

Top 10 Myths About Nicks in Thoroughbred Breeding

There is always that guy at the sales who has a crazy story about Thoroughbred breeding. Sometimes the story is so convincing you repeat it to someone, who tells someone else, and pretty soon the whole Thoroughbred industry is involved in perpetuating an urban legend. We've recently noticed some misconceptions about Thoroughbred nicking floating around, and we thought we'd take a shot at correcting the most common ones.

Here they are, the top 10 myths about Thoroughbred nicking – debunked.

1. Nicks are only for American breeders because they don't take into account race records from other countries.

Using the entire database of The Jockey Club Information Systems (TJCIS), TrueNicks ratings are calculated on the most complete database available anywhere in the world. Foals, runners, and stakes winners from Europe and countries including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Africa are updated daily within the database and these results are considered in ratings run by anyone, anywhere in the world.

Even in the increasingly globalized world of Thoroughbred breeding, however, the sheer reality of distance invariably finds that a lot of nick ratings localize to the country where the stallions stand. While the commercialization of the Thoroughbred has seen the dispersal of popular sire lines throughout the globe, international trends still lead to the establishment of solid and predictable sire line affinities. This makes using a database that collects results from around the world — as TJCIS database does — particularly useful.

2. Can't nicks just be tweaked to satisfy subscribing stallions?

While nicks can and do change over time, the TrueNicks rating "is what it is," to paraphrase America's favorite new cliché. We've even had complaints from stallion managers that TrueNicks was not generating enough A ratings. We make no apologies for this. The TrueNicks algorithm was calibrated using a sample of 100,000 horses, and the programming protocols underwent extensive scrutiny to ensure that they were statistically relevant. While new stakes winners and additional starters appear on reports as they occur, TrueNicks ratings are calculated by The Jockey Club Information Systems using the same formulae and protocols each and every time.

3. Nicking systems wait until there's a big graded stakes winner and then conveniently change the rating to A++.

The group or graded status of black type stakes races is not part of the TrueNicks calculations. In other words, the winner of a grade I is considered a stakes winner by TrueNicks the same as the winner of a listed event. Obviously quality does matter though, and that's why we list as many as fifteen horses and their highest level of achievement on the TrueNicks reports. Indeed there might be instances where a C-rated cross that has yielded multiple grade I winners is more desirable than an A-rated cross that has produced three minor stakes winners. TrueNicks provides that information so breeders can make their own judgments.

4. Nicks are never predictive. By the time a cross has been tried enough to earn its own rating, the success or failure of the cross is already well established.

In general, sire lines continue to breed to the successful patterns that they have previously established. As an example, Fappiano did well with mares by In Reality; his son Unbridled had success with mares by both In Reality and his sons; and, in turn, his son Unbridled's Song and his sons have done well with later generations of In Reality-line mares. This pattern can vary over time, when a sire line alters its functionality and finds itself in an environment where local bloodlines cause it to excel or fail.

TrueNicks ratings are recalculated every day — actually, in “real time” — to take into account new foals, new starters, and new stakes winners. This ensures that breeders and buyers have the latest information available when considering their mating plans and purchases.

The continually-updated data leads to minor adjustments to the variant score for a particular cross, but once a TrueNicks rating has been established, it generally takes several significant events for it to change rating bands (i.e., letter-grade scores). For a rating to change dramatically in a short time period, a drastic change in the quality of individuals produced on a cross would have to occur within a large group of individual horses over a short time — an unlikely occurrence.

5. All systems that evaluate sire line affinities use basically the same data and the same calculations.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Nicking has come a long way since the days of Federico Tesio's meticulous record-keeping with photos and handwritten notes. Computers have made processing large amounts of pedigree and race data a quick and efficient practice. The first attempts to computerize nicking yielded somewhat useful results and greatly increased the general public's appreciation of and participation in this area of pedigree study. Now the next generation is here: TrueNicks. While other nicking systems are confined to looking only at a manually-compiled pool of existing stakes winners — and only unrestricted stakes winners at that — TrueNicks draws directly from the comprehensive database of The Jockey Club. This enables us to run calculations of stakes winners against all starters on a given cross. Therefore TrueNicks is able to measure the success of a cross based on *true*, not *assumed*, opportunity.

It is important that users understand how the TrueNicks system works to appreciate what is done after the “submit” button is clicked for a new report. TrueNicks not only considers the performance of the cross in question, but it also looks at how the sire (or sire line) in question has done with all other mares from *other* broodmare sire lines, and then looks at the mares by the subject broodmare sire (or broodmare sire line) and how they have done when bred to *other* stallions. Let's look at an example. It is one thing to say that a cross has produced 5% stakes winners to foals, but the significance of that statistic is revealed when comparing it to the stallion's progeny results when crossed with all other broodmare lines. If he produces 10% stakes winners from all other damsire lines, the 5% result proves that the given cross is a below-average opportunity.

6. The use of restricted stakes winners makes rating results more accurate, even for horses in restricted programs.

TrueNicks is especially useful for regional breeders whose stakes winners have long been ignored by other nicking systems. Used in conjunction with TrueNicks reports' exclusive list of the top fifteen horses bred on the cross, the inclusion of all black type races — even restricted races — makes our calculation the industry's most useful and accurate rating. Some crosses have been successful so far only on a regional basis, a fact obviously important for breeders in those regions. Successful crosses that first appear in regional markets may be worth a try in others.

