

Cheltenham Festival Guide

2018

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Introduction

My name is Daniel....and I have a Cheltenham addiction.

That's it, I never get past Step 1 of the 12 steps!! Frankly, I don't think I want to be cured. But it must be an addiction or why else, every February, would I dust off the formbooks and against my own better judgement, set about again in compiling the following verbose analysis of the best 4 days of the year.

As The Boxer says "A man hears what he wants to hear, and disregards the rest" ...please disregard any of what follows, but enjoy the week, enjoy the racing, and be lucky.

As ever, this Guide would never get written without the fantastic support of my wonderful wife Tanya. She missed last year's meeting, causing a merciful let-up in the pace of socialising of our group that even had old Andy back on the bridle. This year she will arrive mid-meet and doubtless we'll all be feeling the whip (metaphorically I hope...) pretty quickly thereafter. At least the evenings will rise above the desperate corner of Ladbrokes on the High Street trying to get the last winner at Wolverhampton (there were times when I was so lonesome I took some comfort there...).

This year, as previously, this guide is free of charge. If you either want to show some contribution for the labours involved, or offer up some luck money should you be fortunate enough to profit from next week's fun, then please do feel free to support our charity of choice this festival, which is the Irish Injured Jockeys.

You can read more about this [very worthy cause here](#):

And if so minded, you can [offer a donation here](#):



Finally, for my good friend Phil, if you decide to run Bigmartre in the JLT, and thus a first festival runner, then the very very best of luck.

Happy punting

Dan

Summary of Selections

Here is a summary for those not wanting to wade through the waffle. Stakes are on a scale of 1 to 10.

Tuesday				
Race 1	Getabird	8pts	WIN	6-4
Race 2	Petit Mouchoir	6pts	WIN	9-4
Race 3	Coo Star Sivola	6pts	WIN	10-1
	Beware The Bear	2pts	WIN	16-1
Race 4	The "Naughty Shorties"			
	Buveur D'air - Apple's Jade - Samcro-Laurina	8pts	WIN	13-2
	John Constable b/without Buveur D'Air	2pts	EW	20-1
	Verdana Blue b/without Buveur D'Air	1pt	EW	33-1
Race 5	Jer's Girl b/without Apples Jade	3pts	EW	10-1
Race 6	Jury Duty	6pts	WIN	6-1
Race 7	Barney Dwan	4pts	WIN	9-1
	Any Second Now	3pts	WIN	8-1

Wednesday				
Race 1	Samcro	8pts	WIN	4-5
Race 2	Presenting Percy	7pts	WIN	5-2
Race 3	William Henry	6pts	WIN	10-1
	Sire de Berlais	2pts	WIN	20-1
Race 4	Politilogue b/without Altior	4pts	WIN	7-2
Race 5	Cause of Causes	9pts	WIN	11-4
	Urgent de Gregaine	2pts	WIN	16-1
Race 6	Mitchouka	5pts	WIN	14-1
	Kuraka (if absent: Espirit de Somoza)	2pts	EW	20-1
Race 7	Hollowgraphic	6pts	WIN	6-1

Thursday				
Race 1	Invitation Only	6pts	WIN	7-2
Race 2	Who Dares Wins	10pts	WIN	14-1
	Mine Now	2pts	EW	33-1
Race 3	Un de Sceaux	6pts	WIN	9-4
Race 4	Sam Spinner	8pts	WIN	5-1
Race 5	General Principle	3pts	EW	33-1
	Mister Whitaker	3pts	WIN	16-1
Race 6	Laurina	6pts	WIN	5-6
Race 7	Mall Dini	6pts	WIN	6-1
	Abolitionist	3pts	WIN	25-1

Friday				
Race 1	Apple's Shakira	6pts	WIN	3-1
Race 2	Flying Tiger	6pts	WIN	14-1
	Mohaayed	2pts	EW	33-1
Race 3	Chef des Obeaux	5pts	WIN	6-1
	Calett Mad	2pts	WIN	20-1
Race 4	Might Bite	6pts	WIN	4-1
	Sub Lieutenant	1pt	EW	50-1
Race 5	Wonderful Charm	6pts	WIN	6-1
Race 6	Blow By Blow	8pts	WIN	20-1
	Hardline	2pts	WIN	20-1
Race 7	Theinval	6pts	WIN	11-1
	Don't Touch It	3pts	WIN	14-1

[Disclaimer](#) – “Horses can run slowly as well as fast”

TUES: Race 1 - The Supreme Novices Hurdle - 2 miles for all-aged novices,

Selected Current Odds: 6-4 Getabird, 5 Kalashnikov, 10 Summerville Boy, 16 Claimantakinforan

“It’s time to play the music, it’s time to light the lights...”, yes, the greatest meeting on earth gets underway with the promise to make you a star, and the likelihood of making you a muppet. Hopefully we won’t be too Fozzie-headed after the traditional Monday night reunions, as we set foot in the betting ring, fully wadded, and ready to make the bookies tremble like Beaker.

The Supreme is the ultimate speed test for novices. Quick hurdling is essential, and as for all races on the Old Course (Tues & Weds), race positioning is key with making up ground very difficult once the field start to freewheel downhill to 3 out.

Willie Mullins has landed more Supremes than Berry Gordy, and his number one pick is usually the start point and end point as far as form analysis goes for his legions of Irish fans. Three wins and two seconds in the last five years tells the tale, and the blind faithful will doubtless be loading up on the unbeaten hurdler Getabird without even a cursory glance at the form. Well I prefer to take a more calculated approach of form analysis – which in this case will simply have me waiting in the same pay-out queue as the back-Willie-blind brigade.

Yes, get your drinks in early for the Arkle because I am expecting some mighty queues after Getabird streaks in. Despite the casual similarities to previous winners Vautour and Douvan, Getabird comes from the traditional Irish point-to-point field, and his running style is the long wind up more familiar with the similarly heritagaged Faugheen.

I thought he was deeply impressive in victory at Punchestown last time. Strictly on the figures it makes him a similar horse to the other big fancies here, but he looked to have a ton in hand, and the manner in which he quickened away from decent horses having cut out the running left a lasting impression.

Value has been hard to come by in these Mullins hotpots in recent years, but there have been some instances where short prices (Vroom Vroom, Lets Dance, Vautour etc) should arguably have been shorter, and I think Getabird has the raw ability to be added to that list, His prominent race-style is the preferred tactical option for Ruby in these races, and I find it hard to think anything will give him a lead down the hill, and even harder to think he’ll be passed afterwards.

All Getabird’s runs have been right handed, and some wayward jinking to the right in his debut point to point in his only left-handed effort would have some believe he could be thrown by the change of direction. At this stage that sounds like punters rationalising why to oppose the favourite rather than meaningful evidence. If we see Ruby trying to decipher the right-hand-screw-rule on the way to the start, then start laying off on the exchanges !!

The home defence has rarely looked as hapless since the Captain Mainwaring days. “Don’t panic” I hear, “what about Kalashnikov?”. Well, Kalashnikov provides the romance angle (not a phrase you’d here too often outside of the Kurdish militia). This strapping novice showed his class on ground that was arguably

too soft when grinding out a win in the top handicap hurdle, the Betfair Hurdle, at Newbury off a mark of 141. That elevates him to the kind of credentials brought to this race by previous Betfair alumni Ballyandy, Darlan, Getmeoutofhere, and My Tent Or Yours.

All got placed in this race, but none were able to win – that may just be a case of when rather than if – but the fact that some of those were potentially great hurdlers and they weren't able to convert here after the Betfair is a worry. With due respect to the small yard of Amy Murphy, I am not sure Kalashnikov is quite a Darlan or a My Tent Or Yours, and he is up against a mighty Mullins machine. Placed at best I fear.

For many years, the Supreme was a washout for top trainer Nicky Henderson, with 25 years separating Flown and Altior. The latter's win put an end to a spell that included 4 consecutive runners-up. He doesn't look like the place to look for the winner, but each way value is feasible.

His runner here Claimantakinforgran was shaping up to be a leading home contender until disappointing up at Musselburgh when a laboured 3rd of 5. On that run he has no chance, but it is worth noting that his build up to last year's festival was hardly impressive, yet he still managed a 3rd place in the bumper here. Year after year after year I get beaten around the head by reminders of the value of festival form, and there could be some value in ignoring that Musselburgh form and concentrating on the festival effort, the yard's track record, and the potentially juicy odds.

Summerville Boy has a soft ground verdict over Kalashnikov at Sandown. There didn't appear to be any excuses that day, so with his victim half his price there must be an assumption that Kalashnikov's Newbury win was a big step forward. That may be a dangerous assumption and Summerville Boy could be fairly priced as a result, if he beats Kalashnikov again, then you'd have to assume he places.

The opener looks set to go down a familiar route, with Ruby donning the pink and putting the bookies in the red. **GETABIRD** has a touch of real class and can get Prestbury Park roaring with the cries of thousands of jubilant Irish followers. If short prices are not your thing, then festival form decrees that Claimantakinforgran may sneak into the frame at reasonable each way odds.

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TUES: Race 2 - The Arkle Chase - 2 miles for novice chasers

Selected Current Odds: 6-4 Footpad, 9-4 Petit Mouchoir, 4 Saint Calvados

The Arkle is the middle leg of the speed treble of Supreme-Arkle-Champion that is so beloved by festival racegoers. The ultimate speed test for young chasers, it is often overlooked that the best form is old form, with the top hurdler in the field often prevailing as top chaser.

This doesn't always hold true when you have a chasing monster like Sprinter Sacre, but many times more often than not, it is basic speed which dominates.

The betting this year suggests that two of last season's best hurdlers: Petit Mouchoir and Footpad will be mixing it along with the left field French import Jeanny-come-lately Saint Calvados.

Footpad is the overwhelming favourite and presents a conundrum. I have always liked this horse since seeing him win a juvenile hurdle at Leopardstown, and he has been 3rd in a Triumph and 4th in the Champion hurdle since. So, he clearly fits the class hurdler requirement.

What has really fired up the punters is the style of his three chasing wins. He is not a Sprinter or even a Saint Calvados in that he doesn't take lengths out of the field with big, bold jumps – rather he is supremely neat and economical, slick at every fence, with the minimum of effort and no semblance of a mistake – more reminiscent of a Best Mate.

His cosy defeat of Petit Mouchoir last time was an impressive display of front running and he deserves to be favourite. Looking for any potential flaws, it is fair to say that his faultless jumping will be put to its greatest test on these undulations and with Saint Calvados likely to set a lung-busting tempo from the get-go. I think he should pass the jumping test ok, but it may put a strain on his stamina.

