

Ride On Curlin's exercise rider glad for second chance

Jennie Rees, USA TODAY Sports 10:44 a.m. EDT June 5, 2014



(Photo: Photo courtesy Mike Kane)

ELMONT, N.Y. — Bryan Beccia didn't know if he'd ever step foot on a racetrack again, and didn't know if he even wanted to.

Today the long-time exercise rider not only is back at the track, he's back on the Triple Crown trail, this time with Preakness runner-up Ride On Curlin, who will try to upset Kentucky Derby and Preakness winner California Chrome in Saturday's Belmont Stakes.

Beccia served five years of a 25-year sentence, mostly at Lexington's Blackburn Correctional Complex, after pleading guilty to possessing, trafficking and making methamphetamine in 2006 in Middletown. He was not licensed to participate in horse racing at the time of his arrest.

It was quite the fall from five years earlier, when he was exercise rider for Kentucky Derby winner Monarchos, who then was sixth in the Preakness and third in the Belmont behind beaten Derby favorite Point Given.

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For Beccia, who regained his track license two years ago, it's not about at At age 48, it's not about getting another chance with a big-time 3-year-old for Beccia, who regained his track license two year's ago. It's about getting a do-over in life.

"I'm very humbled, very honored to be a part of this," he said after Ride On Curlin trained at Belmont. "Who would ever have thought I'd be back as a part of this again? Or even to get the opportunity to be on a horse on the backside?"

Beccia is intent on doing all he can to ensure both the horse and he stay grounded.

Ride On Curlin, the Arkansas Derby runner-up who was a troubled seventh in the Kentucky Derby, has been feeling his oats. He went up on his hind legs on his way to train Preakness morning and did the same several times after arriving at Belmont Park from Pimlico. While that's a sign of a horse who's feeling good, trainers and riders prefer the animals show their happiness while firmly on four feet.

After the latest high-flying escapade — on display in a photo on Ride On Curlin's Facebook page — trainer Billy Gowan enlisted a pony to accompany the star of his four-horse stable.

"I understand he's just happy, but you've got to keep them under control, too," Beccia said. "Actually, it doesn't feel like he's up that high. But he is. I don't ever take a hold of the bridle, the reins or anything. I've just got mane and yoke. So it's not like I'm pulling him up. If you look at the picture, the reins are completely looped."

Beccia, who also has ridden as a jockey, long was known as a good horseman who needed to take a tight hold on himself. Even before he galloped Monarchos, he had a long record of arrests on alcohol and drug charges. The meth arrest — his second in a year — was his lowest point.

"When I hit bottom I bounced twice," Beccia said. "... Time to grow up and get it together and realize that life is not one big party. It's not even worth it. I went back to my childhood: When the street lights go on, I'm home. I don't know how people stay out all night anymore. ...

"I've had a few life-changing experiences over the last 10 years. Time to get it together. Either that or land in jail or wind up dead."

His wake-up call?

"I was tired of going to jail, tired of living like I was living," he said. "Nov. 21, 2006 I put my arms up and said, 'I quit. That's it. I'm done.' It was the last time I got arrested. I called my lawyer on the way down there and he said, 'Well, I'm on vacation now for Thanksgiving. When I get back I'll get you out.' I said, 'No you won't. Just leave me where I'm at.' "

After a year in a substance-abuse program, Beccia was sent to Blackburn Correctional Complex, which is home to a Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation facility.

"I was giving riding lessons," he said. "I broke a Clydesdale. They sent my boots and helmet in. Then they needed someone with horse experience at the Horse Park, so I went to work there."

Beccia was paroled after five years.

"I completed every program they made available to me; some I did twice so I wouldn't miss anything," he said. "I did everything I was supposed to, and haven't missed a step."

In August 2012, the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission's License Review Committee voted to grant Beccia a racetrack license, with conditions including drug treatment and drug testing.

"To be honest, I thought never again in my life," he said. "It was not even a thought in my mind about getting a track license. And, I really didn't want to come back to the racetrack. There's no easier reason to have a party. A horse runs good, there's always a reason for everyone to go out and party. And if they run bad, there's another reason. The racetrack lifestyle is not cut out for too many people, especially if someone has an addiction problem.

"So even when I got my license back, I stayed out at the farm. But every week, my phone would ring, someone asking me to come back in" to get on horses at Churchill Downs.

He started on Ride On Curlin on Jan. 2 at Oaklawn Park in Arkansas. Gowan and Beccia go way back, having worked as exercise riders for Hall of Fame trainer Jack Van Berg.

"He's obviously a good hand on a horse, and he's light," Gowan said. "He's good with times too. I told him to work this horse (seven furlongs) in 1:28 and he went in 1:28. I told him to go the first quarter in 27 (seconds), the last quarter in 24 the other day. That's exactly what he did."

Beccia says he's in a great place today, and not just being on the Triple Crown trail again.

"I wouldn't trade my life for nothing right now," he said. "Best I've ever been in my life — physically, emotionally and financially."

Belmont Stakes

6:52 p.m. Saturday, NBC-3

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