

## It might be Awesome Gem's time

By Steve Andersen

Courtesy of The Daily Racing Form

INGLEWOOD, Calif. - The 13-race losing streak that Awesome Gem has amassed since winning an optional claimer at Hollywood Park in June 2007 would alarm most owners and trainers.

What saves the West Point Thoroughbreds partnership and trainer Craig Dollase from panic is the company that Awesome Gem has kept for most of that nearly two-year period. Eight of those losses have been second- or third-place finishes in stakes, including a third in the 2007 Breeders' Cup Classic at Monmouth Park.

"He's always right there," Dollase said. "It's been a while between wins."

Awesome Gem was "right there" in the Grade 3 Berkeley Handicap at Golden Gate Fields on May 25, rallying late to finish a neck behind longshot winner Autism Awareness.

A narrow loss may not be as acceptable in Saturday's \$250,000 Californian Stakes at Hollywood Park. Dollase and the West Point team would like to see Awesome Gem in the \$700,000 Hollywood Gold Cup on July 11.

"We've got to get him used to being in the winner's circle," Dollase said.

A 6-year-old gelding, Awesome Gem races as a closer. He has 4 wins in 24 starts and earnings of \$1,242,882. By far, the 2007 season remains his best. He won the Grade 2 San Fernando Breeders' Cup Stakes, finished second in the San Diego Handicap, the \$1 million Pacific Classic, and Goodwood Stakes, and was beaten 9 1/4 lengths by Curlin in the BC Classic.

Last year was essentially a bust. Awesome Gem earned \$88,522 and finished sixth as a 34-1 outsider in the Breeders' Cup Mile at Santa Anita. He ended the year with a 12th-place finish as a 100-1 shot in the \$2 million Hong Kong Mile in the Far East.

Reviewing the year, Dollase summarized that Awesome Gem may have been turned off by racing.

"I think he lost interest," he said.

This year, Awesome Gem was a fast-closing fourth in the Grade 3 Inglewood Handicap on turf here in April, and followed with the narrow loss at Golden Gate Fields.

The Californian will be Awesome Gem's first start on a synthetic track in Southern California since a seventh in the Pacific Classic last August.

Awesome Gem is part of a field of 12 in the Grade 2 Californian. The race has drawn a sizable field largely because of the absence of a standout in the handicap division in California this year.

Einstein, who won the Santa Anita Handicap in March, starts in the Grade 1 Stephen Foster Handicap at Churchill Downs on Saturday. Ball Four, Rail Trip, and Dakota Phone, the first three finishers of the Grade 2 Mervyn LeRoy Handicap here in May, are part of the Californian field. Mast Track, the winner of the Hollywood Gold Cup last year but winless in five starts this year, was a surprise entrant on Wednesday.

A large field should result in a quick pace for Awesome Gem.

"He's coming into the race the right way," Dollase said. "There's some pace and he needs some pace. It will be nice to have a target to run at."