Omitting the results of restricted stakes winners does a considerable disservice to regional stallions. Take for example **Not For Love** and **In Excess (IRE)**, who for many years were dominant influences in their region (Maryland and California respectively), and have arguably been the best North American sires standing outside of Kentucky in recent years. If their restricted stakes winners were not included, the program would overlook 31 of Not For Love's stakes winners and 27 by In Excess. How can a program that overlooks around half of a stallion's stakes winners give as accurate of a reflection of affinities as one that includes them?

7. Only As are worth breeding or buying.

This myth has raised concern from stallion managers who have been denied mares that rate well — *B* or *B+*, for example — on TrueNicks and are slam dunks on conformation and potential commercial appeal. Note that 30% of the Thoroughbred population that rate *B* or better (*B* to *A++*) account for 77% of all stakes winners — of which horses rated *B* or *B+* account for 40%! It's clear that a TrueNicks *B* rating holds quite a bit of promise, especially where the mating has resulted in several high class horses.

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In addition, careful study of a pedigree may reveal compelling inbreeding or line breeding patterns that make the breeding of or buying a horse with a lower rating well worth considering. This is where the TrueNicks Key Ancestors report becomes useful as it considers all parts of the pedigree to give you the ancestors that are most influential on the outcome for the pedigree at hand.

8. A variant score of 150 must be much better than a score of 7.5, even though both rank *A++*.

It is important to understand that the way that TrueNick ratings are calculated means that nicks that have performed below opportunity will have a variant between 0.01 and 0.99, whereas above-opportunity nicks are rated anywhere from 1.01 to 500 or higher. Usually extremely high scores are the result of a nick that has enjoyed considerable success from very limited opportunity. After carefully studying TrueNicks ratings for over 100,000 horses during our development phase, the TrueNicks variants were converted into broader categories — the *D* to *A++* letter

grades used in academia. Thus, a horse with a variant of 7.50 and a horse with a variant of 150.00 or 500.00 will both rate A. The variant score is useful because it indicates relative degrees of each grade (e.g., a horse rated 1.48 earns a C+ but you can see that it comes close to the requirements for a B rating). Our advice is to use the letter grade in your analysis of individual horses.

9. Nicks are the ONLY criteria to consider when planning a mating.

Stop the presses! No, no, no! No single pedigree theory — including nicking — should ever be the sole criteria for planning a mating. Conformation, stud fee, past successes of the female line, and commercial appeal of the stallion all must be carefully considered before booking your mare to a stallion. Nick ratings are not magic bullets. They require intelligent interpretation and also need to be weighted with all the other factors that go into breeding and buying a racehorse. TrueNicks reports will help you but — as we always like to say — paper doesn't run very fast so don't take the easy way out!

10. Nicks don't take into consideration the importance of other parts of the pedigree.

Well this myth is a mixture of “true” and “false.”

By definition, “sire line affinities” do not factor in how well a sire line has combined with a tail-female line. There are generally too few crosses of a sire or sire line over a mare and her immediate tail-female ancestors and descendants to calculate a significant figure. There is also no measurement of the relationship between the distaff side of the pedigree of the sire and the distaff side of the pedigree of the broodmare sire. We do, however, find that there is a tendency for nicks to perpetuate through sire lines and broodmare sire lines, not necessarily because of specific genetic contribution from the two male ancestors (which in theory diminishes by 50% with each generation removed), but because of common affinities. For example, if Seattle Slew works well over Buckpasser and Mr. Prospector, it would not be surprising if a stallion with Seattle Slew and Buckpasser also works with Mr. Prospector. So the nick does in fact tend to reflect more general pedigree affinities.

Overall, a nick is a reflection of one aspect of the pedigree, and should not be followed without careful regard to other factors. However, as our studies have shown, there is a strong correlation between a high nick rating and success at stakes level.

For those that are wanting to consider all parts of the pedigree when making their mating decisions, we would recommend the TrueNicks Key Ancestors report.

While the TrueNicks rating measures the effectiveness of a sire line when crossed with a broodmare sire line, the Key Ancestors Report focuses on how male and female ancestors in sires' pedigrees interact with mares that are closely related to your mare. For any group of related mares, there are ancestors that contribute to success just as there are ancestors that are deleterious to success. This report identifies these positive and negative ancestors so that you can plan matings accordingly.

The Key Ancestors Report considers the entire pedigree—all male and female ancestors—and identifies the key ancestors to seek out or avoid in the pedigrees of stallions in prospective matings. The report also provides a statistical profile of superior offspring produced from mares that are closely related to your mare.



Run your own complimentary reports at TrueNicks.com, or contact Ian Tapp at +1 (859) 276 6810 or Byron Rogers at +1 (859) 276 6716, or email us at info@truenicks.com for more information.

TrueNicks is a Thoroughbred pedigree nicking program designed to help you make better breeding decisions. Put the benefits of TrueNicks to work for you:

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