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Big weights a thing of the past

By Ryan Goldberg

On Aug. 30, 1998, in the Philip H. Iselin Handicap at Monmouth Park, Skip Away towed 131 pounds in his stirring victory over longshot Stormin Fever, who carried 18 fewer pounds. A monumental upset unfolding, the crowd of 19,107 gasped as Stormin Fever passed Skip Away leaving the eighth pole, only to watch Skip Away storm back in the final yards. It remains one of the most memorable races in Monmouth history.

That day, Skip Away passed an acknowledged test of greatness in a race where other legends had faltered under 130 pounds or more: Kelso twice (1962, 1964), Damascus (1968), and Forego (1976). Here was a textbook example of handicap racing, a longstanding and unique part of the game.

"He was the star horse," said Mike Dempsey, Monmouth's racing secretary, of the impost he had assigned Skip Away. "He deserved the weight. We raised the purse for him. But we wanted to make it fair for everyone involved. That was 10 years ago, and the game has changed a lot since then."

No horse has carried 130 pounds in a major route race on American soil since Skip Away's Iselin victory, and most observers agree it is unlikely to happen again soon. Those who watched the Iselin were witnesses to what, in hindsight, seems like a marker in racing history: the practical end of handicap racing.

With few exceptions, weight, long the ultimate equalizer in racing, has largely disappeared from competition. Handicaps have been diluted for such reasons as the proliferation of races and bigger purses, premature retirement of top horses, and higher jockey weights.

At the elite level, handicaps appear less frequently, and, more important, the weight spread - how much the top horse must concede - has narrowed significantly. In other words, handicaps are not what their name suggests.

In 1970, the top weight in the richest races averaged 123.5 pounds and the spread was 13.9 pounds. Both measurements have steadfastly declined since then. In 2008, the top weight in Grade 1 handicaps averaged 120.67 pounds and the spread was 7.37 pounds.

"Nobody puts true weight on a horse, anyway," said trainer Graham Motion, who said he believes handicaps should be done away with. "The bottom line is there are so many options these days that you can just avoid them."

As racetracks have enlarged their purses with alternative forms of gambling, every racing office has had to compete to secure the best horses. Handicaps are often seen as a hitch in these efforts. Whereas racing secretaries once had the leverage, now trainers, particularly the ones whose stables have greatly expanded over the years, hold the cards.

"I think handicaps are outdated to a point," said P.J. Campo, the racing secretary of the New York Racing Association. "No one wants to carry weight anymore, and if you put too much weight on a guy, they'll just get in a van or get on a plane and go someplace else."



— Forego carries 135 pounds while beating Dance Spell in the 1976 Woodward Handicap, which featured a spread of 29 pounds between the lowest and highest weighted horses.

Said Lou Raffetto, the former president of the Maryland Jockey Club and general manager of Suffolk Downs, "The business aspect, unfortunately, outweighs the sporting aspect."

History of handicap racing

Handicap racing is as old as the game itself. The system was designed to make races competitive and interesting with a spread in weight as well as to level the playing field so the race was worth betting on. The handicap division was fortified in the 1960s and 1970s in combination with a limited and coherent national schedule of top-tier races. Trainers had to accept the weight assignments, which racing secretaries handed down like tablets from Sinai.

"It used to be that the racing secretary would handicap the race the way they thought it should be," said trainer Allen Jerkens, whose Beau Purple upset Kelso in the 1962 Suburban and 1963 Widener handicaps and whose Handsome Boy upset Buckpasser in the 1967 Brooklyn Handicap.

The great horses of those decades regularly carried 130 pounds or more: Tom Fool, Bold Ruler, and Round Table in the 1950s; Kelso, Buckpasser, Damascus, and Dr. Fager in the 1960s; Forego, Affirmed, Seattle Slew, and Spectacular Bid in the 1970s and early 1980s. The older horses were the stars of the game.

Dr. Fager, who legendary turf writer Charley Hatton once wrote had the "ability to make light of enervating weights," carried 139 pounds when he set a track record in the 1968 Vosburgh. Forego carried at least 130 pounds in 24 races over five years.

