

Handicapping in India

presented by

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Handicapping in India is radically similar to what is practiced all over the world. But the Handicapping system in India has developed over the years. It has undergone lot of modifications in the last two decades. The race clubs in India have consciously worked towards a common handicapping system. What we see today is the result of that intellectual evolution which has resulted in greater uniformity. More than that, the system has undergone a transition from secrecy to transparency.

Though racing in India traces back to eighteenth century, it was only in the twentieth century that the sport became an organized business. The classification system was introduced in India in 1916, exactly a century ago. In those days, horses which participated were all imports from Europe and they were classified into four classes namely Class I, II, III and IV. With the advent of Indian thoroughbreds around 1940s, the Indian horses were separately classified into two classes namely class A and class B. Races were framed for imported horses and for Indian horses separately. With the quality of Indian horses improving steadily, many Indian horses were classified in class IV initially enabling them to compete with imported horses. Gradually they got promoted to higher classes. It paved the way for merging of the two sets of classes into one classification system, containing six classes. With the government of India discouraging the import of thoroughbreds for the purpose of racing, racing was mostly confined to Indian horses after independence in 1947. But the classification system continued without any major modification. The salient features of that classification system were as follows:

- Horses were classified into six classes namely class I, II, III, IV, VA and VB.
- Each class had a range of 15 kgs with the minimum bottom weight at 45 kgs.
- Each class started at the end of the previous class.
- With class I stretching up to 25 kgs from 45 to 70, the overall scale of weights was nearly 100 kgs.
- Every horse was assigned a class by the handicapper based on rating. But rating was never disclosed.
- The following table depicts the system which was never published:-

<u>Class</u>	<u>Rating (in kg. units)</u>	<u>Weight</u>
VB	00-15	45-60
VA	15-30	45-60
IV	30-45	45-60
III	45-60	45-60
II	60-75	45-60
I	75-100	45-70

In this system which continued for a long time till 1990, horses were classified and reclassifications were notified at the end of every race day. But nobody would know what penalty or drop was given; nobody would know what weights the horses would carry in their next race; Nobody would know where exactly a horse stood in relation to other horses within the class. Handicap weight of a horse could be known only after it was entered in a race. One other thing that the handicappers did frequently was to keep changing the top weight depending on the entrants. But, there used to be no notification as to whether the weights were lowered or raised. It led to further confusion in calculating the penalty or drop given to a horse even after it was handicapped.

During the course of a season many classes used to get stretched beyond 15 kgs. At the end of each season the handicapper used to drop the ratings of horses within each class uniformly. But, quite often the drop would vary from class to class. The ultimate aim was to readjust each class to 15 kgs which would become the starting point for the next racing season. This process used to happen twice or thrice a year at the conclusion of every season. Though the number as well as the quality of horses was increasing continuously, the scale had remained the same at about 100 Kgs and had become outdated and there was scope for compression of the scale.

The process of compression of the rating scale started in the year 1992. The progressive enhancement in the quality of Indian breeds and the increase in the number of racing horses from 1000 in 1950 to nearly 4000 in 1990 coupled with the practice of “seasonal drop” at the end of each meeting facilitated the process. The compression was not brought about drastically but gradually, keeping in mind that the racing was not affected adversely. It was achieved in stages in a space of nearly three years. In the first stage, the bottom weight was increased from 45 to 47 kgs reducing each class to 13 kgs and the scale to about 85 kgs. In the next stage, each class was compressed further to 11 kgs and the scale was reduced to about 75 kgs. Horses rated up to 2 kgs at the top and up to 2 kgs at the bottom of a class were permitted to run in the next higher and the next lower classes respectively as explained in the following table:-

<u>Race for Class</u>	<u>Rating of horses eligible</u>	<u>Weights</u>
VB	VA 11-13	58-60
	VB 00-11	47-58
VA	IV 22-24	60-62
	VA 11-22	49-60
	VB 09-11	47-49
IV	III 33-35	60-62
	IV 22-33	49-60
	VA 20-22	47-49
III	II 44-46	60-62
	III 33-44	49-60
	IV 31-33	47-49
II	I 55-57	60-62
	II 44-55	49-60
	III 42-44	47-49
I	I 55-75	49-69
	II 53-55	47-49

