

Are wind operations a vet's benefit?



Simon Rowlands (left) and Jason Hathorn strip out the facts from the hype surrounding wind operations and draw worrying conclusions



Background

It is nearly a year since the BHA introduced a wind operation declaration requirement [see link at end of this article]. The rule states that if a horse has undergone a wind operation since its last performance, that fact must be notified when the horse is next declared.

The rule does not catch all cases. For instance, wind operations before a horse has run are excluded, while no declaration is required if the first run after the intervention took place overseas and the horse subsequently runs in Britain.

The BHA considered the benefits of declaring wind operations to be two-fold. Firstly, through improving the integrity of betting markets; and secondly, by enabling research into the effect of wind operations on racehorse performance.

This article focuses on the second of those while attempting to answer the following questions:

- **Absolute Comparison:** Does post wind-op performance improve when compared with all of the before wind-op runs of the horse?
- **Relative Comparison:** Does post wind-op performance improve when compared with the most recent before wind-op runs of the horse?

Characteristics of wind operation horses

Only horses that had run at least three times prior to the wind operation declaration were considered, up to the end of October 2018. More than 800 horses met the criteria, split between 513 National Hunt (NH) and 319 Flat horses. Horses that undergo wind operations tend to have had plenty of racing, already running an average of 12.4 (NH) and 14.2 times (Flat). Using Racing Post Ratings (RPR), the NH horses have a median rating of 116, while the Flat horses come in at 79.

	NATIONAL HUNT	FLAT
Horses	513	319
Age (median)	6	4
Runs (avg)	12.4	14.2
RPR (median)	116	79

Table 1: Characteristics of wind operation horses, flat and jumps

Absolute comparison

We know the date of the first run since a wind operation took place, and we also have the result of each race, whether a horse won or not, and the rating (RPR) achieved. Aggregating first by horse, then across all horses, allows a comparison of before and after wind operation performance to be made.

A comparison of maximum RPR achieved before and after wind operations shows a median deterioration of 8lb for both NH and Flat codes. Strike Rates also show a deterioration. However, about one in four horses do post an improvement in performance, as measured by a comparison of maximum RPR before and after.

	NATIONAL HUNT	FLAT
Runs After (Avg)	3.0	4.6
RPR After	106	70
RPR Difference (lb)	-8	-8
Strike Rate Before	14.5%	11.8%
Strike Rate After	13.8%	9.1%
Improvement in RPR	27.3%	24.1%

Table 2: Absolute comparison of performance before and after wind operations

Relative comparison

Is an absolute comparison as carried out in the previous section fair when we know horses have had many more chances to run to their best before a wind operation? A comparison of the three runs immediately before a wind operation and the three runs immediately after it addresses this concern.

For both codes there is little difference in performance. For NH horses there is an improvement in the number pulled up, and the number improving their ratings is just over 40% in both codes. However, this improvement is insufficient to influence significantly the number of winners or flow through to an improvement in ratings.

	NATIONAL HUNT	FLAT
RPR Difference (lb)	-1	-1
Winners Before	115	61
Winners After	118	63
Pulled Up Before	182	n/a
Pulled Up After	137	n/a
Improvement in RPR	41.5%	40.8%

Table 3: Relative comparison of performance before and after wind operations

Run-by-run comparison

Some suggest that it may take more than one run for the benefit of a wind operation to be reflected in performance. We examined this conjecture for both NH and Flat codes, with the results in Tables 4a and 4b.

The most striking feature is the sharp drop in horses that run for a second time after a wind operation.

We started with 513 NH horses, but only 369 ran for a second time, and 252 for a third: a near halving in participation. For Flat horses we started with 319 horses, but only 274 ran for a second time, and 208 for a third time -- a fall in participation of one-third.

A caveat here: it is possible that we have not allowed sufficient time for all horses to reappear after their first and second runs. The passage of time will allow this concern to be answered, and we intend to revisit this analysis in the future.

A comparison of the maximum RPR rating achieved in the last three runs before the wind operation and the RPR achieved on each of the first three runs afterwards revealed a deterioration of 7lb for Flat racing, and is unchanged by run number. For NH racing the deterioration is 10lb for the first run, 9lb for the second and only 4lb for the third.

Run Number	Horses	Wins	Strike Rate	RPR Difference (lb)
1	513	66	12.9%	-10
2	369	47	12.7%	-9
3	252	36	14.3%	-4

Table 4a: Run By Run Comparison for NH Races

Run Number	Horses	Wins	Strike Rate	RPR Difference (lb)
1	319	25	7.8%	-7
2	274	25	9.1%	-7
3	208	18	8.7%	-7

Table 4b: Run By Run Comparison for Flat Races

Conclusion

We posed two questions earlier, the first asking whether post wind-op performance improved when compared with all of the before wind-op runs of the horse? The answer is No. In fact, it deteriorates.

The second question was: Does post wind-op performance improve when compared with the most recent before wind-op runs of the horse? The answer here is that there is little difference.

But the most provocative question is the one in the title of this piece, namely: "Are wind operations a vet's benefit?" Overall, an awful lot of surgical interventions take place with precious little upside (other than a substantial increase in vets' bills).

What's more, there is worrying evidence that some horses drop off the radar altogether soon after a procedure which may be a desperate last resort.

But generalities can disguise more nuanced truths. The data provided by the BHA to date has invited generalisations because it lacks detail itself. The BHA records different types of wind operations but treats them all as one when distributing the results to the public.

It could be that certain types of wind operations have little efficacy and are, to a degree, a "vet's benefit", whereas others achieve the desired result often enough to be justified.

Now that wind operation information has become established, the sooner the public gets to know the full details, the better, for the benefit of the sport and quite possibly of the horses themselves. ■

BHA link:

https://www.britishhorseracing.com/press_releases/first-run-since-wind-surgery-available-published-racecards-19-january-2018/