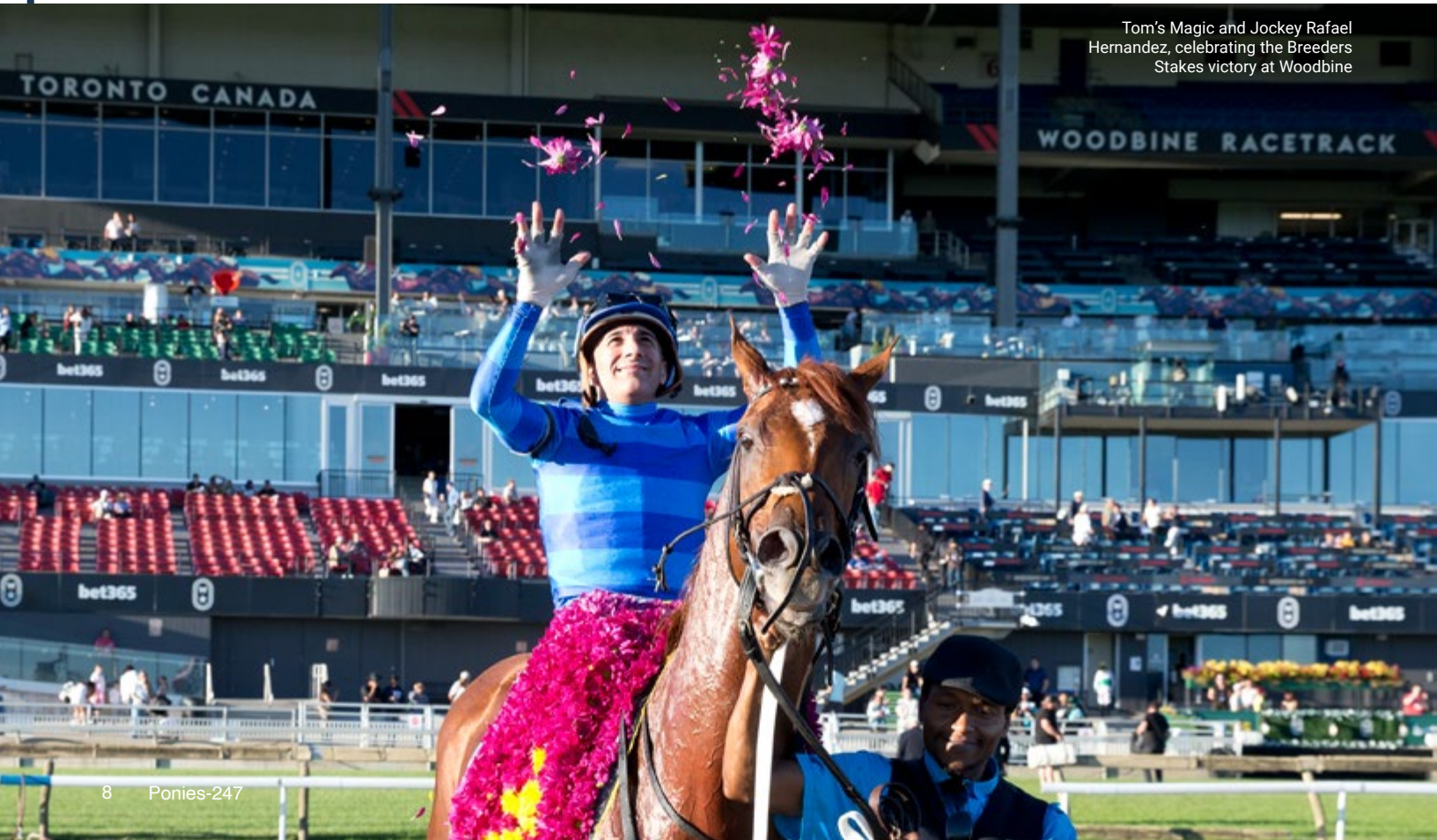
for sure, as I was able to play a kid's game until I was 33 years-old as a professional football player, played at every level there was and professionally for 11 years. I never got to the Super Bowl, played in a few Playoff Championship Games, lost a few, won a few but couldn't get 'over the hump' to win a Super Bowl ring, which is one of the biggest trophies of any sport, certainly in America. Short of that, horse racing took over. We have won some Grade 2's and Grade 3's, never won a Grade 1 so to win a race of the magnitude of the King's Plate, would be very special. We have had a few Breeders Cup entries but no trophies on the mantle yet, but the King's Plate trophy would sit very high on the mantle if we happened to win today!