Even during that period, rating was not disclosed. Horses were still classified and those eligible to run in higher or lower class were duly notified. In the final stage, the scale was further compressed to about 70 kgs and the Rating System was introduced in Bangalore in 1995. “Rating” became the basis for entering the horses in a race as compared to “Classification” as the criterion. The features of this transparent system were as follows:-

- Horses were allotted ratings on a scale of 0 to about 70.
- Each rating point was equal to 1 kg.
- Ratings of horses were publicized before the commencement of every meeting.
- Races were framed on the basis of ratings as indicated

<u>Races in Ratings</u>	<u>Weights</u>
00-15	47-62
10-25	47-62
20-35	47-62
30-45	47-62
40-55	47-62
50 & above	47 & above

- Each race catered to a scale of about 15 kgs starting from 47 to 62 kgs.
- There was an overlap of 5 kgs between two consecutive categories. Consequently, many of the horses were eligible to enter for more than one category.
- A “Ready-Reckoner” of weights as related to ratings which assisted in finding out the exact handicap weight was introduced:-

50 & above	40-55	30-45	20-35	10-25	00-15	Weights
65	55	45	35	25	15	62
64.5	54.5	44.5	34.5	24.5	14.5	61.5
64	54	44	34	24	14	61
63.5	53.5	43.5	33.5	23.5	13.5	60.5
63	53	43	33	23	13	60
62.5	52.5	42.5	32.5	22.5	12.5	59.5
62	52	42	32	22	12	59
61.5	51.5	41.5	31.5	21.5	11.5	58.5
61	51	41	31	21	11	58
60.5	50.5	40.5	30.5	20.5	10.5	57.5
60	50	40	30	20	10	57
59.5	49.5	39.5	29.5	19.5	9.5	56.5
59	49	39	29	19	9	56
58.5	48.5	38.5	28.5	18.5	8.5	55.5
58	48	38	28	18	8	55
57.5	47.5	37.5	27.5	17.5	7.5	54.5
57	47	37	27	17	7	54
56.5	46.5	36.5	26.5	16.5	6.5	53.5
56	46	36	26	16	6	53
55.5	45.5	35.5	25.5	15.5	5.5	52.5
55	45	35	25	15	5	52
54.5	44.5	34.5	24.5	14.5	4.5	51.5
54	44	34	24	14	4	51
53.5	43.5	33.5	23.5	13.5	3.5	50.5
53	43	33	23	13	3	50
52.5	42.5	32.5	22.5	12.5	2.5	49.5
52	42	32	22	12	2	49
51.5	41.5	31.5	21.5	11.5	1.5	48.5
51	41	31	21	11	1	48
50.5	40.5	30.5	20.5	10.5	0.5	47.5
50	40	30	20	10	0	47

(1 rating point is equal to 1 kg)

- Weights were strictly allotted as per the ready-reckoner. Weights were raised only if the top weight was less than 60 kgs and the increase was duly notified.
- After every week's races, the revised ratings for all the horses that ran were published the next day before the entry for the next week's races closed.
- Option of dropping the rating of all horses at the conclusion of the racing season continued but could be done uniformly that too only once in a year. The "seasonal drop" promptly notified and the horses with negative rating were retired from racing compulsorily.

The introduction of the rating system was a game changer. Because of its transparency, it became so popular that it prompted the other clubs in the country to adopt the system. A similar system was introduced by R.W.I.T.C in 1997, R.C.T.C in 1999 and M.R.C in 2012. Ratings were originally maintained in 1 kg unit at Bangalore and in ½ kg unit at other centers. In 2002, it was decided to maintain the ratings uniformly in ½ kg unit in all the race clubs in India for the sake of uniformity and also for the convenience of racing fraternity. The system underwent some more changes in its structure with the bottom weight in a race going up from 47 to 50 kgs in the year 2007. The scale was restructured with each race reduced to 12.5 kgs and the overlapping coming down to 2.5 kgs. The ready-reckoner was revised suitably:-