There was an initially amusing and ultimately interesting commentary box joust on RTE after Footpad won easily over Christmas, with colleagues suggesting to then injured commentator Ruby Walsh that the owners' contracted jockey, Daryl Jacob would be looking forward to the ride. As a Mullins trained horse, and having ridden him at the last two festivals, Ruby clearly wanting to keep the ride was quick to point out that Daryl could also ride (the now injured) Sceau Royal with whom Daryl is very familiar. His colleagues, still looking to wind up Ruby suggested the owners could switch Footpad to the longer JLT so giving themselves and Daryl two chances to win. This is when Ruby was quite frank in expressing his view that Footpad emptied on the hill in the Champion last year, and hence he wouldn't want further than two miles.

Looking back at that Champion Hurdle, Footpad did indeed fade a bit having made his ground from the rear. It is arguable that even in his good last Leopardstown win, his final jump had an element of chance about it, and his last 50 yards just started to look like hard work.

He won't be as aggressively ridden at Cheltenham, but the track and the opposition are likely to make this a similar test to last year's Champion. His jumping class could see him prevail comfortably, but a

few doubts about that final climb might suggest that if anything can get him into a fight then he is beatable.

Petit Mouchoir looks the most likely to serve it up to the favourite. He was the best of these over the smaller obstacles finishing ahead of Footpad in all three clashes. That included a cracking 3rd in the Champion Hurdle when trying to make all. That makes him the trend pick for this race. The big issue of course is his 5 length defeat by Footpad last time out. In Petit Mouchoir's defence, he was coming back from a layoff after a small injury and was consequently having his first run in nearly 4 months and only his second over fences. In that light, it is perfectly plausible that he could overturn that form. Footpad made the most of jumping and fitness by making all, a reversal of the two horses' hurdle tactics, but I'd be surprised if he tried to repeat that tactic here, and this may allow Davy Russell to get a more competitive race position.

On hurdles form Petit has the edge, factoring in some improvement off a lay-off then he is entitled to finish closer to Footpad than last time out, and then with that last climb to the line, perhaps he can finish the better of the two.

The joker in the pack is Harry Whittington's Saint Calvados. My own leg-of-a-horse is with Harry, and I hold him and his yard in the highest regard. He loves this horse and with good reason. His bold jumping front running demolition of fields at Newbury (twice) and Warwick last time had star quality stamped all over them.

The yard think he will handle any better ground here and that his jumping can put them all under stress. I certainly agree with the latter sentiment, although I remain a little concerned that a horse who hits the ground with such enthusiasm, and with a high knee lift may just find quicker ground playing to the advantage of the speedy ex-hurdlers. If he gets his soft ground, which he may well do, then he could be a joy to watch.

In any regard his presence deeply enriches the race both form-wise and importantly tactically as he probably takes out the front-running options for any of his opponents. The heart would love to see Harry win, and this is undoubtedly a special horse, but the history of the Arkle says stay with the quick hurdlers of last year, and that is probably the wiser head-over-heart choice.

Footpad deserves to be favourite, but not to be this short. **PETIT MOUCHOIR** beat him three times over hurdles and with any improvement for that Leopardstown run can force the favourite into a proper scrap here. Good luck to my friend Harry and the team, I will rarely tear up a ticket with such relish should Saint Calvados prevail.

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TUES: Race 3- The Festival Handicap Chase - 3 miles

Selected Current Odds: 8 Gold Present, 10 Coe Star Sivola, 11 Singlefarmpayment, 20 Snow Falcon, Beware the Bear

This handicap will one day prove to be the death of me. Some fairly significant ante-post action was all set to yield a memorable return last year when big tip Singlefarmpayment took it up at the last, only to be run down in a head bobbing finish only fractionally less tear-jerking than Spock's farewell in The Wrath of Khan. Live long and prosper was hardly on the cards after last year's photo finish, and no I'm not still bitter...no, not at all!!

The first of 10 big handicaps during the meeting. For many, these are opportunities to head for the bar and wait for the next championship race, but for me they have become the essential part of a successful Cheltenham. This year, as in previous years, the championship races are dominated by short priced favourites and negotiating the week will require a well-judged strategy of when to pile in and when to stand off. As such, supplementing with 2 handicap winners can turn the whole week in your favour, even one will help.

This handicap should be one of the more accessible as it has some proven powerful traits that make sense. Firstly, the Irish challenge has been almost non-existent for over 10 years. This cannot be sheer coincidence and suggests that the handicapping alignment between Irish and UK ratings, which seems to favour the Irish in hurdle races, tips towards the home challengers in good quality long distance handicaps – indeed until the amazingly well treated Total Recall turned up this year, the Irish record in the similarly framed Hennessey (yes I still call it that) was equally sparse.

That's a rule I would be happy to relax in the face of a compelling Irish challenger, but again this year that looks unlikely. Chief hope would be De Plotting Shed, but he looks much more likely to close today in the novice event.

From within the home challenge, history, and indeed logic, favours youth, with novices or second season chasers hugely favoured as they do not have the long scars of battle, and have not shown as much to the handicappers.

Finally this race. Like the other handicaps, is succumbing to the rising tide of class and entries – and where previously the bottom weights were lethal, now it is so hard to get into the race that it is almost impossible to get in unexposed, and it is the classy types, often nearer the head of the weights who are starting to take over.

The market knows all this, and hence we see Nicky Henderson's Gold Present heading the betting. I really like this horse, he is a quite superb jumper and has a big Grand National chance. Ignore the "F" in his form at Aintree last year in the Topham, that wasn't a fall – he didn't touch a twig the whole way – it was induced by an unavoidable loose horse collision (one of those Aintree things). His excellent jumping almost took him to a win here last year in the 2m4f novice event when second to Tully East, and has been the foundation of good wins at Newbury and Ascot this season. He is a classy type, the big question is whether he can defy a mark of 155. That is 8lbs up on his last Ascot win, and now 18lbs up on his run here last year. He wasn't meant to be here, his Aintree prep was to be Ascot, but he missed

with a bruised foot, and then Kempton but the foot didn't recover in time. He should still go really well here, but it wasn't first choice, and the weight is a worry.

Don't get me started on Singlefarmpayment. He was the novice in this race last year, who after an ante-post multiple dabble that included Supasundae and Presenting Percy, would have won me a new car and holiday etc but for being short-headed in this race after looking the winner. On that form he'd have a huge chance as he is just 3lbs higher, but you would need to be pretty forgiving of a mixed bag of runs since. If festival conditions spark him back to last year's form then he is a big contender, but he seems to find a way to lose – I'll have to have a saver on him personally for risk of mental implosion should he win, but I can't make him my choice here.

Coo Star Sivola is much more interesting as a novice who has placed at the last two festivals over hurdles. Those were off ratings of 132 (Fred Winter) and 138 (Martin Pipe) and now he is here off 142 after running away with his prep race at Exeter (off 135). Trainer Nick Williams clearly thinks the step up to 3 miles is the making of this horse, after a campaign mostly at 2m4f the horse held no festival entries other than this race. He had to win and win well at Exeter to prove the trainer right and to get the rating rise to ensure a run. Mission was well and truly accomplished, and he should run a mighty race. A third consecutive festival placing awaits and its not mission impossible that this time it could be a win.

Gold Present is not Mr Henderson's only string to the bow and both O O Seven and Beware the Bear could be interesting contenders. My concern with O O Seven is resounding defeats all three runs at this trip over fences, and he looked a soft finisher here over a shorter trip in January. Strictly on that form he has a comfortable beating of Coo Star Sivola at the weights, but they were headed in pretty much different directions on the hill, and there is no guarantee of confirmation over this longer trip.

Beware the Bear is more interesting as he has that touch of class and there are, slightly bizarre, reasons for thinking he remains slightly unexposed. He was running up a winning sequence before a below par run over 4 miles here last season, when some sticky jumping was his undoing with the jockey losing his irons, and the impression was very much of a failed opportunity to show what he could do. Even though he won the Rehearsal chase first time out this season off a mark of 145, it was again an episode of misfortune, this time overcoming a slipping saddle. There are reasons therefore to think this mark of 150 does not capture his room for improvement and I am happy to put a line through a pulled up effort last time in the Marmite conditions of a quagmire Welsh National. He looks interesting.

Snow Falcon is probably the primary Irish contender, and represents a key Irish form-line from the Flogas chase through which so many of the leading Irish novices can be traced. He ran a great third to Yanworth at Aintree last year and is potentially well in off 149. I don't know if he quite sees out this trip on a stiff course, he faded late on after travelling well in the Stayers here last year, and that doubt may be just enough to rule him out.

COO STAR SIVOLA is on a roll, has his conditions, and has scope to improve further now stepped up in trip. Henderson looks to hold a few aces, and with full respect for the marvellous Gold Present, I will just side with stablemate **BEWARE THE BEAR** as the back-up bet.

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TUES: Race 4 - The Champion Hurdle - 2 miles

Selected Current Odds: 4-6 Buveur D'Air, 6 Faugheen, 10 My Tent Or Yours, Yorkhill, 14 Wicklow Brave, 33 John Constable, 50 Verdana Blue

The Champion Hurdle was, along with the Grand National, the races that fired my love for jumps racing. The mid-late seventies (I was in my infancy honest !!), saw the Red Rum era at Aintree, and the legendary Night Nurse – Monksfield – Sea Pigeon Champion hurdle dynasties.

The Champion has remained a race that fires the imagination, and which creates great memories and enduring champions. Personally, I will never forget screaming Morley Street home, or the sight of Richard Johnson hacking along on Rooster Booster before winning in '03, and Paul Carberry doing the same on Harchibald in '04...well let's not go there again.

Multiple winners are a feature of the race, and the betting certainly suggests we will get one this year with last year's winner Buveur D'Air a prohibitively priced market leader, and champion of yesteryear Faugheen the only other with a single digit quote.

Buveur did us a favour with his stylish win last season. He has won his races since comfortably enough and there is no reason to think he isn't likely to repeat that form. His extremely short price is more a function of the weakness of those lining up against him. There looks precious little value in opposing him on win lines, but such a short-priced favourite should open up some alternative options.

Faugheen is not really an each way option. If he was the Faugheen of his championship year, then he would arguably be a couple of lengths ahead of a peak Buveur – but that was then, when he was a fit and flying 7 year old. Now he returns to the fray after lengthy battles with injury at the pensionable age of 10, and although great on his return, a wretched pulled up display over Christmas, and a creditable but way-below-best effort last time both suggest that the fire doesn't burn anywhere as brightly as it once did. If he struggles to compete on the day expect him to be looked after rather than flogged into the frame.

