

Fillies & mares weight allowances versus males SHOULD SEX ALLOWANCES BE DISTANCE RELATED?

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By Geir Stabell

I wonder how many would disagree with me if I say that the weight-for-age scales currently being used in horseracing are full of flaws. I wonder how many would disagree if I say that these scales, meant to give horses of different ages an equal chance in many cases do exactly the opposite. Quite a few, I suspect, since I heard no protesting voices after looking into this matter in a previous Trainer article. Protesting voices are not in short supply in horseracing circles. So, will there be any when I share the essence of my more recent 'ponderings'; that the current system of fillies' and mares allowances leaves a lot to be desired. Let's find out.

Like the weight-for-age scales, the fillies and mares weight allowances in pattern races differ in different racing jurisdictions. That in itself is quite bizarre. As an example a three-year-old filly racing against three-year-old colts in the US gets a 5lb weight pull, while if she meets older males she gets only a 3lb weight pull. As with so many regulations within horseracing, there is a glaring lack of consistency.

The idea of sex allowance is that a filly or a mare is not as strong as a colt or gelding. Thus, the 'weaker sex' is given a weight pull when they meet males in championship races. Often the sex allowance is 3lb (1,36kg) but not always. For some reason, some races offer fillies and mares a 5lb sex allowance (2,26kg). Most handicappers agree that 2lb equals about one length over a mile and if so 3lb equals 1,5 lengths, while 5lb equals 2,5 lengths. As we can see, races framed with a 5lb fillies and mares allowance thus give the fairer sex about one length better terms than races with a 3lb allowance. This in itself is not enough to base an article on, you may think, and it's not, though it is relevant to the question: should sex allowances be the same over all distances?

We can still take a look at some of these discrepancies first, and then move on to the question above. While the 'King George' at Ascot offers female runners a 3lb sex allowance, the 'Arc' at Longchamp offers females a 3,3lb allowance (1,5kg), the Hong Kong Cup is a race where fillies' and mares get a 4lb allowance, and in Dubai they get a 5lb allowance. These differing weight terms should make a trainer of a high-class filly think long and hard about where to ship, if he decides to let her have a crack at the boys in international races. Many of these contests produce close finishes and one or two pounds can make all the difference.

When the French trained mare Pride won the Hong Kong Cup in 2006, she beat the colt Admire Moon by a nose while enjoying a 4lb allowance. If they had met in France, she would be carrying 0,7lb less and probably won by more than half a length. If the race had been run in Dubai, on the other hand, Pride would be carrying 1lb more and probably lost by a narrow margin. Like the Hong Kong International races, the Japan Cup is a race staged with a 4lb sex allowance, and last year Vodka took full advantage of this weight-pull to beat the horse Oken Bruce Lee by a nose. Run the same race in England, and the result would probably be reversed, as she would only get a 3lb pull.

In North America, the fillies' and mares allowances differ in a strange way. An allowance of 5lb is being used in the the three Triple Crown races. The best example of a filly benefiting from this generous weight pull is Rags to Riches, who beat the colt Curlin by a head when they clashed in over a mile and a half in the Belmont Stakes. The US media hyped Rags to Riches out of all recognition. Not many, however, gave Curlin his credit due for almost being capable of giving the filly 5lb. If they had met again, he would be 2lb better off. When we get to the Breeders' Cup Series in the autumn, all race conditions clearly state: "fillies and mares allowed 3lb".

So, while three-year-old fillies are thought to need a 5lb sex allowance to be competitive against males of their own age in May and June, they are only handed a 3lb sex allowance when racing against older males in the autumn. It is hard to see any logic to this, but never mind. Let's just establish these facts at the back of our minds and take the next step on this interesting 'thought journey'.

To get to the bottom of this subject one needs to start off with the obvious first question: why have these sex allowances been put in place? The accepted explanation is that fillies and mares are lighter animals and not as strong as the males. The weight they carry ought to be a bit lower, more fair relative to their physical build and their body weights.