80 & above	60 to 85	40 to 65	20 to 45	00 to 25	Weights
105	85	65	45	25	62.5
104	84	64	44	24	62
103	83	63	43	23	61.5
102	82	62	42	22	61
101	81	61	41	21	60.5
100	80	60	40	20	60
99	79	59	39	19	59.5
98	78	58	38	18	59
97	77	57	37	17	58.5
96	76	56	36	16	58
95	75	55	35	15	57.5
94	74	54	34	14	57
93	73	53	33	13	56.5
92	72	52	32	12	56
91	71	51	31	11	55.5
90	70	50	30	10	55
89	69	49	29	9	54.5
88	68	48	28	8	54
87	67	47	27	7	53.5
86	66	46	26	6	53
85	65	45	25	5	52.5
84	64	44	24	4	52
83	63	43	23	3	51.5
82	62	42	22	2	51
81	61	41	21	1	50.5
80	60	40	20	0	50

(Ratings are indicated in points where 1 point is equal to 0.5 kg)

The above system is in practice in the country even today except for few minor differences between the individual race clubs. But the working of the handicappers remains the same. They are basically guided by the common principle of the rules of racing regarding handicapping - "A Handicap is a race in which the weights to be carried by the horses are adjusted by the Handicapper for the purpose of equalizing their chances of winning." But no guideline or method or procedure has been laid down in the rules of racing or in the racing calendar for achieving the objective. The handicappers themselves follow certain guidelines to ensure uniformity, consistency and impartiality. These guidelines have been inherited from generations to generations.

- Generally, a horse is allotted rating based on the assessment of the handicapper only after it wins once or runs thrice. Horses normally start their career in Terms races in India as 2-year-olds in the month of October or November.
- The rating of a horse depends neither on the number of races it wins or on the amount of stake money it earns but it depends purely on the relative merit of the horses.
- The ratings are changed only after a horse runs and only if required.
- Minimum or a maximum penalty for winning a race has not been prescribed. The fact that the maximum penalty for a win in a handicap race given at Bangalore is 25 kgs in one race and the minimum is 2 kgs in another highlights the freedom enjoyed by the handicapper.
- No hard and fast rule has been laid down for reducing the rating of a horse for an unplaced run. There are instances where horses have been dropped 5 kgs for an unplaced run. There are also instances where horses have not been dropped even ½ kg after running unplaced ten times continuously.
- Ratings of horses are generally not reduced in case they run too far below their ability or even if they are impeded from performing up to their ability for whatever reason.
- In Handicap races, normally fourth placed horse is treated as the base and the ratings of the horses placed higher are increased relatively and the lower placed horses are generally reduced. The base could be sometimes third placed horse or even it could be between third and the fourth placed horses. It all depends on the number of participants, closeness of the verdict, quality of participants etc. The handicapper is supposed to judge it based on the circumstances. Very rarely second placed horse is made as the base when the field is too small.
- In Terms races, the ratings are readjusted based on the actual weight carried by the horses which are not in conformity with the ratings. There are many instances where the ratings of horses had to be enhanced substantially for placing second, third or even fourth in a Terms race as well as instances where winners were not penalized even ½ kg for winning a Derby. There is also an incident of the rating of a winner having been reduced after its win in a Terms race.

In a recent development in 2014 rating of horses played a vital role in the formation of a national pyramid for pattern races for the country as a whole instead of the individual clubs having their own pattern. This became possible only after the introduction of the average rating of horses performing in such races as the most important criterion in addition to many other norms for bestowing the status of a graded race by the Indian pattern committee.

Even after this long and fruitful journey there is no commonality in the rating of a horse amongst different turf clubs in India; there is still a gap between the rating of a horse in India with its international rating; handicap weights stretching beyond 60 kgs is a over burden on the horses; handicap weights below 52 kgs is not convenient to most of the jockeys. Hence, the challenge for the future is to

- i. Achieve common rating for every horse amongst the different turf clubs in India.
- ii. Compress the scale further so as to integrate the Indian rating of horses with their international rating.
- iii. Restrict the top weight to a maximum of 60 kgs.
- iv. Raise the minimum weight to at least 52 kgs.

It is hoped that the handicappers in India would set a road map to realize these goals in a phased manner and would be able to accomplish the objectives in the near future so as to pave the way for Indian racing to gallop ahead globally.