**PONIES 24-7:** Mike I want to go back to your football career for a moment, as I believe and I think you would agree that there are many similarities between being on a football team and owning a race horse, as they are both basically team sports and team environments, would you agree?

**MIKE RENFRO:** Yes, the transitions, correlations, what have you, are very similar. I bought my first race horse, actually I was on injury reserve in 1988 with the Cowboys and as you are probably aware, It meant that I was not able to perform on Sunday's and didn't have to show up as there was no jersey hanging in my locker. (Laughs). We were going through some tough times back then, I think that the

Cowboys won three games that year and it ended up being Coach Tom Landry's final year as their Head Coach. Jerry Jones buys the team a few months later and actually I got to the point where I didn't even go to the games on Sunday, instead I would drive over to the closest pari mutuel racetrack from Dallas and that was Louisiana Downs and play the horses. I ended up buying a horse, actually had some luck with him, winning three or four races in a row. My Dad was actually a NFL Coach for the Detroit Lions and we lived in Detroit and in 1965 we spent one season living, you could say, close to Woodbine. (Laughs) But anyway, the bottom line is the correlations are unbelievable, the equine athlete that trains, the coaches of the NFL are similar in a way to the Trainers in horse racing, ownership, well personally I feel like a GM with CJ Thoroughbreds and we are just evaluating, purchasing, racing, selling and training the commodity of the athlete, two legged or four legged, which is all very similar to football. I thought at one time that I might Coach after my playing days, or maybe even train horses and now doing what I'm doing, in and out of horse racing, I just love the whole horse racing game. It's great to compete, talk with the Trainers and even better when you win a race and act like a child again, jumping up and down in the Winner's Circle. (Laughs) It certainly keeps you young!

**PONIES 24-7:** So, you mentioned that you are Vice President Business Development for CJ



Tom's Magic and Jockey Rafael Hernandez, celebrating the Breeders Stakes victory at Woodbine

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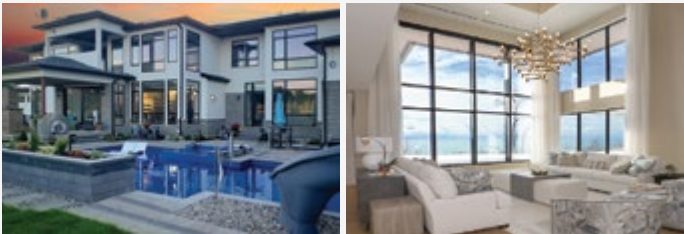
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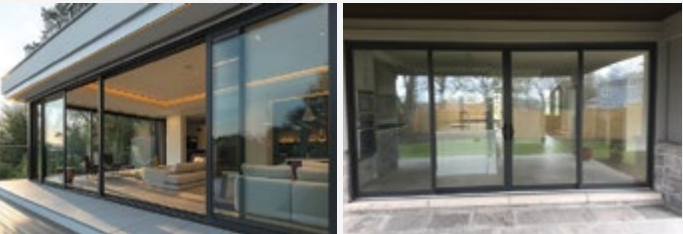
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Mike with CJ Johnsen

Thoroughbreds, perhaps for our listeners Mike you could talk about the company?

