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Wickerr a start for Awesome Gem

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DEL MAR, Calif. - Racing a mile on turf is not Awesome Gem's best trip. Over the last year, he has proven to be among the best older horses in the nation in longer races on the main track, finishing third in the 1 1/4-mile Breeders' Cup Classic at Belmont Park and finishing second in three other graded stakes, the shortest of which was at 1 1/16 miles.

When Awesome Gem starts in the \$85,000 Wickerr Handicap over a mile on turf at Del Mar on Friday, trainer Craig Dollase will be looking toward the future as much as the race itself.

"He'll come running at the end," Dollase said. "I think it's a good comeback for him. I want to get him back to his old self."

Owned by West Point Thoroughbreds, Awesome Gem, 5, makes his first start since finishing seventh in the \$1 million Santa Anita Handicap in March. He was considered a contender for that race, but finished 7 1/4 lengths behind Heatseeker. The loss gave Dollase a reason to give Awesome Gem a break.

"He wasn't the same," he said.

The last time Awesome Gem raced over a mile on turf, he finished second in the Grade 3 Sir Beaufort Stakes in 2006. Race winner Kip Deville won the Breeders' Cup Mile last fall.

Awesome Gem drew the outside post in a field of 10, which displeased Dollase.

Awesome Gem is likely to move at least one post position to the inside. Trainer Darrell Vienna said Cheroot, winner of the Daytona Handicap at Santa Anita in February, would scratch for the California Dreamin Handicap on Aug. 2.

The Wickerr is restricted to horses that have not won a stakes at a mile or farther worth \$50,000 or more to the winner, other than statebred races, since May 1. The clause has left the race with a strong field, including Becrux, who won this race in 2006-07; Dark Islander, winner of the 2006 Oak Tree Derby; Stoneside, winner of the Grade 3 San Simeon Handicap in April; and Lang Field, winner of the Grade 1 Citation Handicap at Hollywood Park last fall.

Becrux is winless in five starts since the 2007 Wickerr. A 6-year-old gelding, he was fifth in the Grade 2 American Handicap at Hollywood Park on June 28, his only start this year.

"He always needs a race or two to get going," trainer Neil Drysdale said. "He has in the past. I'm looking for an improved performance."

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