Introducing TrueNicks

TrueNicks is a new tool that rates the compatibility of stallions from one male line with mares from other sire lines. Initially theorized by pedigree analysts Byron Rogers and Alan Porter of Pedigree Research, the proprietary formula for calculating TrueNicks grades was developed in partnership with Blood-Horse Publications using data made available by The Jockey Club Information Systems. Individual reports are available for hypothetical matings as well as for named foals, and a subscription service is available to stallion owners. Additional information, including frequent news updates in blog format, is available at www.TrueNicks.com.

Porter and Rogers took some time recently to discuss TrueNicks with staff writer Esther Marr.

Q: What exactly is TrueNicks?

Porter: It's a system designed to evaluate sire/broodmare sire crosses. It's the only system that's able to take into account—because of the information available from The Jockey Club Information Systems—all foals on a cross. It gives true opportunity for a cross. While it only examines the sire line/broodmare sire line cross, that aspect through studies of more than 100,000 horses has shown to have a tremendous correlation of success.

For example, A-rated horses are only around 13% of the population, and yet if you look at stakes winners, 37% would be found to be rated A or upwards.

How was the formula developed?

Porter: It was developed through a little bit of trial and error. When you do a whole population, you have to come up with a methodology of not having too much of a regression to the means through inferior attempts of the same nick.

For instance, the Nasrullah—Princequillo cross worked well when it was Bold Ruler and Princequillo. It was tried numerous times with inferior horses, and then when the searches measured the whole nick, they found it came down to somewhere near the whole population. We ultimately found a way around this. We compared how specific stallions did with all other mares and how that group of mares did when bred to all other sires. It's somewhat a similar concept to the Comparable Index.

Rogers: The other thing…the mathematics which Alan described is only part of the formula that generates the rating. Alan conceptualized that idea a long time ago. There was also a series of logic tests and requirements for a calculation to be made. That was one of the most challenging parts of the whole process.

What do the numbers mean? What is the lowest and highest? What type of number should I be looking for? What is the variant?

Porter: A rating of 1.00 means that the cross is performing exactly in line with opportunity. When we did the population study, we found that the midpoint in terms of ratio of the population to stakes winners was consistent. Horses that were rated 1.00 really were producing about the same percentage of stakes winners as there were horses in the population. So we didn't calculate the 1.00, which is a C for an average, and then move it around to get the ratios the same. The actual ratios came out very much in line with what you'd expect. The TrueNicks score starts at .01; anywhere from .01 to .99 would be below expectation and opportunity. Any number from 1.01 and on upwards would be above opportunity. With the scales going up, just as you see with Average Earnings Index, a good rating could be anywhere from 2.00, which is twice opportunity, going all the way up to 500. An extremely high score usually means there have been a couple stakes winners from very limited opportunities. To allow people to get a better grasp, rather than just giving the raw numbers, we have banded those numbers from A++ all the way down to F. By and large, horses that are rated A and B are outperforming the rest of the population by a very considerable margin.

Rogers: In layman's terms, a B+ or better is probably where you want to start to think, "this is a solid mating."

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How does it differ from other mating or nicking programs?

Rogers: The first major difference is because we're using a complete set—The Jockey's Club's data—to generate the rating, we're able to look at what the true opportunity is. The problem that can occur with systems that base calculations on hypothetical opportunity is the cross is tried more often than it normally would hypothetically occur. Kingmambo—Sadler's Wells is a perfect example. Kingmambo stands here in America, and Sadler's Wells is a broodmare sire in England. The cross initially had a couple high profile horses creating a situation where that cross was tried an extraordinary amount of times. Systems that just use hypothetical opportunity can't cater for this type of occurrence and therefore their data is less meaningful. Because we know how many times it's actually been tried, our results reflect reality better in those cases. The other thing is it's easy to count successes, but when you're counting failures as well, it's a more realistic number. The downside to that is our system puts out a lot of low ratings. The people that have been doing the beta testing on it have said that to get a B or an A is pretty hard—the system doesn't just spit out As and Bs like confetti. You're going to see a lot of Fs and Ds and Cs, but that's a reality. We make no excuses for that—that's what the population is.

How does it benefit a breeder?

Rogers: The advantage of the system is its reality-based information. This is one part of the pedigree we're looking at— we've done strong statistical tests and we've shown there's a high correlation of high-rated horses going on to stakes success—but it's not the only thing. Obviously, conformation, aptitude, and various parts of the pedigree all need to be considered and weighted appropriately.