This appears to make sense, but what puzzles me the most is that the sex allowances are *exactly the same over all distances*. At Royal Ascot, if a filly runs in the King's Stand Stakes over 5 furlongs (1,005 metres), she will have the benefit of a 3lb allowance. If a filly runs in the Ascot Gold Cup, she also gets a 3lb pull. The distance of that race is 2 ½ miles (about 4,022 metres). In other words, the distance of the Gold Cup is four times as long as the King's Stand. If the sex allowance is meant to compensate for the fact that fillies and mares are lighter than males, and therefore given a weight carrying task that (compared to body weights) is equal to the weight task given to males, why then are these sex allowances not adjusted in relation to distances?

This *must* be an interesting question, and another is: how did one come up with 3lb as the correct sex allowance in one part of the world, yet 5lb in another part? I am not all that interested in which is the right allowance here (or the less wrong if you like), I am simply wondering how on earth one (and who) came to the conclusion that the sex allowance should be in this region. Why three, four or five pounds? Why not nine, ten or eleven, for example?

Looking at the riding weights relative to the body weights first, a good place to find relevant information is Hong Kong, where the weight of each runner is published on racedays.

How much less do the fillies and mares weigh, compared to their male rivals? This is individual of course. Some mares weigh more than some males. Take a look at Zenyatta. Her size and strength indicates that she should indeed be conceding weight to many of the boys. Look at the Godolphin trained colt Alexandros, a lightly built male, whose weight was very close to the fillies' weights when he ran at Sha Tin last year.

This will be far from a scientific study, but using the last two years of Hong Kong International races gives us a guide. In the 2009 Hong Kong Mile, Alain de Royer-Dupre ran the three-year-old filly Sweet Hearth. Her raceday weight was 973 pounds. The heaviest male in the race was the eight-year-old Egyptian Ra, a gelding weighing in at 1185 pounds. The lightest male in the 14-runner field was the four-year-old colt Alexandros, who weighed 987 pounds, just 14lb (6,3kg) more than Sweet Hearth. Taking the two extremes (Egyptian Ra and Alexandros) out of the equation, we are left with 11 males and their average weight was 1090 pounds. Performing the same exercise for the Vase and the Cup (the Sprint had no female runners) we get these results for all three races combined:

Average weight males: 1082 pounds
Average weight females: 965 pounds

In 2008, the corresponding figures were:

Average weight males: 1089 pounds
Average weight females: 1035 pounds

(Only two females ran, in HK Cup and Mile)

Hong Kong International 2008 and 2009 combined

Average weight males: 1085 pounds
Average weight females: 1000 pounds

A larger sample would of course be better but at least these figures give us an indication and they show that the average filly / mare weighs about 85 pounds less than the average male. Put another way, the average filly weighs about 92% of the weight of the average male (1000 = 92,1% of 1085).

Taking these figures and comparing them to the sex allowances, we see that these allowances do not correspond to horses' body weights. In the Group Ones at Sha Tin, fillies and mares carry 122 pounds and males carry 126 pounds. 122 pounds equals 96,8% of 126 pounds. Mathematically, there is a discrepancy of 4,7% here (96,8-92,1), and it is favouring the males.

The average weight of the fillies and mares running in 2009 was 965 pounds (89% of the average male) and, to keep this study simple, we can say that on average a filly or mare weighs 90% of a colt / horse / gelding.

Using 90% as a guide, if the sex allowance is to be relative to the body weights of the horses, the fillies and mares should be carrying only 113 pounds (just under 90% of 126lb). It may be hard to believe that a 13lb sex allowance would be more accurate than a 3, 4 or 5lb sex allowance but *how do we know* that it wouldn't be? One thing is certain; that 13lb is lot closer to a figure reflecting the differences in body weights, than what 3lb is.

This question is two-folded: Are the sex allowances correct, or at least near correct, and, whatever the sex allowances should be; should they also vary over different distances?

Now, let us go back to the question of sex allowances over various distances. The reasoning behind giving the females a weight allowance is that they are not as strong, and will thus find it harder to carry weight over a distance of ground. Surely, if this is right, such a sex allowance should increase with longer distances. Over the years, we have all observed sprinters managing to win under high weights, while in staying races the high weights become more of a burden. From my days working in Scandinavia, I remember quite a few stakes quality sprinters winning open handicaps carrying over 70kg (154 pounds!) though no trainer would run a horse in a staying race under such a weight.

