

Attention Turns to El Camino Real

By Chuck Dybdal

The California Derby at Golden Gate last Saturday left two trainers pleased and one scratching his head, but all are looking ahead to the Grade 3, \$200,000 El Camino Real Derby on Feb. 14.

Trainer Jerry Hollendorfer would like to run the California Derby winner, Chocolate Candy, in the El Camino Real and Santa Anita Derby in preparation for the Kentucky Derby.

O.J. Jauregui was satisfied with Merus Miami's third-place finish after the colt raced wide on both turns and was bothered when Feisty Suances came out and crowded him at the start.

Frank Lucarelli, though, was disappointed by Gallant Son's fifth-place finish and said the horse came back from the race very tired but has rebounded.

Hollendorfer knows how to get runners to Kentucky. He has had three Derby runners: Eye of the Tiger, who finished fifth in 2003; Cause to Believe, 13th in 2006; and Bwana Bull, 15th in 2007. He might have saddled the favorite in 1998, but Event of the Year fractured a knee eight days before the race, and Globalize was a late scratch in 2000 after he was kicked by his pony two days before the race.

Hollendorfer has won the Kentucky Oaks twice, with Lite Light in 1991 and Pike Place Dancer in 1996.

He sees Chocolate Candy, a homebred owned by Sid and Jenny Craig, as a viable Derby candidate. The colt is by the undefeated Candy Ride, who won Grade 1 races in his native Argentina and the Pacific Classic in the United States. Crownette, Chocolate Candy's dam, won the Santa Ysabel at Santa Anita and had a pair of stakes placings. All four of her foals are winners, including the stakes-placed Crowning Storm.

"He's progressing," Hollendorfer said of Chocolate Candy. "A horse takes you to the Derby. You don't take him. He's winning stakes races, and that makes him a candidate."

Chocolate Candy already has \$100,000 in graded-stakes earnings, having also finished third in the Grade 1 CashCall Futurity at Hollywood Park last month. He previously won the ungraded Real Quiet Stakes.

"It's very important," Hollendorfer said of the graded-stakes earnings, which is the criteria for entry into the Derby if more than 20 are entered. "That's the only thing that gets you in the race. If he can knock off a graded-stakes win" - such as the El Camino - "and win at Santa Anita, he'll be in good position."

"A lot of horses come to hand now, and as time goes on you see the standout horses. You just try to keep picking off the spots you can and hope to end up in the 20-horse field for the Kentucky Derby. Everyone knows it's a difficult thing to do."

Jauregui saw many positives from Merus Miami's performance. The colt had won his first two starts, a maiden sprint and the Gold Rush Stakes at one mile at Golden Gate on Dec. 20, before finishing third in the California Derby.

"I'm more excited by this race than the last one," he said. "He got tested. This time, he had to really put out. He came out of the race good. He had a little trouble and got tired, but he'll be better down the line because of this race."

"He's got a lot of improvement still, but my horse just ran third to a very good horse. I know my horse can compete after all that. He's got a big future. There are a lot of derbies to run in."

Gallant Son had nothing left in the stretch after moving into contention turning for home, and finished fifth - a disappointment for a horse who was beaten only 3 1/2 lengths in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile.

"He got a lot more tired than I thought he would," Lucarelli said. "He hit a brick wall at the eighth pole. I've never seen him as tired. He came out of it good, but I felt sorry for him. As he walked back to the barn, his head was hanging."

Lucarelli said that in retrospect Gallant Son probably needed a couple of more works. He said he will put three good works into the colt before the El Camino.