

Santa Monica Stakes gets super-sized

By: Brad Free



ARCADIA, Calif. – Is the Santa Monica Stakes staging a comeback, or is a refreshingly large field this year a single-season aberration?

Twelve fillies and mares entered the Grade 2 sprint on Saturday at Santa Anita, making it the biggest Santa Monica field in at least three decades and a welcome change to a race with only five starters each of the past four years.

A large field boosts the odds for potential favorite Hard Not to Love, winner of the seven-furlong Santa Monica last year and trying to be the first repeat winner since Past Forgetting in 1988. It will not be easy for Hard Not to Love against Grade 1 winner Fair Maiden and listed winner Qahira, but not as tough without the beast of the division.

:: Want to get your Past Performances for free? [Click to learn more.](#)

Gamine, runaway winner of the Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Sprint, posted her first comeback workout early this week and does not return until spring. So where did all the female sprinters come from?

Two main factors contributed to the Santa Monica surge, according to Santa Anita racing secretary Chris Merz: "I just think we have a lot of 3-year-old [fillies] that just turned 4, and the division without Gamine is pretty wide open. People want to take a shot at it."

What if Gamine entered? Merz laughed, and said, "I think the field would maybe have been cut in half."

Six of the 12 Santa Monica starters are 4-year-olds, including Fair Maiden, the Eoin Harty trainee who crushed the age-restricted La Brea on Dec. 26. History suggests Fair Maiden need be taken seriously facing older fillies and mares on Saturday.

Four of the last seven La Brea winners that ran back in the Santa Monica won again. Fair Maiden, 4 for 6 in sprints, will be ridden again by Ricardo Gonzalez, while the likely Santa Monica favorite is a mare Gonzalez rode last time.

Hard Not to Love, 5 for 6 in sprints and 0 or 5 in routes, finished a distant third in a route last out. It was better than it looks. Trainer John Shirreffs was not exaggerating by much describing her performance as "awesome."

The one-eyed Hard Not to Love is tricky to ride. "Ricky broke her like you would a normal horse," Shirreffs recalled. "Bad idea. That puts her on the engine, and that's not her style."

She dueled inside the first three furlongs, sucked back and went around to re-engage, dropped back, re-rallied, and finished well. "She's one of those horses you kind of just let her fall out of the gate and don't encourage her," Shirreffs said.

Juan Hernandez takes over on Hard Not to Love, whose style is to rally from off the pace. Winner of the La Brea and Santa Monica last winter, Hard Not to Love enters this year's race as a borderline standout, at odds significantly higher than her 3-5 price last year.

Qahira won the Kalookan Queen Stakes last out under a confident ride from Joel Rosario. She is trained by Bob Baffert, who also entered potential pacesetter Merneith and Golden Principal. Others include Miss Stormy D, Secret Keeper, Amuse, Proud Emma, Pharoah's Heart, Bidy Duke, and Bohemian Bourbon.