Why are Forecasts Always Wrong?

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This question is still asked quite often by the general public and I thought this month we should examine that question further. The state of weather forecasting and meteorology has changed dramatically over the past 10 to 20 years so one would hope those changes have lead to more accurate forecasts.

Lets' see if that's true.

The reason the question, "why are forecasters always wrong" or some iteration of that, is still frequently heard, is: it's human nature for people to remember the bad forecasts or missed events.

For example, if your local weather forecaster is calling for 6 to 12 inches of snow and high winds and you end up with one inch of snow you remember that. Your kids remind you because they thought school would be canceled and the talk at the local store or water cooler is of the blown forecast. Yet, next week when the same forecaster calls for 6 to 12 inches of snow and you receive that, there is not nearly the same recognition of the good forecast received compared to the poor one.

Is that fair? Probably not. However, as a meteorologist I can say I'm in one of the few professions where I can be wrong 50 percent of the time and still have a job!

So lets' delve into this issue further. hopefully, most Turf readers do not rely solely on television or radio for weather. As has been mentioned in several past articles, your job is highly dependent on weather so hopefully you have a professional source of information. I'm sure you watch the local news for weather forecasts. Who doesn't? The meteorologist who is giving you the forecast probably spent less than an hour actually studying weather maps and preparing the forecast. The reason is, they simply don't have the time. The prime time meteorologist arrives around 1 p.m. in the afternoon; spend an hour or so catching up, answering e-mail, etc; then may have to attend a station meeting which could last up to another hour. suddenly it's 3 p.m. and they have to on the air at 5 p.m. Hopefully they can spend from 3 to 4 p.m. forecasting before preparations begin for the evening show. however, if they're expected at the zoo of the fair for a remote shot they may lose that hour. Now it's 6:30 p.m. and time for dinner and a break. Most new forecasting information does not come in until after 9 p.m., so that does not give them enough time to update things before the 10 p.m. show. So there you have it. Despite all the super Doppler radar, storm tracker, weather tracer, 4-D fly through equipment they can buy, it can't take the place of a meteorologist sitting down to study maps and data.

In today's world of TV meteorology, it's this writer's opinion, the meteorologist is expected to be an on air "personality" first and meteorologist second. While many TV stations promote and emphasize accuracy, they do not promote an environment where this claim can be fostered. that's not to say all TV meteorologists are created equal. Some find ways to work around the requirements of being a "personality."

Many people also turn to the newspaper to check the latest forecast. this method is inherently flawed as well. the morning paper you pick off your doorstep was printed last night, most likely before midnight. The forecast you read in that paper was likely prepared by a meteorologist working for a private weather company.

This meteorologist was on a deadline as well, and the private provider probably needed to have that forecast to the paper by 6 p.m. That means the forecast you're reading at 8 a.m. today was prepared by someone yesterday afternoon. since then, substantial new weather data has been collected and there's a good chance the forecast you are reading is out of date and perhaps substantially inaccurate.

There's no one to point a finger at. When the meteorologist typed the forecast 18 hours ago, they may have done an excellent job. but as everyone knows, the weather can change dramatically in just a few hours so the inaccurate forecasts we may read in our daily paper are due to the method in which they have to be prepared.

So did we answer our headline question? We've probably given you some insight as to why forecasts can be inaccurate, even in these days. And despite all the improvements in equipment and computers, the weather is still very difficult to predict.

There have been documented accuracy improvements in mid and long-range forecasts and warning notification of severe weather. Because mid and long-range forecasts have improved however, we have TV meteorologists reporting the forecast a week from now as gospel. We've all heard this, "I know it's miserable outside today, but look at a week from now, it's going to be beautiful." Can we really rely on this statement? Unfortunately no, so as a Turf reader your best bet is to rely on multiple sources for your weather forecast. If possible do your own accuracy tracking. You'll soon know what source really is providing you the most accurate weather information.

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