

Contessa returns a winner

It has been a long time since trainer Gary Contessa stabled a string of horses full time in south Florida. But for Contessa, it was worth the wait when his Hatfield captured Saturday's Gulfstream Park Turf Sprint.

"I was stabled at Hialeah in 1993 and raced and had a pretty good meet at Gulfstream that winter," Contessa said by phone from New York on Monday. "That was the last time I was down there. This was the first winter since then that I had the right combination of horses to come back."

Contessa has 15 horses stabled at Gulfstream and plans to fill out the rest of his 18 allotted stalls shortly. Hatfield is the best of the bunch, although the trainer still has high hopes for Starforaday, who finished fourth one race earlier on Saturday in the Grade 3 Mr. Prospector.

Hatfield won the Turf Sprint over a yielding course, which Contessa felt gave his colt a distinct advantage over the other key contenders in the race.

"To be honest, I was surprised management kept the race on the grass," said Contessa. "I kept waiting for the announcement - one which fortunately never came - that they were taking it off, because I was planning to switch his shoes if he had to run on a sloppy main track. He's a little horse, he doesn't go 700 pounds soaking wet, and I think smaller, lighter-moving horses like Hatfield do better on soft turf courses, which kind of suck you under."

Contessa says he plans to keep Hatfield on the grass this season with the Breeders' Cup Turf at Churchill Downs the main goal.

"He's kind of a fragile horse," Contessa said. "He had surgery to take chips out of his ankles last spring, and I think racing on the grass will help keep him sounder. Besides, it's kind of a bonus plan if his race is taken off the turf, because he can run on dirt, too. The Breeders' Cup is so far down the road I really don't want to think about it too much now. I just hope I can keep him together until then."