My Tent Or Yours is three times a runner up in this race, and although now a veteran at 11yo, his powers appear to be diminishing in Tom Jones fashion, he may be a little worn but he can still belt out a tune as he showed when winning a big race here before Christmas. We know he loves this stage, Sea Pigeon won at this age (it's not unusual), and he looks the most solid contender for a frame spot in much the same manner as last year. His each way value is questionable, unless you think he can win outright, then the place leg of a say 10-1 bet pays the equivalent of backing a 1-2 shot once you factor in your lost win bet.

Yorkhill looks likely to run here at the time of writing. This is a horse with a big following and one who has won at the last two festivals, so what's not to like. Well, stripping away the hype, his official hurdles rating of 156 has him 11lbs behind Buveur and in fact in the mix with those quoted at 20/1 to 50/1 here. His reputation was founded on a defeat of Yanworth here (who was 7th in this last year). At the time that opponent was thought to be a superstar, that view had faded somewhat, and Yorkhill's follow up hard fought Aintree win looks weak, and his Punchestown defeat concerning. That was it over hurdles

and he only returns now as a result of his chasing career falling to bits in recent outings. The betting public, and two festival wins, will still ensure he gets backed as a heavyweight contender, his form doesn't really stack up to that status, but he clearly has bags of talent when channelled accordingly. He may well miss Ruby though if he sticks to Faugheen.

Of Willie's runners, and given my scepticism for Faugheen and Yorkhill, and the limitations of Melo, it is previous County hurdle winner Wicklow Brave who could improve on an arguably unlucky 6th in this last year. He can't improve enough to beat Buveur, but it would no surprise if he placed.

The race looks ripe for something to run out of its skin and hit the frame at monster odds, and there are two horses whose run styles may just enable them to outperform.

Verdana Blue is a 145 rated mare and should be far beneath this class. Nothing can work with Altior at Henderson's, and Buveur is probably his next best worker, and this mare is reputedly close behind. On the track she has looked a "short" runner in soft ground, not quite getting home, but if on a better surface here she may be able to travel well deep into the race and scramble up the hill for a place.

Probably even more preferable is blog favourite John Constable. We have enjoyed success and failure with this fella in equal measure. He is another very smooth travelling type who should really enjoy a switch to spring ground. We would have had doubts about the track but he ran ok behind My Tent here before Christmas, and if he can blossom again with the Spring sunshine then he has the latent ability to get in the mix.

Last time he just gave Buveur the hurry up when that one was apparently cruising to his prep race win in the mud at Sandown. That is surely no guide to this, but John Constable will improve a lot for better ground if he gets it, and whilst that may not be enough to beat the champion, it could get him amongst or past the pensioners battling it out for frame spots.

Given I think Buveur will be very hard to beat, value is usually best found not in backing each way against him, as the win portion of the bet is pretty much doomed, and bookies protect against offering big each way fractions in the outright book by trimming the win odds. Instead, value is in the "betting without" market, which is widely quoted on races like this. Backing a horse like John Constable at 33s in the without market has substantially more each way appeal than taking 50s in a market where he has to beat Buveur to win, and has one less place to aim at.

There should be no beating Buveur D'Air, with only Faugheen having the ability to do so, and that looks too depleted by the ravages of time. The battle for the frame could be interesting though, and should the ground be half decent then **JOHN CONSTABLE** looks too big a price in the "betting without Buveur" market in a field that lacks much depth. A little on **VERDANA BLUE** in the same market can add further spice.

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TUES: Race 5 - The David Nicholson Mares Hurdle - 2 miles 4f

Current Selected Odds: 4-6 Apple's Jade, 5 Benie Des Dieux, 25 Jer's Girl

Time for the girls to take centre stage. Yes, in the spirit of all-female re-boots, the Mares Hurdle offers us a line up of leading ladies in a feature whose quality relative to the Champion Hurdle is eerily similar to the relative merits of the all-female Ghostbusters and the original.

Last year, Apples Jade put up a heroic effort up the hill to fend off the dual Willie Mullins challenge of Limini and Vroom Vroom Mag, both of whom may have been distracted to see they had turned up wearing the same outfit.

This year Apples Jade is a significantly shorter price to see off the similarly attired Mullins trio of Let's Dance, Benie Des Dieux, and the potentially returning Vroom Vroom, and it is easy to see why.

Two years ago, it remains a mystery how Apples lost a Triumph hurdle to Ivanovic Gorbatov (even 3 weeks later at Aintree she was 41 lengths too good for him). Even in defeat in the Triumph she had Footpad 6 lengths behind and main potential rival here Let's Dance a further 7l back.

Since then Apples has been almost unstoppable, her one defeat in 2017, to Limini, was reversed on the big day here last year, and she is unbeaten this term including a verdict over Stayers hurdle favourite and Irish Champion Hurdler Supasundae. She is an uncomplicated ride, who will be near the pace, and will force things from a long way out. A worthy odds-on shot.

Whilst Let's Dance did us a favour when winning the novice Mares event here last year, the balance of her form, dating back to that Triumph run, suggests she has at least 7-10lbs to find with the favourite here, and whilst clearly second best on the book, the odds really don't appeal as each way is barely even a money back option, and she may well go the way of the Stayers hurdle.

Benie Des Dieux is an interesting Willie angle (not a phrase to google...). She has had plenty of experience in France over hurdles, and has looked good in three easy chasing wins since joining the Mullins team. A step back to hurdles should be no issue and this trip should suit. Her last win was her best form, but also the toughest, and in dishing out a 2.5l beating to Asthuria she simultaneously established her merit for this race, but equally suggested that may still leave her something to find with the favourite's proven Grade 1 capability.

La Bague Au Roi leads the home challenge after 3 easy wins this year. The last two have come over 3 miles and that leaves possible pilot Richard Johnson the dilemma of how forceful to be. She was given the full monty from the get-go last year when fading to 7th behind Let's Dance in the novice event, and this looks a tough ride to judge. Even if he gets it spot on, she surely won't have enough to trouble the favourite.

Jer's Girl was a champion Grade 1 novice at Punchestown in 2016. She came to this race last year having shown precious little since, but was seemingly running well when crashing out at the third last. Her 2 length defeat to Apples Jade at Navan in November over this trip is by far the best form, Apple's

omitted, in this race. She was narrowly outstayed by Le Bague Au Roi at Kempton over 3 miles receiving 4lbs, but should be capable of turning that around back at this trip.

APPLES JADE clearly wins the race and can be backed to earn a free bet in the next. There is definitely value in the “betting without” markets as outlined previously, and again we have the key ingredients of a short priced likely winner in the outright market, and a short priced favourite to take on (Lets Dance) in the without market. **JER’S GIRL** looks the way to go in the betting without market at a great value price

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TUES: Race 6 - The National Hunt Novice Chase - 4m miles for Amateur riders

Selected Current Odds: - 6 Jury Duty, Dounikos, Elegant Escape, 12 No Comment

Theoretical physicists have hypothesised that string theory could be used to explain the mysteries of black holes. Well the mystery of the black hole in my finances could certainly be explained by string theory, the string in question being that of poker-faced Irish training genius Gordon Elliott. Whenever I back him he's bluffing, if I call him he delivers the aces. Einstein would struggle to unravel the form-lines of Gordon's massed entries (it's all relative apparently), and following on-the-day jockey bookings may be the best guide. He has been playing a typically inscrutable hand in the build up to this 4 mile novice chase for amateur riders in which he has entered six runners currently quoted at less than 12/1.

The two of big Gordo's at the head of the market are Jury Duty and Dounikos. I like Dounikos, I think he has a touch of class and ran well in the Flogas chase in a field of many of Ireland's best novice chasers. He looks sure to be suited by stepping up in trip and this race would fit the bill. All that being said, his owners have a huge squad of horses and they may feel this one is their best shot at the Grade 1 RSA. If he were to run here, preferably with Jamie Codd on board, then he would be the pick, but I fear he may aim for greater goals.

That would leave Jury Duty in prime position. He was a very good 3rd, in what may have been an unusually good Pertemps last year behind Presenting Percy off a mark of 147. He has looked just as good a chaser with a series of consistent runs in top Irish novice chasers. He is a reliable jumper, and will be well suited to being ridden off the pace – a tactic that works well here if you avoid trouble. He may well end up the mount of the Coddfather were Dounikos to defect. A huge chance.

The home challenge is headed by Tizzard's Elegant Escape who has been trading blows with the useful and RSA-bound Black Corton all season. He looks a proper stayer, and on official ratings he comes out just on top. Whilst his 7th in the Albert Bartlett last year was ok, it also wasn't hugely impressive, and I suspect he may come up short.

A more interesting home challenger is the JP McManus owned No Comment, likely to be the mount of champion Irish amateur Derek O'Connor. He ran ok when 7th in the Martin Pipe last year and was second at both Aintree and Punchestown afterwards. The reservation is the lack of chasing experience having had just one run in the Grade 1 Scilly isles at Sandown. That was promising enough but it is a huge challenge to come here off such a light prep.

Gordon holds the aces. DOUNIKOS would be first choice on class, but that would be a narrow call over the useful **JURY DUTY**, and he becomes the confident choice if/when Dounikos is routed elsewhere.

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TUES: Race 7 – The Close Brothers Novices Handicap Chase - 2 miles 4f

Current Selected Odds: 6 De Plotting Shed, 8 Movewiththetimes, 10 Barney Dwan, Any Second Now

This is the JLT Chase “B” division, masquerading as a handicap. The JLT is the level weights grade 1 novice chase over 2m5f on Thursday. This event is nominally a handicap, with a rating limit maximum of 145, but such is the bunching of horses in and around that rating band that last year top to bottom was just an 8lb band. This year it could be even tighter.

The challenge for punters is that much of the form for this race comes from small field novice events which bear little comparison to the hurly burly of this handicap event. That said, 4 of the last 8 winners came here from competitive handicap chases, and of the 4 that didn’t, 3 had previously run well at Cheltenham festivals showing an aptitude for conditions.

This is not a good trend for the market leaders as De Plotting Shed, Movewiththetimes and Any Second Now do not have previous festival experience, and have not experienced handicap chasing.

De Plotting Shed is the Gordon Elliott handicap “good thing” for this year. That can be a poisoned chalice as all those backing Tombstone last year will recall, or Squouateur the year before. He was a useful staying hurdler last season, and has run moderately in novice chases mostly over an unsuitable 2 miles. He can be expected to improve hugely over this trip and with this likely to have been his focus for the year.

