

Countdown to the Cup: Hidden Gem  
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Are you looking for an early Volponi for this year's Breeders' Cup Classic (gr. I)? Well, you just might have seen him on Saturday...on the grass...finishing second. When it comes to the hard-knocking Awesome Gem, who has his good days and his bad days, I can't help hearing Ralph Kramden (yes, I'm a Honeymooners fanatic): "One of these days...one of these days – Bang! Zoom!"

Awesome Gem has shown he can give you that "bang" on any given day, against top-class horses, but he hasn't yet been able to add the "zoom."

Going into the 2002 Breeders' Cup Classic, Volponi had a record of 23-7-7-3, and had won one grade II and two grade IIIs, and placed in a grade I, while going back and forth from grass to dirt, from one mile to 1 1/2 miles.

Awesome Gem has a record of 27-5-10-3, winning one grade II and placing in four grade Is, while going back and forth from grass to dirt to synthetic, from one mile to 1 1/4 miles. He has finished second (beaten a half-length) in the grade I Pacific Classic on Del Mar's Polytrack; second in the grade I Goodwood Stakes (beaten a nose) on Santa Anita's Cushion Track; second (beaten a length) in the Eddie Read Handicap on Del Mar's turf; and third (behind Curlin and Hard Spun) in the Breeders' Cup Classic on a sloppy dirt track at Monmouth.

To show just how versatile he is, he has finished in the money going:

6 1/2 furlongs on dirt at Del Mar  
1 1/8 miles on turf at Del Mar  
1 1/16 miles on Polytrack at Del Mar  
1 1/4 miles on Polytrack at Del Mar  
1 mile on turf at Del Mar  
1 mile on dirt at Santa Anita

1 1/16 miles on dirt at Santa Anita  
1 mile on turf at Santa Anita  
1 1/8 miles on Cushion Track at Santa Anita  
1 1/16 miles on Cushion Track at Hollywood  
1 1/16 miles on turf at Hollywood  
1 1/4 miles on dirt (slop) at Monmouth  
1 1/8 miles on Tapeta at Golden Gate  
1 1/16 miles on Tapeta at Golden Gate

Granted, he doesn't win a lot, but neither did Volponi, and it only takes one race for a horse to run the race of his life, as Volponi did in the Classic. If Craig Dollase can get him to peak and run the best race of his life on Nov. 7, he has proven he can run with the best horses in the country. In his victory in the San Fernando Stakes, he defeated eventual two-time Sprint champion Midnight Lute and multiple graded stakes winner Brother Derek. In addition to finishing third to Curlin, he's been second to Kip Deville, beaten a length; second to Student Council, beaten a half-length; and third to Well Armed and Heatseeker, beaten 1 1/2 lengths. Even in the Breeders' Cup Mile, in which he was in tight quarters, he was beaten only 4 1/4 lengths by Goldikova. He has finished ahead of Lava Man, Street Sense, Lawyer Ron, Any Given Saturday, Tiago, and Monterrey Jazz.

So, if he should keep moving forward off his strong, fast-closing second in Saturday's Eddie Read, gets back on the synthetic surface, and puts it all together on Breeders' Cup day, he could be very live to win or at least finish in the money in the Classic. Yes, it's a stretch, but we're talking about a 40-1 or 50-1 shot right now in a year when who knows who will be running in the Classic. West Point also has a top older horse in Macho Again, but he has not exactly distinguished himself on synthetic surfaces, and even if he does run in the Classic, there's nothing wrong with running two.

The bottom line on Awesome Gen is, he'll like the track, he'll like the distance, he has the right running style, he has a hungry veteran rider who has already won the Classic, and he's rounding into perhaps the best form of his career, with five straight big efforts on all kinds of surfaces.