Porter: One of the unique features is that we list the best horses on a cross, whether they're stakes winners or not. It's a system that is designed to encourage intelligent interpretation. I wouldn't want to see people blindly using rat-

ings without looking at the context in which they're formed, looking at the best horses bred on the ratings. An example is that Dynaformer only gets a B rating with Mr. Prospector, but he's got four grade I winners on the cross. There's a reason for that. He's a horse that has a unique physical type, perfectly capable of producing an outstanding horse with a specific cross. He does very well when bred to the right type of Mr. Prospector mare. So when you look at those types of details we add in, you're able to make some intelligent choices. We would like to see people running these programs and then using other reports that will supplement that information—and look at the whole pedigree and interpret the data. It challenges a lot of preconceptions—there are some things you believe that have worked quite well because you've seen a lot of good winners, when in fact they've just been tried an awful lot. On the other hand are crosses that you believe don't work terribly well. Halo and Damascus in broad terms have not—and then I was looking at Halo-line horses and a Time for a Change mare, and that cross has outperformed opportunity significantly. And that's something, even with the best of memory and the best of knowledge, most people wouldn't realize. Especially when those data sets can sometimes be formed by horses from around the world.

Is the most beneficial usage for hypothetical matings?

Porter: There are two principal uses. One is in planning matings. When you plan a mating for a horse before it even exists, that defines the boundaries of what you might get. So your opportunity is defined in the moment you plan that mating. Secondly, hypothetical pedigree is any horse that's not named; it's very useful in evaluating mares that are carrying foals and for evaluating broodmares because you can see if she has been bred to stallions that suited her. It's also used for evaluating weanlings, yearlings, and 2-year-olds that aren't named.

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Is it correct that the database changes every day, so if a sire or dam has a grade I winner, that is reflected right away in the numbers?

Rogers: They actually don't change and vary as much as we thought they might. Once ratings get into that A category, it takes a fair amount for them to fall. One of the advantages is when a sire establishes a positive or negative affinity, the stallion manager is able to look at that and make decisions based on that. A good example is Forestry, who stands at Taylor Made. Every pedigree analyst I know thought that he would do well with Mr. Prospector-line mares. He got a ton of them and for whatever reason, except with the Fappiano-line mares, he hasn't been as successful as what was expected. TrueNicks, which is using the data every day and coming up with ratings, would quickly discover that it wasn't working, except for Fappiano. So then it's a negative nick—it doesn't help the stallion—and we're going to try and exclude Mr. Prospector-line mares except for the Fappiano-line mares. Taking those mares out of the equation is going to improve his overall results. You'll notice that Mr. and Mrs. (Aaron and Marie) Jones went and bought a whole lot of

Fappiano-line mares at the sale just recently to go to Forestry and to improve him. If a system spat out a recommendation five years ago and spat out the same recommendation to Forestry, it wouldn't be accurate information—it would be leading someone down the wrong path. From the breeders' point of view, there was an example a few weeks ago where there were two stakes winners in the same weekend—both graded—by Storm Cat-line stallions out of Unbridled's Song mares, and there had been none on the cross before. If you're a breeder, that's useful information. We've designed the nick in a way that one new stakes winner doesn't change an established nick, but it will give the information to the breeder very quickly.

In addition to the rating, what other factors do you examine?

Rogers: Personally, I like to see a nick that has been positive. I then like to see if there is some inbreeding or line breeding particularly to what I call genetic relatives. You also look for a balance of temperament and speed, stamina, and precocity and aptitude. I look to balance those attributes. Depending on the breeder's need, commercial considerations come into it. That would also affect the aptitude. If you have a less expensive mare that had speed, you're probably not going to breed her to a classic-type stallion because those horses usually want a little more family. Then, of course, you can't ignore the physical factors. However good a mating is on paper, if it isn't a good physical mating, then you don't want to do it.

This was just launched. At the January sale, have the top nick ratings been reflected well in the prices?

Rogers: It's hard to say. We think long term it will have a commercial impact. It's interesting to note we put the top 10 horses up every day, and Alan did a commentary on it (on BloodHorseNOW.com). We had one day where two of the top three sellers were horses in the top 10 (by TrueNicks variant score). We'd be drawing a fairly long bow to think we influenced that decision, but thinking long term, it's going to be widely published and widely known.

How do you see this product developing over time? In what other ways can a person use TrueNicks?

Porter: This is one of the first ventures The Jockey Club has worked with an outsider to go forward. I see us continuing to refine the TrueNicks rating and improve its quality. We're going to look to implement a number of programs where breeders are able to enter a mare and will see mating suggestions, and we're going to look to provide the same type of service for stallions. We're going to look to provide reports for sales, and I think in the longer term, we're going to be able use the data to develop some more sophisticated programs that look at the whole pedigree, as well as the nicks. I wouldn't be at all surprised if handicappers started to look at TrueNicks to evaluate first-time starters. ◖