Any Second Now is a fine looking chaser, with scope and size. He has been campaigned in top class novice chases, but mostly at a safe distance behind the likes of Footpad. Much like De Plotting Shed, that makes it a nightmare for the handicapper to assess. He certainly looks to have the class for this, and on hurdles back form, and on pure looks he appeals most of the light raced types here.

Movewiththetimes has run similarly to Any Second Now, but in UK novice chases around this course. Again that would be a nightmare for the raters, but they at least have his strong novice hurdle form to lean on, with an outstanding 2nd place in the major handicap, the Betfair Hurdle off a mark of 136, which makes 142 here look reasonable.

All three fail on the bulk of previous criteria; being festival form and handicap form. Movewiththetimes probably comes closest with his big field handicap hurdle form, and the likelihood he would have placed at Cheltenham last year but for injury. But value may lie elsewhere.

So is there anything that does qualify. Barney Dwan fits the bill. Whilst his chasing form has come in small fields, he has festival pedigree having chased home Presenting Percy when runner-up in last year’s Pertemps Final off a mark of 143. Running off the same mark here he must have a fine chance, Presenting Percy was rated 146 when winning then and is now 157 over fences, whilst third in the Pertemps Jury Duty ran off 145 then and is now 148 over fences.

It would be more reassuring if Barney had jumped fences a little more fluently in his runs so far, but in form trainer Fergal O'Brien is sure to have him well prepared and this will have been the plan all season.

Mister Whitaker would be especially interesting having won the January handicap used by several previous winners as a stepping stone. Unfortunately his rating of 137 leaves him needing 24 to pull out and that just looks unlikely at this stage. If he were to creep in at the bottom of the weights he would need to be added to the ticket.

Ozzie the Oscar bring festival credentials after a shock 3rd place in the County Hurdle last year. That was a performance well beyond what he had shown before, and he will need to do something similar this time as his chasing form to date has been pretty scratchy.

Ibis du Rheu also brings festival form having won the Martin Pipe two years ago. His chasing career has been undistinguished including pulling up in the 3 mile chase here last year. He wasn't seen afterwards until a distant 4th on reappearance at Newbury, he could still be interesting at huge odds if appearing here.

I will rely on the historic patterns here, and the legendary schooling grounds at Naughton to have **BARNEY DWAN** cherry ripe for this festival retrieval mission having found only Presenting Percy too good last year. Of the "plotted" horses, **Any Second Now** looks the pick and could go well for motor-mouth Ted Walsh.

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WED: Race 1 The Neptune Investments Novices Hurdle - 2 1/2 miles (for all-aged novices)

Selected Current Odds: 4-5 Samcro, 6-4 An act of god.....

Deep in the Massaco territories of the Brazilian rainforest, the uncontacted peoples of the Asa tribe roam nomadically avoiding all contact with modern man. Occasionally, as was reported before Christmas, scientists have discovered some discarded debris; a huge bow and arrow, tortoise shells, rudimentary tools, and a Paddy power ticket with "Samcro – Ballymore Hurdle – 9/2" written on it.

Gordon Elliott's new stable star is the single most exciting horse for many punters approaching this year's festival and his name is on everyone's lips. Yes there is the established brilliance of Buveur D'Air, and in particular Altior, but you won't get rich backing them, besides there is something enticing about being on the bandwagon from the outset, and there is no knowing how far Samcro will go.

One man hoping Samcro will go far is good friend and festival regular Pete. He loves nothing more than peppering the pre-festival build up with multiples of festival "shorties", and Samcro features in many, although it is always wise to read the small print. Pete was chest-bursting in pride to have thieved an apparently juicy 9/4 that Samcro wins ANY race at the festival, and it was only after a too-good-to-be-true epiphany that he realised it was for the 2019 festival. (may still be value...).

Setting conjecture aside, what do we actually know.

Gordon Elliott's 6yo novice brings his 5 run career unbeaten record to the Ballymore Novices Hurdle as one of the biggest hyped "certainties" ever to make the pilgrimage to Cheltenham from the Emerald Isle.

The dashing chestnut son of Germany has been the Freddy Krueger of bookies dreams since starting his novice season in convincing fashion at Punchestown. A subsequent Navan win hardly came at the expense of any effort, and everyone waited with baited breath for his appearance at the inaugural Dublin racing festival in February. He didn't disappoint.

Unexpectedly dropped to the minimum trip, he showed tremendous cruising speed to run all over Ireland's best 2m novices and saunter clear for an easy win.

With the step up in trip expected to suit, the question marks are few, The course? Quicker ground? The opposition?.

The bookies, and the (mostly UK based) nay-sayers (neigh-sayers?), will cite previous Gordon hotpots Don Cossack, Death Duty, No More Heroes and recall how each had run up soft ground Irish sequences only to come unstuck as short priced novices at the festival.

Well, any likeness to Samcro is purely superficial based on his trainer and the colours he runs in. The actual horse is a very different creature to those others. Watching him closely in the flesh at

Leopardstown he is strikingly athletic – not a big chasing type like those previous novices, he is much more the well balanced athlete like a Best Mate or a Kauto Star rather than a Denman.

In his racing, he has a quick light action which if anything promises to be better suited to the less boggy Cheltenham surface, and his balance should make the undulations no issue. I don't like to go heavily on a short-priced favourite, but there is little to crab about Samcro – he is every bit as good as he looks, and he should deliver a career best on the big day.

That just leaves the opposition to consider. Top of that list is the unbeaten home challenger On The Blind Side for Nicky Henderson. He has looked good in his wins, one of which came over course and distance. That day he briefly looked one paced before coming through strongly. He looks booked for a place, but if he has a few seconds of one-paced action whilst changing gears then he may lose sight of Samcro before he can hit his stride.

Next Destination represents Willie Mullins and has the advantage of festival form after a staying on 4th in last year's bumper. Three heavy ground hurdles wins have seen him challenge for second favouritism. As a son of Dubai Destination you might expect him to improve for better ground, however, he lost his unbeaten bumper run here and at the Punchestown festival last year, and that may indicate that when elevated to the top table, he just comes up a fraction short. That won't be good enough here.

We're hoping Willie will find a handicap opportunity for Duc Des Genievres after he really impressed with a late run into a distant second to Samcro at Leopardstown last time. The style of his late run last time suggests a longer trip will suit and the 3 mile Albert Bartlett has been suggested. This is possibly his least likely chance of victory given the margin he needs to reverse with Samcro, but if he were to run then he could be the each way value for those not enjoying the prospect of backing at odds on.

Death...taxes...Salcro. **SALCRO** comes here with Istabraq/Golden Cygent style expectations, and looks all set to live up to them with a win. For those looking for longer odds, Duc de Genievres has place prospects should they choose to run him here.

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WED: Race 2 - The RSA Novice Chase. 3 miles

Selected Current Odds: 5-2 Presenting Percy, 10/3 Monalee, 8 Black Corton

The novice Gold Cup, and this year a race that presents a huge problem. One of the biggest problems with being a regular punter is the decisive way in which we categorise certain horses, and our slowness to recognise error. Last year, Presenting Percy was one of my most confident bets in the Pertemps Final, and his easy win single-hoofedly dragged this Guide from the edge of a tipping precipice after a serious of heart-breaking near misses.

I love the horse, and my immediate view – the instant classification – was of a horse who could thrive over fences, and would make an excellent bet for the 4 miler this year. I of course acted accordingly in the ante-post market, and at least for those placed prior to nonrunner no bet, I now have to accept that I was wrong. I actually underestimated the horse, and now I have to ask myself is he actually good enough to win a Grade 1 RSA?

Coming via the Pertemps is an unconventional route to the top of steeplechasing's tree, but he has some excellent form over fences. He was a little scratchy at his fences when a disappointing 3rd at Punchestown in November at which point the 4 miler loomed, but he spread-eagled a good field of stayers over a marathon trip next time.

A good win reverted to hurdles preceded his run last time at Gowran, and this is the key to his chances. Races are always open to interpretation. A sceptic would say that he was beaten as a short priced favourite, he was receiving 7lbs from the winner, and the winner prefers a longer trip. A supporter would say the winner is a legitimate Gold Cup contender, that to run him so close is the best staying novice form of the season, and that Percy will only get better for a longer trip and better ground.

As a die-hard Percy fan, I lean towards the latter interpretation, but not blindly to the risks, and not at any price.

Monalee represents the more regular route to this race having run a blinder when narrowly beaten in the Grade 1 Albert Bartlett at the meeting last year. He had a crashing fall at Leopardstown over Christmas but put that right under aggressive tactics when he outfought a good field over 2m5f there next time.

I like Monalee and I love his battling qualities and they are a good match for this test. He is exactly the kind of horse who has a decent chance of winning an average RSA, and possibly sets the race up for the winner should there be an above average contender. Barring a fall, he has to be in the top 3, and whether he is the winner pretty much relies on what you make of Presenting Percy.

The home challenge is led by the prolific Black Corton, likely to be the ride of the even more prolific Bryony Frost. This horse has progressed from Summer jumping, and after seemingly having limitations exposed in defeat to Elegant Escape at Newbury, has since raised his game for Grade 1 wins at Kempton and Ascot. In fairness he seems to be improving and will bring pace to the race. Frost said the Irish will need to good to beat him. Well I think they are, and they probably will.

Shattered Love finished well ahead of Percy when he disappointed at Punchestown and will get the mares allowance if running here. She reversed the form with Jury Duty when staying on too well for him after Monalee's exit at Leopardstown over Christmas. It is always worth remembering the power of the mares' allowance when you have a particularly good mare. She could go well, but probably needs some of the same luck from last time to finish ahead of the front two here given that her Festival form from last year is a poor 12th in the Neptune.

A more likely Gigginstown contender could be Dounikos and he has a touch of class. He looks held on Leopardstown running by Monalee. Connections will be encouraged that relative to most of the field that day he was doing some of his best work late on and this longer trip can only help. Unfortunately for them the same applies to Monalee.

As a confirmed member of the **PRESENTING PERCY** fan club it would be heresy to suggest anything else. It should be between him and Monalee and it is with respect to the battling qualities of the latter that stakes on Percy are held to reasonable levels.

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WED: Race 3 - The Coral Cup Handicap Hurdle - 2 1/2 miles

Selected Current Odds: 10 William Henry, 12 Bleu Et Rouge, 20 Sire De Berlais

Many punters will be digging out the lucky pin for the Coral Cup. One of the most competitive races on the agenda, it retained its reputation as a graveyard for favourites last year, although the win of Supasundae was neither a shock nor out of keeping with the recent history of this race.