**MIKE RENFRO:** Sure, CJ Thoroughbreds was started by Corey Johnsen, a long time Racetrack Executive. I met him originally at Louisiana Downs and then he went to Remington Park in Oklahoma, moved to Lone Star Park where I officially got to know him and he hired me as a Staff member of the original Marketing and Management Team. We had some great early years, including hosting the Breeders Cup in 2004, Corey left and bought Kentucky Downs and with a lot of help from the politicians in Kentucky, including ex-Senator Damon Thayer, they were able to get Historical Horse Racing passed and running. The purses are *'through the roof'*, it's probably the best racing in North America, if not the world and then Corey decided to get more involved in horse ownership, his son CJ Johnsen and I (actually the company is named after CJ and the bottom line is that we put a small group together about six years ago. We started going to the Yearling Sales, occasionally *'popping over'* to Europe and trying to buy 10 or twelve horses and just really have a lot of fun at it. That's part of my role, but Corey is much more involved in the industry than what I am. He was hired to lead the Maryland efforts of resurrecting Pimlico and he has been involved with that for about 18 months, but not as much now. Corey has built racetracks but now I believe he is more into the Horseman's side, again Senator Damon Thayer and Corey are very involved with the HBPA and the help that they can give to various States around the Country. He's very focused in Iowa, we had a stallion in Wyoming named Guinesses Moment, which was a two-year old claimed by Dale Romans that we are trying to make a go of. So, we stand a stud in Wyoming and we are getting a lot of mares to him and we are winning races in Wyoming and Breeders Awards and the Stallion Awards are escalating on account of HHR successes. There's a new *'play'* in Arizona, Corey is always going to be involved in several things that will help the industry grow but not so much from the racetrack side now, more the Horsemen. It's still a tough game, we all know that, but Corey is very involved in the development of the continued success of the horse racing industry around the Country. It's a good combination of having Corey, his son CJ and I working together, I pretty much spend my time bringing in partners and raising a little money.

**PONIES 24-7:** Well, let's get back to Tom's Magic, I want to ask you, all of his races have been on the turf, do you think that he will be able to handle the synthetic today at Woodbine, although his mother



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produced a horse by the name of Dixie Moon and a Queen’s Plate Trial winner by the name of Guy Cabellero, so there seems to be some breeding for the synthetic, would you agree?

**MIKE RENFRO:** We think the breeding is enough, we have actually discussed this scenario quite a bit to be honest with you Larry, when we were discussing maybe coming up for the ‘*Plate Prep*’ race a couple of months ago, but he mainly had the confidence of Mike and Hillary (Stidham), his Trainers, where they said that this horse has enough ‘*blood*’ to handle the surface. More importantly, he trained over a very similar racing surface to Woodbine’s, Fair Hill in Maryland and he seemed to like it and Mike and Hillary were very confident that he was going to be able to handle the Woodbine surface. He has just been on the turf and usually the correlation is similar, but of course you can’t always count on that, but we kind of ended up leaving it all in Mike and Hillary’s hands. About two months ago, it was raining, they had to cancel racing across the country, especially turf racing and everyone was scrambling to decide where they were going to race next. We didn’t want to ‘*dodge*’ anyone, but at the same time our end goal was to race in the King’s Plate, so it’s been almost a couple of months since he ran. He could have run in the Plate Trial, but I look at it that we have a fresher horse now, he certainly looks like he wants to run this morning, hopefully he does this afternoon. (*Laughs*) One thing we do know is Tom’s Magic loved the

surface at Fair Hill and hopefully it’s not going to be an issue at Woodbine later today.

**PONIES 24-7:** Well Mike thanks for doing this and good luck today with Tom’s Magic and hopefully he puts you over the goal line!

**MIKE RENFRO:** That’s a good one Larry, (*Laughs*), it’s been a long time since I was able to cross the goal line and had a chance to ‘*spike it*’. I used to spike the ball, but I don’t know what I’m going to spike if he wins the King’s Plate, but it will be more than a football, believe me!