Horses were "honored" with top weight, as the press described it. Owners and trainers usually saw the weight assignments as challenges for their charges.

TIMELINE: Great weight carriers

1900s	1920s	1930s
		
Roseben "The Big Train" nearly set a track record when he won a six-furlong race July 17, 1907, carrying 147 pounds – 60 more than the runner-up.	Exterminator In 33 starts from 1921 to 1922, he won 19 races and never carried less than 126 pounds.	Discovery Nine of his 27 victories came while carrying 130 pounds or more, including the Merchants and Citizens on August 10, 1935, when he carried 139 pounds, 22 more than the runner-up.

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Jerkens recalled a remark John Hay Whitney of the old Greentree Stable once made about weights.

"Mr. Whitney said, 'Do you realize they put 136 on Tom Fool for the Brooklyn Handicap?'" Jerkens said, referring to the 1953 Brooklyn. "He said, 'Isn't it wonderful that they think so much of my horse?' There's not many people around now that can afford to be that sporting."

Though there were fewer elite stakes then, handicaps were more frequent. Approximately two of every five stakes at the top level were handicaps; today, it is one out of four.

In 1970, there were 32 handicaps from 79 races with purses of at least \$75,000. Two decades later, there were 41 handicaps out of 95 Grade 1 races.

Then the number began to drop. In 2000, there were 34 handicaps from 100 Grade 1 races. This year, there were 28 handicaps from 115 Grade 1 races. The top weight and spread declined to levels unanimously perceived as insignificant.

Jerkens was critical of the way top weights have come down for older horses in handicap races.

"Where's the logic attached?" Jerkens said. "You carry 22 when they're 2, 26 when they're 3, and 21 when they're 4. How does that make any sense?"

The remaining Grade 1 handicaps are nearly exclusive to New York and California; elsewhere, there are three in Florida and one apiece in Kentucky and Arkansas. What was once known as the handicap division has become barren: The only Grade 1 route handicaps left are the Donn, Santa Anita, Stephen Foster, Hollywood Gold Cup, and Whitney.

The Iselin, for decades an important stop for older horses, is now a Grade 3 race and no longer a handicap. Other handicaps or former handicaps such as the Brooklyn, Suburban, Gulfstream Park, Massachusetts, Meadowlands Cup, and Oaklawn have seen their grades and purses drop. Gone are the Marlboro Cup, Widener, Saratoga Breeders' Cup, and Pimlico Special.

Four years ago, Monmouth removed the handicap tag from its graded stakes. Keeneland also did away with handicaps. In recent years, every major track has turned some of its graded races from handicap to allowance or weight-for-age conditions.

Some of those decisions were intended to appease the Breeders' Cup, which "pretty much told tracks that if you want supplemental money, don't use handicaps," said Doug Bredar, the former racing secretary at Gulfstream Park and Churchill Downs.

Martin Panza, Hollywood Park's racing secretary, said, "For a while there, if you took Breeders' Cup money, you had to write allowance conditions," pointing to the Grade 1 Gamely as an example.

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1940s	1950s	1960s
<p>Devil Diver</p> <p>He carried over 130 pounds 11 times and won seven of those races, including four straight against top competition in 1944.</p>	<p>Round Table</p> <p>Won 17 of the 25 races in which he carried 130 or more pounds, carrying as much as 136 pounds in his United Nations victory Sept. 19, 1959.</p>	<p>Kelso</p> <p>Five-time Horse of the Year carried 130 or more pounds 24 times, winning 13, including the 1 1/4-mile Brooklyn in 1961 while carrying 136.</p> <p>Dr. Fager</p> <p>Set a track record at Aqueduct while carrying 139 pounds in his last race, the seven-furlong Vosburgh.</p>

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This policy continues for Grade 1 races, but other graded races that are handicaps now qualify for Breeders' Cup funds, a Breeders' Cup spokesman said.

"We believe that handicap races have the potential of taking away the highest rated horses due to increased weights they must carry," said the spokesman, Jim Gluckson.

Loss of an older division

The 1998 Iselin was the 12th and final handicap in which Skip Away, then 5, ran after his 3-year-old season. That year, his Horse of the Year season, he ran nine times and contested five handicaps. Once he retired, a new generation was ushered in, and, at the same time, handicap racing was ushered out.