The Coral Cup holds a unique place amongst the handicaps as it is the only open handicap (not constrained by ratings) in which there is no alternative championship race. If you are a class 2m4f hurdler then either you need to test your speed in the Champion, test your stamina in the World, or carry a weight in this event.

It is no shock therefore to see quality horses contesting, and winning this race, with a number of recent winners who would not look out of place in top graded company (Supasundae, Aux Ptit Soins, Diamond King, Whisper, Carlito Brigante, Ninetieth Minute).

It is also no surprise to see Irish winners well represented. Not only have they some of the best horses and strongest yards, but they also have a deeper programme of non-handicaps, with graded races supported by rated conditions races. This allows a horse like Supasundae to contest an entire season in the build up to Cheltenham with only one handicap appearance – a minefield for the raters.

The English programme for these hurdlers seems much more stacked towards lucrative handicaps, and as such many home contenders come here having shown much more to the handicapper and having far fewer secrets.

So, the recipe suggests a classy sort, preferably with not too much handicap exposure, Irish horses favoured.

William Henry comes from the Whisper route – he's a classy hurdler trained by Henderson who has had just the one handicap run when a tidy winner of the Lanzarote Hurdle off a mark of 145. That was a decent race and a rise of 6lbs is far from punitive. He has to be on the shortlist.

Bleu Et Rouge comes from the Mullins yard who, despite dominating the similar County Hurdle and Martin Pipe Hurdle have only one third place to show for the last decade of Coral Cups. He was a Grade 1 novice hurdler in 2016, falling in the Albert Bartlett here, and not far behind Buveur D'Air, Petit Mouchoir and Limini at Aintree. Chasing was a bit of a disaster last season and he has reverted to hurdles this season. After an opener, he has run in the top two UK handicap hurdles, finishing a fair 4th at Ascot before Christmas, before a cracking 2nd in the Betfair, both off a generous looking mark of 146.

It would be fair to suggest that he has shown his hand, and a rise to 151 certainly asks more of him, but that is all 2 mile form, and his Grade 1 novice form was at 2m2f, and he could improve for the longer trip. He has to be in the mix.

Duc des Genievres looks headed for the Albert Bartlett but he looked a novice of great promise when chasing home Samcro. Raised to a mark of 148, this would be his only handicap option as he was too good for the Martin Pipe. Despite his inexperience, he would be very interesting here.

Spiritofthegames ties together those two market leaders having finished one place behind both. Dan Skelton's lightly raced contender stayed on well to run William Henry to less than a length, and may not have been wholly comfortable on very heavy ground when still a good third 8 lengths behind Bleu et Rouge at Newbury. He gets pulls in the weights and is twice the odds so holds some each way appeal.

Irish titan Willie Mullins may have a weak Coral Cup record, but big rival Gordon Elliott can look back on wins for Carlito Brigante and Diamond King. He has his usual mass of entries, and trying to get any info out of Gordon is nigh on impossible without Guinness-boarding (like water boarding but with more participant consumption).

Reading between the Delphic utterings of the Meath maestro, the much fancied Flawless Escape could be headed for the Martin Pipe, but would be of obvious interest here, whilst I love the prospects of Blow By Blow and he would be of massive appeal here, but again may follow the tried and trusted route of novices to the Martin Pipe (ratings allowing). His Ben Dundee could improve for better ground, and Sire de Berlais looks to have hidden talent (perhaps deliberately so?), after running second last time when looking like another day was in mind – this day perhaps?

Blow by Blow is the one I like most, a classy Grade 1 bumper winner who missed 18 months before slowly building his novice campaign this year, sluicing home last time like a huge improver under Rachel Blackmore, but whether this race is the target, not even Mrs Elliott knows...

William Henry is not the only Henderson contender, and Burbank is an interesting added string to the bow. He ran a lifetime best when a fairly close up 4th in the Neptune last season, and any horse running their best here immediately become of interest for future festivals. He hadn't shown much in a couple of runs this year until a good 3rd behind stablemate Jenkins at Ascot. That wasn't enough to damage his mark, and if he can again dig deep for a season's best then he should contend.

One left field option would be Royal Vacation. The Colin Tizzard yard has caught fire just in time for the Spring festivals and a number of his horses may find themselves well weighted after a quiet early season. Royal Vacation is better known as a chaser and ran in the RSA last year. He reverted to hurdles with a fair effort here in the Relkeel hurdle, and a mark of 142 could be workable. He once produced a massive lifetime best to win a handicap at this course off 143 over fences, so the mark could work if the Tizzard team get him firing.

The usual Coral Cup conundrum. **WILLIAM HENRY** looks a solid pick on Lanzarote form, whilst there should be room on the ticket for **SIRE DE BERLAIS**. Both Blow By Blow and Duc Des Genievres would be of huge interest if turning up here.

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WED: Race 4 - The Champion Chase - 2 miles

Selected Current Odds: 8-11 Altior, 11-4 Min, 4 Douvan, 8 Politologue

For many punters, the magnificent Altior joins the ranks of Buveur D'Air, Samcro and Apples Jade in the list of certainties for the week.

Now, I can take a watching brief on how high Samcro can go, but as things stand Altior does not deserve to be in that company, he is in a league of his own. Powerful and athletic, he was good enough as a novice hurdler to trounce Buveur, and would undoubtedly be a huge Champion Hurdle contender were he ever to revert.

At his best his jumping can be bold and nimble, and he looked at times like the next great thing last season. Some words of caution however. Firstly 2 mile chasing can go wrong in a flash, and it can be very hard to fix problems in a race that is hectic – we only need to look back to the demise of the unbeatable Douvan in this race last year. Secondly, Altior's worst effort last year was arguably his Arkle win over this course when he was being hustled up by the useful but limited Charbel before than one fell. Finally, he has an interrupted season, finally seeing the course at Newbury in February when thrashing the useful Politologue. That said a lot about Altior as to my eye he met few of the fences on a good stride and as a jumping display it was average by his standards and yet he just oozes class. He'll need to be a bit more fluent here, but will be very hard to beat.

Douvan was all the rage last year, but early mistakes and an injury conspired to leave him a well-beaten favourite in one of the biggest festival shocks of living memory. This will be his first start since, and its is a rare sign of pragmatism that he is priced at around 9/2 and not 9/4. I think this is a clear sign that the Mullins yard are just happy to get him back on track. If he were the pre-injury Douvan then there would be a fair old joust for favouritism. With that in mind he almost borders on value – he is the only horse I this race that could potentially compete based on their own performance rather than relying on a sub-par Altior.

Min is the better fancied of the Mullins pair, but that is hard to fathom. He was well held as a hurdler by Altior, never got the chance to compete here last year as a novice chase, but 4 straight wins (one lost in the stewards room) suggest he is back on track. The Min of Christmas – when barging his way to a narrow margin over old stager Simply Ned would struggle to place here, the Min of the Dublin festival was a whole lot better (12 lengths better in fact). Which one shows up? I think he will run to his last form, but that still needs Altior and maybe others to disappoint to convert into a winning chance.

Politologue has a huge amount to find on Newbury running with Altior. He made the running that day and certainly won't here, and better ground may help him also. He has always looked a fraction below top class – 4th in a JLT last year being about right. He is unlikely to be good enough and is probably only as short as he is in the betting as the bookies will be running scared of the each way fractions, but he has more scope for improvement than many of the ageing challengers here.

Special Tiara is the reigning champion having held off Fox Norton following the Douvan demise. He was also just a nose behind the top class Un de Sceaux here 2 years ago when 3rd behind the legend Sprinter Sacre. 3rd as well in 2015 this 11yo veteran has again struggled for form during the muddy months. He will put pace to the race, he is very quick in the first half mile, and he once again has place prospects if the ground rides near good.

Gods Own has been 4th and 5th in the last two runnings of this race. He probably would have gone closer last year but for uprooting the second last fence when challenging. His form this year has been a bit below par, but he tends to be a Spring horse and could again be a frame contender.

ALTIOR should win this. The race can be an extraordinary spectacle where one error can consign a challenge to the bin, and neither Douvan nor Min appeal at close to evens in the betting without Altior market. **Politologue** has his limitations, but he is a reliable jumper at speed who could improve for better ground and could be value in the betting without market.

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Wed: Race 5 Glenfarclas Cross Country Chase - 4 miles - cross country

Selected Current Odds: 11-4 Cause of Causes, 5 Tiger Roll, 16 Urgent de Gregaine

When it was first introduced to the festival, the cross country race was widely seen as a joke, and a good chance to go and get the drinks in. Octagenarian horses running in endless circles of the Cheltenham infield whilst negotiating a set of obstacles so ludicrous that it came as something of a surprise to find the Cheese Wedges was not a literally described fence.

However, it has slowly graduated into a race, which although still visually stupid, is now fast becoming a punter's pal. This was elevated further by the transformation from the great leveller of handicap status into an effective championship race, taking away the last great variable.

For a clutch of contenders, the distinction between level weights and handicaps is basically academic with course veterans Auvergnat, Josie's Orders, Cantlow, and Bless The Wings all effectively rated within a few pounds of each other. Bless The Wings may come out on top, but is unlikely to be enough to win.

If there is an unseasonal downpour then French mudlark Urgent de Gregaine would certainly enter calculations, but this race looks sure to go to Gordon Elliott, as apart from Bless The Wings, he also brings Cause of Causes and Tiger Roll.

Cause of Causes is gunning for his 4th straight festival success (and barring a last fence blunder in a Kim Muir it could have been 5). He won this race last year by a widening 9 lengths when looking by some measure the best horse in the field. His subsequent runner-up effort in the Grand National further emphasis his class relative to these other cross country types.

He had a neat little warm-up staying on from miles back to finish a steady 15th in a big race at Leopardstown, and has been over to school at the Cheltenham course since. Deliberately lightly raced he looks a threat to Quevega's 6 festival wins. He should pick up number 4 here.

The biggest danger is likely to be stablemate Tiger Roll, already himself a two-time festival winner. I wouldn't be too worried by his over 40 length defeat on his first run over these obstacles as Cause of Causes suffered a similar defeat on his first course sighter prior to last year's festival triumph. Rated 151 over fences, he is just 1lb behind Cause of Causes and thus by far the biggest threat.

The extra experience of **CAUSE OF CAUSES** looks likely to secure him another festival win, with stablemate Tiger Roll the one to beat, and the straight forecast looking pretty likely. **Urgent De Gregaine** needs it soft and would be worth a saver if it comes up boggy.