*Editor’s Note: Since this interview was conducted a couple of important updates on Tom’s Magic, he was a closing second, despite a challenging trip in the King’s Plate and recently on September 28th and again at Woodbine, he was victorious in the \$400,000 Breeders’ Stakes on the grass and the third leg of the Canadian Triple Crown. With this in mind, I asked Mike if he can share what the plans are going forward for Tom’s Magic.*

**MIKE RENFRO:** Tom’s Magic has returned to his home base at Delaware Park and will enjoy some well deserved *r and r* over the next few weeks. Mike Stidham and our ownership group will discuss his future race options which will include earning Graded Stakes status. More to come soon!



Photo by: Michael Burns

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# LISA KNIGHT

## Where the Horses Were Waiting

Chris Lomon, Woodbine

Photos by Michael Burns



There was a time in Lisa Knight's life when she was immersed in the film and television industry – unaware she was living a story worthy of a Hollywood script.

In her late 20s, despite a successful career, Knight couldn't shake a persistent feeling of unease and lack of fulfillment. She knew something needed to change – perhaps something drastic – but at the time, she

had no idea what that would be.

"I went to school with the intent of working in film and television," recalled Knight. "I went to college for a year in that program, as well as multimedia. I spent time working on video games and then went to work on a couple of TV shows."

When her role shifted into something more technical and isolating, Knight began to crave a new path.

"I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in a cubicle, staring at a computer, which is what my career had been chiseled down to. I was making very good money, but I came to realize you can't do something you don't have any joy for."

After much contemplation and reflection, an unexpected thought came to her.

Why it did, she had no idea.

"I had an inkling that I might like to work with horses. I had never been around them, but it just seemed like it would be cool. I didn't know how to get into the industry, so I jumped around doing different jobs to pay the bills."

Then came a chance encounter that changed everything.

"At one of these jobs, someone actually asked me what I wanted to do and I told them. They told me they could get me a job working with horses – it turned out her husband was a jockey agent."

Not long after that chat, Knight found herself on the expansive Woodbine backstretch, heading to the barn of longtime trainer John MacKenzie.

She drew a deep breath as she walked the shedrow for the first time, taking in the sight of horses peering out from each stall. She was speechless. Somehow, it felt like she was meant to be there.

"I started out like everyone else," recalled Knight. "I was a hotwalker, but I couldn't even spell horse back then, as far as knowledge. John taught me from the ground up. I was hooked."

It wasn't until a few years into her career that Knight stumbled upon a truth that made everything click – perhaps she hadn't just chosen the Thoroughbred racing world.

Maybe it had chosen her.

"The funny part was that after doing this for a couple years, I got reunited with my biological family. I was adopted as a baby. My biological family were, as it turns out, trainers and jockeys – both sides of the family. That's how my parents met. They were galloping horses for their parents down at Calder.

"They were teenagers when I was born – and this

was the early 1970s – so it wasn't a good time for them to be teenage parents. I was adopted by a fantastic family, so I was very fortunate. I have a great relationship with my biological family as well. It was a bit of a surprise to find out the thing I came to was the thing I came from. I never felt I had to question my decision once I found that out."

And she never has – not for a moment.

Her bond with horses is undeniable.

"I just love this connection I have to horses," said Knight, who also worked in the barn of Debbie England and her husband, fellow trainer, Phil England. "I always had dogs and cats growing up, but horses are so complex. I love getting to know them, figuring them out and finding what makes them happy. Grooms spend a lot of time with the horses, and they know their personality more than anyone."

Knight has worked with champions, allowance types, upper-level and lower-level claimers.

To her, they are all equal.

"I was close with Cruden Bay," she said of the multiple graded stakes winner trained by Don MacRae. "I fell in love with him right from the start, but he was someone else's horse at the time. As the years progressed, I ended up looking after him – just luck of the draw. We got on so well. He has a fantastic groom right now and I could not be more thrilled. He is one of those special horses. He is more of a champion each year.

"But it's never been about those big-name horses for me."

For Knight, it's often the horses whose stories echo her own that stand out the most.

"I sought out the underdogs, the ones who take time to figure things out. Maybe they do well, maybe they don't, maybe they haven't reached their full potential. I like those ones."