We can use 1600 metres as a starting point, and say that over this distance, a filly should be given a 4lb sex allowance. This allowance is accepted to be relative to her physical ability (comparative to a colt) to carry weight at speed over 1600 metres. As the filly runs the race from start to finish she burns a certain amount of energy. Everyone agrees that she would burn less energy without a jockey, but how much more energy does she burn if she carries four pounds more? And how much more energy would she burn if she ran further?

I know exactly what I am trying to say here but I am not at all sure about how best to say it. Here's an attempt: The core of the matter is how 4lb more or less on its back affects the performance of a thoroughbred over various distances. It hardly makes common sense to say that, 'of course, the effect will be the same over five furlongs as it is over two and a half miles'.

If I carry a rucksack weighing 20 pounds over a mile, I will burn a certain amount of energy. If I carry the same sack over four miles would I not burn four times as much energy? And, if the sack one day weights 24 pounds, how will the extra four pounds affect me? The obvious answer is of course that I will be burning more energy carrying a heavier sack. And this difference in energy consumption will not be effective only up to a certain distance covered. The further I walk, the less energy I will have left, and the more I will feel the weight. How much I feel the weight must be directly relative to how much energy I have left. At the outset, the sack feels light, as I have plenty of energy, and it will not be much of a burden at all. At the end of a long walk, it feels many times heavier, simply because I have much less energy that I had at the outset and I now feel tired.

Why should this be any different for a horse? Of course it's not. A filly, with a lighter body and (assuming) less energy to burn than a colt, might be at a greater disadvantage against the colt the further these horses run.

If the four pounds we are using as an example is indeed correct over 1600 metres, the sex allowance should probably be 8lb if the race is run over 3200 metres (4lb x 2), furthermore one can argue that it should be 6lb over 2400 metres (4lb x 1,5), while in a sprint race over 1000 metres, the allowance ought to be no more than 2,5lb (4lb : 1,6) and so on.

I am not assuming that 4lb is the correct sex allowance to use over a mile, or over any other distance for that matter. Nor am I assuming that the UAE racing aouthorities are closer to a fair system when allowing fillies and mares five pounds in the Dubai Sheema Classic, than the English are when allowing fillies and mares three pounds in the King George VI & Queen Elizabeth Stakes, both run over 1 ½ miles. What I am assuming, however, is that these allowances, well established and tradition bound they may be, have been all too easily accepted over the years - and thus not been very well thought through.

In these days of work to harmonise racing rules, perhaps the subject of sex related weight allowances ought to be on the agenda. A thorough examination of these matters would do no harm.

FILLIES AND MARES, BREEDERS' CUP 1984 – 2009

Examining the record of fillies and mares at the Breeders' Cup, where the sex allowance is 3lb, it makes sense to disregard the Classic as given the alternative of running in the Distaff / Ladies Classic only four fillies / mares have taken part in the race. Other B Cup races have had its fair share of female runners though, and it is interesting to analyse the Sprint, Mile and Turf.

BC SPRINT - 6 furlongs (day's shortest distance)

34 runners, 3 winners (8.5% winners to runners)

1st, 2nd, 3rd: 3 - 8 - 0 (31,4% placed)

BC MILE - 8 furlongs (medium distance)

37 runners, 7 winners (18,9% winners to runners)

1st, 2nd, 3rd: 7 - 3 - 2 (32,4% placed)

BC TURF – 12 furlongs (longest distance)

35 runners, 2 winners (5,7% winners to runners)

1st, 2nd, 3rd: 2 - 4 - 3 (25,7% placed)

These figures indicate that a mile may be the best trip for a filly or mare to run against the males at sex weight allowance terms, though bear in mind that outstanding back-to-back winners Miesque and Goldikova account for four of the seven wins for the fairer sex in the BC Mile. If those two had come to the Breeders' Cup just once each, these stats would show that the shorter the distance, the better the chances are for fillies and mares.

While over 30% of all fillies and mares taking a shot at the boys have finished in the first three in both the Breeders' Cup Sprint and the Mile, the place percentage drops to 25 when we look at how female runners have fared in the Turf.