

California Chrome owner a sore loser

By Beth Harris, AP

NEW YORK – California Chrome went home to the West Coast on Sunday with a bandaged right front foot – and no Triple Crown – after bumping another horse leaving the Belmont Stakes starting gate.

Steve Coburn, who co-owns California Chrome, was still smarting, too.

He was irked Belmont winner Tonalist didn't run in either of the first two legs of the Triple Crown. After the race, he complained others took "the coward's way out" by skipping the Derby and/or the Preakness.

A day later, Coburn was unrepentant.

"It's not fair to these horses that are running to entertain these people in all three legs of the Triple Crown," he said. "It's not fair to them to have somebody just show up at the last minute and run. I may have gone off half-cocked yesterday, but that's the way I feel."

Under Coburn's premise, there would have been just three horses in the \$1.5 million Belmont, making it unlikely the third-largest crowd of 102,199 would have shown up or that a record \$19,105,877 would have been wagered on-track.

California Chrome, General a Rod and Ride On Curlin were the only horses to run in the Derby, Preakness and Belmont. General a Rod finished seventh and Ride On Curlin did not finish.

Art Sherman, the 77-year-old trainer of California Chrome, distanced himself from Coburn's comments.

"Horses aren't cowards and the people aren't cowards," he said. "He was at the heat of the moment. Don't forget he's a fairly new owner. Sometimes your emotions get in front of you. He hasn't been in the game long and hasn't had any bad luck."

Coburn and Perry Martin named their racing operation Dumb Ass Partners, with California Chrome the lone horse in their stable. The chestnut colt has earned \$3,317,800 this year and brought a six-race winning streak into the Belmont.

California Chrome had smooth trips in winning the Kentucky Derby and Preakness to set up a shot at racing's first Triple Crown in 36 years. But he had a rough trip in the 1 1/2-mile Belmont on Saturday, getting a chunk of flesh torn from his foot after bumping with Matterhorn coming out of the starting gate. California Chrome finished in a dead heat for fourth with Wicked Strong.

"It was kind of scary. You come back and see a horse bleeding from the foot," Sherman said. "He's never had anything wrong with him. We've been awful fortunate."

Sherman said California Chrome has a superficial wound that should heal in two to three weeks. The colt will then rest for six to seven weeks after a tough Triple Crown campaign that involved running in three races at different tracks and distances over five weeks.

His camp plans to point him toward the Breeders' Cup this fall at Santa Anita.

Sherman thought Coburn would apologize for his comments. Instead, the outspoken co-owner went even further Sunday.

"It wouldn't be fair if I played basketball with a child in a wheelchair because I got an unfair advantage," Coburn said. "If your horse is good enough to run in the Belmont, where was he in the Kentucky Derby and Preakness? It says Triple Crown, not one out of two, one out of three or two out of three."

Sherman said, "I can't make excuses. That's not really what you should do in these type of races."

Frenchman Christophe Clement, who won his first Triple Crown race with Totalist, declined to comment on Coburn's remarks.

Coburn had predicted California Chrome would win the Triple Crown.

"If they want to call me a sore loser, I don't care," he said.

Horses are made eligible for the Triple Crown races in January. Owners and trainers of horses not nominated can pay a late fee of \$6,000 in March to get in. The 20-horse field for the Kentucky Derby is decided by a points system, with horses earning points for running in prep races. The Preakness and Belmont have maximum fields of 14, but no points system is used.

It's common for horses to drop in and out of the Triple Crown series. In 1978, when Affirmed won the Triple Crown, the Belmont had a five-horse field. Two of the colt's rivals did not run in the first two legs and one only ran in the Derby.

In 1977, Seattle Slew won the Triple Crown. The Belmont had eight horses, and five did not run in the first two legs. One ran only in the Preakness, and one other besides Slew raced in all three legs.

On Saturday, second-place finisher Commissioner was new to the Triple Crown series. Winner Totalist wasn't ready for the Derby, so trainer Clement prepared him for the Belmont.

"California Chrome was running with tough, fresh horses that were waiting in the wings, and that's what happens," Sherman said. "We all know when you're on this trail you got to have an iron horse."

The veteran trainer hopes California Chrome's owners will keep him running next year as a 4-year-old. He credited the colt

for having a lot of talent and taking his handlers on an exciting ride.

“This is one of them races that we couldn’t win,” Sherman said, “but he didn’t disgrace us any.”