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WED: Race 6 The Fred Winter Juvenile Novices Handicap Hurdle - 2 miles

Selected Current Odds: 9 Act of Valour, 10 Nube Negra, 14 Mitchouka, 20 Kuraka, Esprit de Somoza

Without doubt the Fred Winter – a handicap for barely raced juvenile hurdlers – should be the toughest race of the week to solve...and yet, it isn't. Flying Tiger was certainly a tricky one last year, but by and large this has been a lot more punter-friendly than we have any right to expect.

Paul Nicholls has a superb record in this race, and as his yard has slowly fallen away in the festival Grade 1s of recent years, it is fringe events like this and the foxhunters where he clearly targets maintaining a winning festival record.

His main hope looks to be Act of Valour, who was a quality 3yo on the flat in Ireland last year. That busy flat background helps to ensure he is race-wise, and his three hurdling efforts suggest he has hopes here. A debut Newcastle win was achieved over the useful Look My Way, but an effort just two weeks later at Doncaster was dismal. But he showed that run to be all wrong when finishing much closer to Triumph hope We Have A Dream after a break last time at Musselburgh. A mark of 136 maybe a fraction high historically for this race, but winning marks inch higher every year.

Nube Negra has an exotic Spanish racing background, but has looked a bit special in three runs since arriving at Dan Skelton's. Two smooth-as-silk wins sandwiched a second to Triumph favourite Apple's Shakira here in December. That's a set of form that is very hard for us, and the handicapper to assess. The one defeat was a relatively close second, but winner Apple's Shakira has been ridden with education in mind all year, winning easily but with the jockey keen to ensure the mare gets some racing experience, as such any winning margin could be basically arbitrary.

Nicky Henderson missed out narrowly with Divin Bere last year. He has struggled to get his juveniles well handicapped as many aim high for the Triumph before dropping into this race and you usually need to be less exposed. He has just the one entry, and Style De Garde gets in on 137 – a crucial 3lbs below Divin Bere's mark. That looks workable, but he will need to be better than he was at Huntingdon last time.

The winner at Huntingdon, Esprit De Somoza look like being the main hope of last year's winning trainer Nick Williams. He was surprisingly unraced prior to a hurdling debut – nearly all juveniles are ex-flat or ex-French, so it was no surprise that he improved so much for that debut with his easy Huntingdon win. He got turned over next time at Taunton, but the winner may be decent, and it was more valuable experience. He looks a little overpriced.

For many years the place to look for the winner here was near the foot of the weights, looking for a three times raced potential improver, preferably with a last time out win.

Well Night of Glory fits that bill as he was a 92 rated flat horse for trainer Andrew Balding, and has been broadly disappointing on 3 hurdles runs, albeit scraping home at Fontwell last time. Better ground could be key, but he will also need to jump a whole lot better, and that is where the surface may help. He is certainly eye-catching on his flat form.

Nestled just under Night of Glory in the weights is Gordon Elliott's Kuraka. This horse was nowhere near as good on the flat, rated around 70, but three quiet maiden hurdle runs behind talents like Espoir D'Allen and Mr Adjudicator have left him in a broadly equivalent hurdles rating of 121. That could underestimate the potential improvement from the switch to Gordon's yard, and there was a glimpse of that when unlucky not to win a flat race at Dundalk last time. He is a little reminiscent of Flaxen Flare who romped home in this in first time headgear for Gordon, and if he reaches for some added equipment here then take the hint !!

Gordon may also have the top-weight in the shape of the experienced Mitchouka. This could be a really fun bet as he travels so beautifully and you will be getting very excited coming down the hill. He is though a bit of a soft finisher and needs to be delivered late. Jockey-come-God Davy Russell looks likely to get the leg up, and he is the best man in the business for nursing one into a race late. Better ground should help him time his challenge and it will be a joy watching Davy trying to tuck this horse out of sight for as long as possible – don't expect him to see daylight if he can hold it until some time after the final flight.

Competitive as ever. It's tempting to look at Act of Valour in particular at the head of the market, but this shapes up like it could be a surprise. I will head to the top and the foot of the weights for Gordon Elliott with **MITCHOUKA** and **KURAKA**, and back that up with another ex-winning yard and Nick William's ESPIRIT DE SOMOZA should Kuraka not make the cut.

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WED: Race 7 - The Bumper - 2 miles FLAT

Selected Current Odds: 5 Blackbow, 6 Hollowgraphic, Didtheyleaveuouttoo, 8 Rhinestone

This is the race that effectively brought us Willie Mullins. His name was for a long time synonymous with this race, until it started becoming synonymous with all the others too.

Given his extraordinary record in the race it is not surprising to see his runners topping the betting lists, what may be a bit surprising is that we have to go back 5 years to Briar Hill to find his last winner, and that was 25/1 !!

Well Willie naturally supplies the favourites here with both Blackbow and Hollowgraphic at the top of the lists.

Blackbow earned his place by winning the most significant Irish bumper run this season at the Dublin festival. He pulled well clear that day with Rhinestone, the two leaving multiple previous winners a long way behind. Blackbow looked to travel fractionally the between into the race and quickened impressively clear off the home bend. That said, once Rhinestone hit top speed in behind he probably closed a 5 length gap into something under 2 lengths by the line.

The distance they were clear suggests these are two quality horses who should feature and the key question being will the placings be confirmed. My guess is yes.

Generally I will look for a horse to confirm form – its not all numbers, sometimes winners just keep winning. Blackbow looked a little free early in the race and will benefit I think from a stronger run race which he is likely to get here. The style with which he put the race to bed was eye-catching, and producing something similar from the bottom of the Cheltenham hill would set a stiff target for any to match.

Rhinestone did close well, but as a son of Montjeu I would imagine Leopardstown would be a better match for that mercurial blood-line than Cheltenham.

Hollowgraphic is Willie's other big gun. He has not been tested yet at the same high level as Blackbow and his prominence is due to an impressive Punchestown win, and trainer Willie's penchant for name-dropping him every time he is asked about his Bumper chances.

He showed good speed at Punchestown, and clearly could be anything. It will be interesting to see who regular jockey Patrick Mullins picks.

Willie has a number of other lightly raced entries, of which Carefully Selected looks the most fancied off the back of a good recent win at Naas. He has good point-to-point experience and it will be interesting if he runs here given the options backs home at other festivals. If he takes on Willie's other big guns then that is an interesting vote of confidence.

In 25 runnings of this race, the home team have 7 wins. The leading home hope here appears to be Didtheyleaveuouttoo, owned by JP McManus and trained by Nick Gifford. He won a bumper at Ascot in smooth fashion that, much like the Dublin bumper, was open to a host of previous winners. Was there substance to go with that style?

As a son of Presenting he can be expected to improve on decent ground and must have a chance. To my eye that Ascot event looked slowly run, (22 sec above standard), and a number of them, including runner-up Bullionaire pulled far too hard. Didtheyleaveoutto settled well, travelled smoothly and was able to quicken past those hard-pulling types. He could do no more, but I'm just a little skeptical that it was as good as it appeared.

A similar sentiment, but for different reasons, applies to Acey Milan's win at Newbury in the other top UK pre-festival bumper. He forged clear to win well that day, but the ground had been churned up badly and was very testing. Those behind were tacking up the straight like a doldrummed yachtsman, and a wide margin win may have had more to do with conditions than relative merit.

It could be time for some nostalgia. The bookies and punters alike have been expecting the emotional reunion of Willie and the Bumper trophy for a few years now, only to be disappointed. But good things come to those who wait. Willie could have a 1-2 this year with the impressive Blackbow and Hollowgraphic. Blackbow looks the big chasing type of the future, and I'll risk that **HOLLOWGRAPHIC** may just have more speed at this stage.

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THURS: Race 1 - The JLT Novices Chase - 2 1/2 miles

Selected Current Odds: 7-2 Invitation Only, 7 Modus, 8 Terrefort, 16 Bigmartre

My good friend Phil has two well-earned reputations within our festival group. He definitely gets the rosette for sartorial elegance (although it's a bit like being the fastest sloth, or Arsenal's best defender), he is a king of the tweed, the well-pressed shirt and the silk hankie. The hankie comes in useful for drying tears, as he is also the unluckiest punter. Somehow he researches in huge detail, shortlists contenders nearly always finding the winner in his shortlists, and then somehow dodges them all in his betting strategy. Outside the festival, Phil's horse ownership luck has, for a long time, matched his punting (and I know, I've shared some of that misfortune), but all that has changed with the excellent Bigmartre.

Fair play to trainer Harry Whittington, and to Phil, who took a chance on a moderately priced French import with wayward racing tendencies. They saw the innate talent, and under Harry's steady tutorship this athletic sort progressed first over hurdles, and then dramatically over fences and he has a good outside chance here.

His excellent wins at Newbury and a great run in narrow defeat at Doncaster have seen him rise to a 149 rating that is on the heels of the market leaders. The step up in trip should help, the undulating nature of Cheltenham remains an unknown. He disappointed on a previous hurdle run there, but that was at a time the stable weren't firing. His good form has come on flat tracks (including past efforts at Aintree), but mainly because he hasn't raced on undulations. I will be cheering for Phil and Harry with all my might, but am not going to jinx his chances with a selection.

That, instead, goes to the head of the market and Willie Mullins' Invitation Only. Willie has a fine record in the race and this just looks the ideal type. He has been running well at around this distance whilst threatening to improve for a step up, and this is usually a strong test of stamina at the trip so those added reserves will be needed.

By the time he runs, the value of his great run in the Flogas Chase last time will have been well and truly tested (Monalee, Al Boum Photo & Dounikos - RSA, Snow Falcon – Ultima, Rathvinden – NH Chase). He looked good in 3rd that day and was the only one who looked likely to beat the good Monalee at any stage.

Shattered Love looks like stepping down in trip to contest this. She gets a useful mares allowance and will be greatly boosted if there is significant rain. It was late in the race over 3m that she wore down Jury Duty at Leopardstown, and she will need this to become a stamina test to beat the horses with the speedier form.

Modus has a good festival record, having been placed in the bumper and a reasonable 6th in the Coral Cup last year, and but for one messy fall, has been unbeaten in his novice chase campaign. He is probably Paul Nicholls' best hope in the Grade 1 events, but a bit like Politologue who placed in this last year, I feel he is vulnerable to anything with a touch of class.

Terrefort won a great battle at Sandown last time when pipping Cyrname. That horse has been on a roll and it was a gutsy effort to beat him. Like many French imports, Terrefort's strengths are over the obstacles and get accentuated in soft ground. He would be a threat, but Cyrname was well beaten by Bigmartre, and although an improver since, I am not sure that Sandown form is enough to win here.

