

North County Times/The Californian

HORSE RACING: Del Mar notes

By JEFF NAHILL - Staff Writer

DEL MAR ---- There are horse races and then there are horse races. Friday night's \$92,610 Wickerr Handicap was quite a race.

When the dust had settled five horses were within a neck at the finish line of the one mile race on the Jimmy Durante Turf Course.

One Union (\$19.80) edged Awesome Gem by a nose. It was another nose back to Dark Islander, another nose to Worldly and another nose back to fifth-place Stoneside.

The photo to declare a winner took several minutes because the horses were so close to each other, but the winner was clear.

One Union went straight to the front under jockey Victor Espinoza. He ran through fractions of 23.06 seconds, 46.82, 1:10.67 and 1:22.42 before hitting the wire in 1:34.09.

"When they left the gate it was obvious we were going (to the front)," said winning trainer Richard Mandella. "He settled down and rated nice on the lead. He showed some gameness."

One Union was being attacked on all sides, but he stuck his nose out at the wire.

The 5-year-old son of Dixie Union has always been a decent sort, but beset by injury. He finished fourth to Steve Wonderboy in the 2005 Del Mar Futurity. In 2006, he finished second in a division of the Oceanside Stakes before returning this year with a second and third in minor stakes on the grass at Hollywood Park.

"He's always been a good horse," Mandella said. "He's had a few problems in his life and he's the real thing.

"I did have confidence he would run great."

Mandella said he would probably look at the Del Mar Handicap at a mile on the turf for One Union's next race.

Runner-up Awesome Gem, owned by West Point Thoroughbreds, suffered another heartbreaking defeat. The 5-year-old gelding trained by Craig Dollase finished second for the eighth time in 18 career races. It was the third time in four tries on grass that he was second.

Awesome Gem settled near the back of the pack early in the race under jockey Tyler Baze and came running at the top of the lane. He was bumped by Becrux in midstretch and bumped again by Stoneside near the wire.

"I'm very happy," Dollase said. "It was a good comeback race for him. That'll set him up for something."

That "something" will be the \$1 million Pacific Classic on Aug. 24. Awesome Gem finished second in last year's Classic to Student Council.

Carryover-mania

Del Mar might have a solution to its downward turn in handle in the form of a Pick Six carryover.

Del Mar's handle was down 5.5 percent after the first eight days. Saturday's handle figures to be up with a two-day carryover of \$540,092.97 in the Pick Six.

Friday's sequence featured all double-digit payoffs ---- but none higher than \$20 ----and one favorite in Little Boss Chick (\$4.60), who took the sixth race.

Saturday's Pick Six sequence, which starts in the fifth race, figures to be just as tough, especially the featured Grade II San Clemente Handicap at one mile on the turf course for 3-year-old fillies.

The field is head by Honeymoon Handicap winner Misty Ocean and Iowa Oaks winner Storm Mesa, who will be making her turf debut for Midwest trainer Bret Calhoun.

Others to watch in the race include Missit, Sensational Love, Bel Air Sizzle, Tasha's Miracle and Seattle Smooth.

Spot play

Staff writer Jeff Nahill's spot play for Saturday: Didn't come close on Friday as trainer Barry Abrams won the fourth race and not the third like we needed. Last year we used trainer Ron Ellis' Fire Wood for one of these plays. Lo and behold, Fire Wood (No. 1) is making a comeback in Saturday's sixth race. He has the rail and good turf jockey in Jose Valdivia Jr. Play \$25 to win and back-wheel the exacta with the rest of the field (\$16).

Saturday's wagers: \$41

Friday's result: Minus \$30

Season: Plus \$20.60