Besides Curlin, not one champion older male horse since 1998 has carried more than 124 pounds in a handicap. Ghostzapper, following five graded wins, including the Breeders' Cup Classic, carried 123 pounds in his

5-year-old debut in the 2005 Metropolitan Handicap. Invasor, following four Grade 1 wins, including the BC Classic, received 123 pounds for his 5-year-old debut in the 2007 Donn.

Last year, Curlin ran five times in the U.S. and twice in Dubai. In his career, he raced in one handicap, the Stephen Foster, in which he carried 128 pounds and had to concede 10 to 15 pounds, an assignment that led Steve Asmussen, his trainer, to waver on running. Curlin carried 132 pounds against lesser competition in his Dubai World Cup prep.

From his crop, Curlin was the best horse to return; his rivals Hard Spun, Street Sense, and Any Given Saturday did not. Among the 10 champion 3-year-old male horses since 1998, only two others stayed on for additional seasons - Tiznow and Funny Cide.

1970s	1980s	1990s
Forego In 30 handicaps from 1974 to 1977, his average weight assignment was 132.3 pounds, going as high as 137 in his victory in the 1976 Marlboro Cup.	John Henry Despite carrying 130 pounds in only three of his 83 career starts, the 15-time Grade 1 winner carried at least 126 pounds in all but three of his last 39 races.	Skip Away His nose victory in the Iselin on Aug. 30, 1998, marked the last time a horse carried more than 130 pounds in a major route race in the U.S.



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Since 1998, stakes programs have shifted more money and focus to juveniles and 3-year-olds, and for the most part, the financial allure of the breeding shed has become too much to resist. This has also meant less money for older horses.

Because horses do not stay around long - and if they do their starts are infrequent - it has become too difficult to assign higher weights in remaining handicaps, Panza said.

"I think there's room for handicaps in this country," he said. "Probably our racing programs need to be redesigned and rethought out. We need to create incentives for horses to stay on the track."

The heavy lifting has been left to the fillies and mares that remain in training longer than their male counterparts. Azeri, the older female champion for three years, once carried 128 pounds and regularly conceded double-digit weight to her rivals. Xtra Heat, the lightning-fast sprinter, carried 127 in the 2002 Vagrancy. And Zenyatta won under 129 pounds in late June in the Grade 1 Vanity at Hollywood Park, her fifth career handicap.

Bigger jockeys, bigger stables

When handicaps flourished, the bottom of the weight spread was 110 pounds, and jockeys often rode below that. Since the benchmark started at 126, racing secretaries could set a legitimate spread.

But over the last decade, jockeys have been allowed to ride at higher weights. Tracks have reflected this in on a day-to-day basis. For instance, Kentucky usually starts allowances at 118 pounds.

What this has done for handicaps is elevate the floor. Few top jockeys ride under 115 pounds, and any weight assignments below that lead to overweights. Racing secretaries have not lifted the top of the scale to accommodate the new floor.

One reason is that as jockeys got bigger, so, too, did the stables of leading trainers, an altogether new phenomenon. Bobby Frankel, who won the Eclipse Award four years in a row (2000-03), has long been outspoken against handicaps and the weights assigned to his horses. With the best horses concentrated in the hands of few trainers - and higher purses and more options than before - they could pit each track against one another. An easy way to solve the problem was to dump handicaps or minimize weights.

"I think we got into an era where trainers complained a lot and racing secretaries got a little uneasy and started to go lower," said Panza, who said he does not fault trainers. "They're doing what's better for their horses."

Panza added: "As long as the game revolves around the betting dollar, there needs to be room for handicaps."

What's best for the game, Bredar said, may be another story. Citing the problems tracks face with small fields, and pointing to recent Grade 1 examples, Bredar said the betting public and smaller trainers lose out if handicaps continue on their path to the dusty pages of racing history.

"The only bargaining power that racing offices have right now is to tell that 30-1 shot that he [the trainer] is getting serious weight from the favorites," Bredar said. "He'd at least consider it. But if he is carrying the same weight as Curlin or Zenyatta, how can you explain that to your owner?"

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