Benatar is on a winning roll with some fine performances at Ascot, most recently beating Finian's Oscar by a short head. He was receiving 5lbs that day, so technically will struggle to confirm the form. He is a consistent type but has his work cut out in this company.

Finian's Oscar may just be a fraction over-priced. I never thought I would say that as he has never been a horse I warmed to, but the simple facts are that his novice chase form is not far from the top here, and that has been when evidently looking uncomfortable, so much so that he reverted to hurdles last time. Pulled up in the mud there, he has since had a wind operation. That could see a marked improvement, more so on better ground, and if he could discover some fluency over his fences then he is bang in there.

All the best wishes in the world to Phil, nothing would please me more than to see him leading in Bigmartre, and the same goes to Harry. In reality I suspect Willie will be leaving another set of footprints in the Cheltenham enclosure with **INVITATION ONLY** looking the likeliest winner.

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THURS: Race 2 - The Pertemps Handicap Hurdle - 3 miles

Selected Current Odds: 9 Glenloe, Louis vac Pouch, 12 Sort it Out, 14 Who Dares Wins, 33 Mine Now

And now to just about my favourite race of the week – yes you need to be a somewhat bizarre festival nutcase to hold a 3m handicap hurdle in such esteem, welcome to my world. If I was lucky enough to be like my friend Phil and own a horse good enough for the festival, you can keep your Gold Cups and World Hurdles – I would be campaigning it for the Pertemps (and hold that thought 12 months and check back in.....).

The race has become much more punter friendly in its modern guise where qualification for the race demands both a top 6 finish in a qualifier and to be rated high enough (probably around 136) to get into the race. This makes it nigh on impossible to arrive unexposed, or to hide away a horse's true form as you need to show the handicapper something in order to get in.

The last two renewals have gone to horses who were placed in the Leopardstown qualifier, and the market is looking for more of the same with Glenloe. The combo of Gordon Elliott and JP McManus is always likely to leave the bookies quaking, and there is no doubt that Glenloe looks a promising sort. Bred for staying trips, he has been steady if unspectacular in placing in three decent handicaps this season, with the step up to 3 miles looking to suit when a fair 3rd at Leopardstown. They have kept their powder dry since and he clearly arrives here with an obvious chance.

JP also has a lively one in the shape of Sort It Out trained by Eddie Harty. He is in the veteran stage as a 9yo but has been lightly raced since finishing 2nd in a County hurdle in 2015. A doomed chasing campaign was put on hold when he reverted to hurdles to qualify for this at Punchestown when running on in very eye-catching fashion. Gut instinct at the time was that the qualifier that day was a bit below par, but it will be worth watching the relative market moves with Glenloe.

Louis' Vac Pouch started his season with an excellent close up 6th at Chepstow over a shorter trip before running out a cosy winner of an Aintree qualifier for this winning a battle with Forza Milan the two well clear of useful Beer Goggles (not that beer goggles are ever useful...although I suppose it depends who's wearing them....). Louis has not been seen since that November race, a clear tactic to avoid the worst ground, keep him fresh and preserve his mark. Unfortunately for connections that form has worked out so well he has been rated at 145, a full 13lbs higher, and that may just scupper the plans.

Forza Milan has himself only run once since that narrow defeat to Louis, when a good 2nd at Newbury at the start of December, he also has been kept fresh, but he also has a rating rise, this time 10lbs to overcome.

Who Dares Wins brings some notable form as he was a superb 3rd in the Coral Cup last year which looks even better given the subsequent exploits of winner Supasundae. Trainer Alan King always gets his handicap hurdlers well prepped for this meeting and its worth noting this horse is classy enough on the flat to be placed in a Chester Cup and at Royal Ascot and won a big Newmarket race ending the year rated 100. He qualified for this with a decent 3rd at Kempton – he looked set to win that day until a mistake at the second last. It is to his credit he finished so close as the mistake threw a wood splint into

his foot that required immediate on course operation. He has by all accounts recuperated very well and is now firing again for this race. A mark just 3lbs up from last year's Coral Cup rating has to put him in the mix.

I backed The Organist each way in last year's Mares hurdle (finished 7th at 100/1) and it is tempting to back her here, but a mark of 139 has been well earned and may not have enough scope, and whilst Tommy Rapper is improving, a mark of 140 looks stiff enough in this company. Elliott's Delta Work would be interesting, but I don't like 5yos over this trip and would prefer to see him in one of the 2m4f races.

One who the bookies seem happy to overlook is Mine Now. Admittedly a 10yo running off a mark that is a stone and a half above the majority of his lifetime form should make very little appeal, these horses just don't win big festival handicaps. But, although only scraping home in the end by a fast diminishing short head when winning the Leopardstown qualifier, that was still 8 lengths ahead of favourite here Glenloe. Normally I would put a line through a horse like Mine Now pretty quickly, but the stylish way in which he travelled at Leopardstown and the speed by which he quickened up to win his race, even if closed down near the end, showed exactly the tools you need to win a Pertemps. It needs a suspension of disbelief regarding the lifetime of form prior to that 33/1 success, but just using the eye test on that run you would have to think he has a decent chance, and yet he is friendless in the market.

Glenloe is the obvious one, but he has been well spotted by punters and bookies alike. At the odds I prefer the proven festival credentials of **WHO DARES WINS**, whose Coral Cup form of last year is a cut above these slow stayers. For a back-up, **MINE NOW** looks to have been overlooked a bit too much for a horse who won in super style last time but just doesn't fit the trends analysis.

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THURS: Race 3 - The Ryanair Chase - 2 1/2 miles

Selected Current Odds: 9-4 Un de Sceaux, 7-2 Waiting Patiently, 7 Top Notch

The Ryanair Chase is sponsored by the O'Leary boys, and tempting as it is to think it will have a low cost prize and be run at Cheltenham (Stratford), it is in fact one of the feature events of the festival.

Last year I spent a long time explaining why Un De Sceaux was potentially great value at around 3/1 and then proceeding to tip against him, and watch him storm home in very impressive fashion. He was beaten afterwards by Fox Norton, but has maintained his extraordinary win record since then including an easy Ascot Grade 1 last time. He is always a better horse on softer ground, which he may get here, although that adds stamina issues, he stayed well enough last year albeit he was being closed down by the modest Sub Lieutenant on the hill.

If he was good value last year at 3s, then he should be decent value again this year having proven himself over the course and distance, at around 2/1.

Whether that price holds up will probably be decided by Ruth Jefferson, whose first instinct was to miss this race with the deeply impressive Waiting Patiently, and wait for Aintree. If the ground softens, she could be tempted to throw him in, and he would be a huge threat. He was galloping all over a good field at Ascot last time, including useful veteran Cue Card. I think he is exceptional on soft ground, but I wonder whether connections have missed a trick with a Champion Chase entry. He shows a lot of speed, and after cruising to the front at Ascot, the winning distance of under 3 lengths was a lot less than looked likely. This stiffer track and slightly longer trip will stretch that stamina.

Cue Card is a 12yo, a past winner of this, and a faller at the 3rd last in the last two Gold Cups. This is probably his ideal trip, and his Ascot run behind Waiting Patiently was by far his best of the year, coinciding with an uptick in stable fortunes more broadly. It's probably asking too much of him at this stage, but you can't wholly rule him out.

Top Notch was well beaten in that Ascot race which was a real surprise after consistency was very much his hallmark. He has been placed in a Triumph, 5th in a Champion Hurdle and placed in the JLT here last year. That shows he is a class act, but that class is a fraction below the very best. Expect him to bounce back, especially on better ground, but to come up short again.

If Waiting Patiently is the big danger on soft, then Balko Des Flos is probably the big danger on decent ground. He was a comfortable winner of the Galway Plate, didn't appreciate heavy ground when runner-up at Gowran and third at Clonmel, but then ran a career best in better ground in the all-Giggingstown finish to the Christmas Chase, narrowly beaten late on by Gold Cup hope Road To Respect. The ground will be key, and he could be a big factor if it dries out.

UN DE SCEAUX has won 20 of 26 races, including this last year and is arguably reasonable value and I won't be repeating last year's selection error. Balko Des Flos and good ground maybe the biggest danger.

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THURS: Race 4 - The Stayers Hurdle - 3 1/4 miles

Selected Current Odds: 9-2 Supasundae, 5 Sam Spinner, Yanworth, 10 Penhill

It has been a while since this race really fired the imagination, being either below average heats (eg Cole Harden), or bloodless coronations (Big Bucks), but this one looks like being a real cracker.

The shape of the race is clear to see, with Northern trained improver Sam Spinner likely to set a searching gallop from the offset. Big Sam turned a Haydock handicap into a procession, and then showed that to be no fluke when going for tape to tape in the Grade 1 Long Walk Hurdle at Ascot.

He made all again that day, and showed his characteristic courage when digging deep up the straight to repel the challenge of the smooth travelling L'Ami Serge. He earned plenty of fans that day and will clearly put up an honest and bold show. Lack of course form isn't a worry for this strapping sort, he looks like a Cheltenham type and will be hard to pass.

The horse considered most likely to pass Sam Spinner by the markets is Jessica Harrington's Supasundae. He is a fine looking horse who graduated from that epic Altior Supreme to win the Coral Cup here last year. He has progressed again this season, running Apple's Jade close over 3 miles at Leopardstown over Christmas, and then showing his versatility by beating Faugheen to win the Irish Champion Hurdle over 2 miles. It's hard not to like the horse, but it is a worry that when looking to have Apple's Jade beaten here, he was worn down by the mare late on. That may have been an exceptional effort by Apple's but it may also have been Supasundae's fuel needle hitting the red. This will be a stronger run race on a stiffer track, and I wouldn't want to be taking too short a price.

It was a similar story for Supasundae at Aintree last year when passed in the final yards by the mercurial Yanworth. On that form Yanworth, who reverts here to hurdles after a less than fluent chasing campaign, ought to be vying for favouritism, and as a horse who has been beaten favourite at the last two festivals, he may well be market leader again by the day. If you were to be generous to the horse, and you have to be, then it could be argued that one run over 3 miles at Aintree ought to have been his campaign all along, and that it is to his credit that he has been as good as he has at shorter trips. I am not quite ready to trust him, but I do respect his chances.

The New One is no longer aptly named having been around so long I am sure I remember him battling with Monksfield. Now at the veteran 10yo stage, he finally steps up to a staying trip after about 56 tries at the Champion Hurdle. He looks almost as good this year as at his peak, but it is a pretty rare trick to teach an old dog a new trick at this late stage.