MacRae, a multiple graded stakes-winning trainer with over 600 carer victories, is effusive in his praise of Knight.

"Lisa is someone who flat-out cares. She comes in with a positive mood every day and wants to make the team around her better. Her horses know her and even other horses in the barn know who she is and stop to be around her.



“She is a pleasure to be around and keeps the vibe in the barn solid every day.”

Currently, Knight is working Tuesdays and Sundays with veterinarian Candace Allen. There could be other work – back in the MacRae barn – on the horizon.

Wherever she is, it feels like she’s living her own version of a Hollywood story – one where horses take the lead roles.

“I have always tried to go the extra mile with horses and learn as much as I can. I am always trying to learn to be better at what I do, so that they can be the best version of themselves. Sometimes these horses just need a friend, and I always try to be that for them.”



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# The Racer's Edge

## A Handicapping Primer

By Larry Simpson

### Some Help In Distinguishing Whether A Thoroughbred's Form Is Improving Or On The Decline

Deciding whether a horse's form is on the improve or regressing, has always been a stumbling block that handicappers of all levels of experience have faced on a daily basis. The traditional belief that an improving horse may be observed to run closer to the leader at the prestretch, stretch and final call after a layoff still holds true. However there are many other signs of improving form and probably just as many or more clues to declining form. In fact, it's probably safe to say that you could most likely fill the pages of what we would hope to be a best selling book, when talking about many of these form indicators, but for brevity's sake, we will *'drill down'* on several of both below. Of interest, is that some of these indicators can be detected not just in the last running line, but they may also be prevalent in the horse's last two running lines, or even three races back. In any case though, it's important to give some extra attention to the signs of improving form and a horse who looks to be on the decline and your bankroll will thank you for it.

Let's first look at a few examples of improving form:

- The horse's comment in the last race Past Performance line reads 'bid and hung', however despite this, the horse in question did finish in front of at least half of the field.
- The horse was part of an all-out stretch drive in its last start.
- You notice that the horse won its last race by three lengths or more.
- A horse is back in to race in five days, which is rare nowadays, but is still a good

sign of improving form when it does arise.

- The horse showed an improved race last time out and has followed up this effort with a good or even better 'bullet' workout.
- A horse that is a Sprinter is making its third start off a long layoff and the second race back was a much improved effort.
- A Router that has been freshened and has raced in a couple of Sprint races, stretches out today to a familiar Route distance.
- He or she exits a very fast claiming event with a good performance.
- A *'back class'* horse with some dull recent form, showed some surprisingly good early speed last start.



On the flip-side, some astute handicapping can also drill down on some *'red flag'* symbols that something is not right, and a horse's recent form has been in decline. These include the following:

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- The horse has run three bad races in a row.
- After being off for a 30 day rest period, there is a drab performance in the last Past Performance line.
- There is also a decline in the horse's recent Speed Figures or if you follow them, Pace Ratings.
- The horse runs a winning race, or even a good one, which is then followed by a drop in class that doesn't make any sense at all.
- After a lengthy layoff, he or she runs what is referred to as an over-extended race, setting up today's race for the always familiar 'bounce' performance.
- The horse shows up on the track today with first time front bandages, especially Maidens and Stakes horses.
- Again, a quick look at the Comment in the Past Performance line indicates in the last race that the horse was 'lugging in' or 'bearing out' continually through the stretch, which is not a good sign.
- A horse whose last race shows an uncharacteristic

running style and lack of position, namely at the first call, especially if this is a horse that is usually on the lead or at least close to the pace. This is especially noticeable in Sprint races and is a good sign that the horse has perhaps lost a bit of its 'edge'.

There are many other signs that a horse may be either in an improving mode or regressing and as you get deeper into the science of handicapping and reading Past Performance lines, you will gradually get to recognize some or all of these. Also, as you become more astute at watching races and reading a 'Racing Form', you just may develop your own list of factors that will indicate either better or lapsing form, keeping in mind though that 'Horses are not machines' and like us humans, they do have their off days and this could be reflected in a lacklustre performance on the racetrack.



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