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Santa Anita | Posted 2/25/2010, 5:07 pm



## Without a standout, Sham hard to predict

By Steve Andersen

ARCADIA, Calif. - Jockey Martin Garcia has seen enough.

When he rode The Program to a nose win in an allowance race on Feb. 3, he convinced himself that the colt was capable of winning a graded stakes. The opportunity for Garcia to confirm that arrives late Saturday afternoon at Santa Anita in the \$150,000 Sham Stakes for 3-year-olds.

"He's going to win," Garcia said. "He's been training very good. I think he can go a distance. You can do whatever you want with him. You can be on the lead or off the pace."

Garcia's confidence is not universally shared among the other riders in the Grade 3 Sham Stakes, which is run over 1 1/8 miles and is a key prep to the \$750,000 Santa Anita Derby on April 4.

Some of the other riders simply don't know enough about their horses under racing conditions to predict victory.

Garcia is riding The Program for the fifth time, but jockeys Garrett Gomez and Mike Smith are riding their horses in races for the first time - Gomez aboard Outlaw Man and Smith aboard expected favorite Nextdoorneighbor.

For Gomez, a crash study course and a quick phone call with trainer Kenneth McPeck are needed to prepare for the Sham.

"I don't know anything about him," Gomez said of Outlaw Man. "I'll look and see what he looks like on paper. I'll talk to Kenny, and he'll tell me a few things he wants me to know."

As for the rest, Gomez said it will unfold when the race gets under way. Outlaw Man is making his stakes debut and first start on a synthetic track, having won a maiden race over 1 1/8 miles on turf here Jan. 27. Gomez is likely to have Outlaw Man a few lengths behind the pace, in a handy position.

"When we leave [the gate], he'll tell me what he's comfortable with and what's he's not comfortable with," Gomez said.

Smith has a slightly better feel for Nextdoorneighbor, having been aboard the colt in recent workouts. Trained by Mike Machowsky, Nextdoorneighbor is making his stakes debut in the Sham. On Jan. 24, he scored a convincing win by four lengths in a maiden race over 1 1/16 miles under jockey Rafael Bejarano.

"I'm excited about getting on him," Smith said. "He's a good-looking horse, good balance, and a great turn of foot. I want to see what he can do. If he takes the next step forward, he could be any kind."

Smith has some race experience with Nextdoorneighbor. On Jan. 24, he was aboard Exfusion who led but faded to finish sixth behind Nextdoorneighbor.

"I was on the lead the other day, and he went by me," he said.

Bejarano has opted to ride Setsuko in the Sham, which has drawn a field of 10, an

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indication that the race lacks a standout.

Trained by Richard Mandella, Setsuko is making his stakes debut. After winning a maiden race over 1 1/16 miles at Hollywood Park in his fifth start, Setsuko returned to finish second in an allowance race on turf.

"He's going to be tough," Bejarano said. "I worked him the other day, and he worked behind horses. Hopefully, there is some speed in there and I can come from behind."

Bejarano and Alex Solis, who rides Alpie's Bet, had to make choices for the Sham. Solis rode Outlaw Man to his Jan. 27 win and was aboard Alpie's Bet when the colt was second to Caracortado in the California Breeders' Champion Stakes on Dec. 26.

Caracortado returned to win the Grade 2 Robert Lewis Stakes. Alpie's Bet returned to win a one-mile maiden race on turf last month with Solis aboard.

"He's developing and he's putting it together both mentally and physically," Solis said of Alpie's Bet. "We all have high hopes."

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