Unowhatimeanharry was odds on for this when 3rd last season, and he went on to exert revenge over Nicholls Canyon at Punchestown. He is now also a 10yo veteran having been a latecomer to the top table. A runner up to Beer Goggles at Newbury and a 10l defeat to Sam Spinner suggest his window of opportunity for this race closed half way up the run-in last year.

Penhill won the novices equivalent of this last year, the Albert Bartett. He was a very good winner that day, overcoming a few bumps to cruise into the race off a hold-up ride. He won going away from a useful pair in Monalee and Wholestone. I am prepared to forgive him a runner-up effort in one of those frequently odd to interpret Punchestown Grade 1s, and the intrigue comes from not having seen him

since. By all accounts a deliberate ploy, and in Willie Mullins it is a master trainer who is tasked with getting him to fever pitch first time out. Good ground should really help this classy ex-Flat type and he looks a massive contender.

The mares allowance has been a controversial measure since introduced, coincidentally I am sure, the year Dawn Run won the Champion Hurdle. Would she, Flakey Dove or Annie Power have won without or with a different allowance – its hard to say. I have said before that I feel it is derived from a long term statistical analysis of gender performance differences, and it is just an impression, but for top mares, they may get closer to the men than the statistical average. The allowance is 7lbs and the potential recipients here are La Bague Au Roi, Augusta Kate and Let's Dance.

La Bague Au Roi has been in great form, and whilst primarily being aimed at the Mares Hurdle, if the ground is not soft enough then expect her to be redirected to this event. I think the allowance is generous for her, and strictly on ratings it puts her just a couple of pounds below the best of these. Tactically though, she likes to dominate, and with Sam Spinner in the field that just won't happen.

Augusta Kate is owned by a celebrity syndicate. Given its headed by Lee Westwood, and the horse is named after that famous Masters course, it is no surprise to see her three-putting after misses in the Bumper and the Albert Bartlett in the last 2 years. Beating this field may be like trying to hole a 20 footer across the notorious 9th green, but there is reason to think Augusta is overpriced.

She was beaten just over 5 lengths in the Bumper here, and was a fair 6th in the Albert Bartlett from off the pace. She went on to beat Lets Dance narrowly but fairly at Fairyhouse on these terms. Three well beaten distant views of Apples Jade probably impact her price here, but in finishing second to Presenting Percy on disadvantageous terms last time, she was ahead of a subsequent good winner, and over 25 lengths ahead of Lets Dance. She could outrun her massive odds.

Lets Dance may well end up running here rather than the mares event. She is a useful mare and there may be improvement at this trip. That said, she has repeatedly looked short at the top class, and this race is rich on top class talent. It would be a surprise if she landed this.

A tough race. I am naturally drawn to the simplicity of the Sam Spinner all-the-way pick, but intrigued in equal measure by the long absent Penhill. Ground will be key with Penhill's speed needing a better surface.. I'll take **SAM SPINNER** to make all.

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THURS: Race 5 - The Festival Plate - 2 1/2 miles

Selected Current Odds: 8 Tully East, 10 Patricks park, 12 The Last Goodbye, 14 The Storyteller, 16 Mister Whitaker, 33 General Principle

And now, as my Irish friends would say, its time for the fecking Plate. This beast of a race continues to assail punters with an array of unfathomable results. Last year's 14/1 winner Road To Respect was, in hindsight unfortunately, a very well weighted novice, running off 145 when turning out subsequently to be a Grade 1 Lexus chase winner. Something similar happened with 16/1 winner Empire Of Dirt the year before who subsequently ran 2nd in an Irish Gold Cup.

One thing those runners had in common was Gigginstown ownership. This may be something to bear in mind. The O'Leary brothers operation prides itself on finding staying chasers and own a huge raft of well-bred promising chasing novices with sights on future Grade 1 glory. With such a large squad, it is inevitable that some may end up under the radar for handicapping purposes. Given the accent on staying chasers of the future, this race, at a stiff 2m5f is pretty much the ideal test, combining the need for class, with the need for stamina.

Tombstone fits the bill, but will have punters shuddering. He was considered a cert when sent off a ridiculous 7/2 for the Coral Cup but totally bombed. If he could find the form of his 4th in the legendary Altior Supreme of 2016 then his mark here, 2lb lower even than that Coral rating, would be an absolute steal. His 6th at Leopardstown last time could turn out to be a good run. I am not sure he is as natural a chaser as I would like, and last year's capitulation is hard to forgive.

Tycoon Prince looks more a 2 miler, which leaves General Principle and Sutton Manor as the most likely Gigginstown challengers. General Principle is a second season chaser and having slogged around in mid division in the Troytown and Paddy Power, showed improvement when 4th at the Dublin Festival over this trip, staying on well which augurs well for this race. He looks very interesting as Davy Russell rode him that day and wasn't overly hard on him, and it looked a lot like a sighter for this. If he gets the leg up again here i'll be shaking those coins out of my piggy bank.

Sutton Manor was much further back in that race despite being well fancied, his 5th in the Pertemps suggests longer trip, perhaps the Kim Muir might suit better.

Tully East heads the market, and must go well having won the novice equivalent easily here last year off a mark of 138, and the 10lb rise gives him a sporting chance of a repeat dose. He was beaten off this mark here in November but the ground may have been a bit soft that day. His 3rd last time was a strong effort and he deserves favouritism. This stiffer 2m5f may be a bit of doubt if the ground is on the soft side.

The winner in front of Tully East last time was Patricks Park, making an impressive chasing debut for Willie Mullins. Despite a 12lb rise, a mark of 135 still leaves him needing help to get into this race. It is a race with a history of cutting up, so even though he is way down the weights, he may still squeeze in. He was deeply impressive at Leopardstown, and even though the winning margin was under 3 lengths he travelled so well he could be called the winner a long way out. That would help in getting in here, and with non-runner no-bet terms he is something of a must.

Kings Socks is an unexposed Pipe trained plunge horse, the likes of which seem to turn up here every year (and to be fair have won a few times too). Experienced in France, he has had just one UK run when 3rd to Modus. It could be a good plot, but you're always on the wrong side with these types as the bookies price them with due caution.

Gordon Elliott's non-Gigginstown challenge may be headed by The Storyteller. He is handicapped very similarly to Tombstone on Leopardstown form. He doesn't have any prior course form, and he may just be one that Gordon favours for Fairyhouse or Punchestown.

Last Goodbye won the big 2m5f handicap chase at the Dublin festival. He spread-eagled his field that day off a mark of 135, a kindly 5lb lower than when 5th to Tully East here last year. The raters have had their say by bumping him up to 149 here. On that basis he will struggle to hold Tully East, but that last run was super impressive, and he may just be one the upswing.

Vieux Morvan chase Last Goodbye home, and is also up a further 6lbs. That gives him some chance at the weights although he lacks the scope for progression of his younger rivals. A fine jumper he may be better suited to an Aintree target.

Bouvreuil and Romain de Senam are two Nicholls runners who I have followed off a few cliffs, to be fair Bouvreuil was third here last year landing each way money. A place is probably the best that either can hope for as the handicapper knows these fellas as well as I do.

One more to note is the novice Mister Whitaker. He won really well here in January in a race which may work out quite well. He has been raised 8lbs for that win, which looks manageable, but his mark of 137 leaves him sweating on a place at the festival. The obvious target would seem to be the Close Brothers Chase on Tuesday, but it is a mystery in some way that this race, even though open to all ratings, often runs deeper than the novice event which is restricted to 145 maximum rating. So although Mister Whitaker needs 24 to drop out of the close, and 50 to drop out here, this race is often the one that cuts up the most. If he gets in then his low weight will make him very competitive and he would have to be added to any ticket.

Tully East will probably do for most punters, and I wouldn't put anyone off. **GENERAL PRINCIPLE** looks and runs a lot like the last two winners and is worth a punt if running here. In a battle of low-weights **MISTER WHITAKER** edges Patricks Park, although both will need to beat the cut to make it in.

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THURS: Race 6 - The Mares Novice Hurdle - 2 miles

Selected Current Odds: 5-6 Laurina, 6 Maria's Benefit, 40 Oscar Rose

This most recent addition to the Cheltenham programme extends the number of mares-only races. They are hugely uncompetitive from an equine perspective, but they do give punters the chance to lump on some short priced certainties.

There have been two runnings of this race, both won by short priced Willie Mullins trained hotpots. Wait, what's this? Another Willie hotpot? Oh yes, for Limini and then Let's Dnace, read now the tale of Laurina.

French import Laurina has had just two runs in Ireland, but what runs, a jog around Tramore was followed by a consummately easy stroll to an 11 length win over subsequent Leopardstown winner Alletrix at Fairyhouse. That was a really smooth win for a novice and confirmed the promise of her French novice form where she looked seriously progressive under the care of young talent maestro Guillaume Macaire.

She looks seriously good, and possibly better at this stage than even both of the past winners of this event, and should go off at a similar price and record a similar event. Unopposable.

Maria's Benefit is the home leader, she is on a five race winning streak and is a talented mare, but her all out front running tactics will just be perfect for Ruby Walsh and give him a target on Laurina, she is likely to play stooge to the favourite.

I'm not sure if she'll run here on such poor terms, but Oscar Rose is capable of running well above her handicap rating of 119. She would need to as that's 2 stone behind Maria's benefit (and probably more behind Laurina. Oscar Rose was desperately unlucky with a slipping saddle last time, and is slowly ironing out some jumping issues. It may ruin her mark to run well, so it would no surprise if she targeted a valuable Newbury mares handicap instead, but if she runs here she could defy massive odds.

No need to get too complicate, **LAURINA** will win this and give us an effective free bet on the Kim Muir. Looking across the meeting as a whole, there are enough short priced likely winners that a combo looks worth a look. I will be making Laurina the anchor leg of the "Naughty Shorties", a relay of Buveur D'Air – Apples Jade – Samcro – Laurina in a four-timer, which pays around 13/2, which will do very nicely.

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THURS: Race 7- Kim Muir Handicap Chase - 3 1/4 miles - Amateurs

Selected Current Odds: 6 Squouateur, Mall Dini, 20 Abolitionist

Ah, it's time for the Kim Muir – a legendary handicap chase for amateur riders and often “characterful horses”. My good friend Andy is the renowned (and possibly self-appointed) Kim Muir King. In fairness it is a race in which he has a superb record albeit frustrating for this Guide, not usually a selection available this side of nine pints of Stella and the night before racing. I thought I had learned enough from the master when getting on a winning run in this event as the results became surprisingly predictable. But last year's race was a throwback of old when Doomsday Book (the best seller when Andy was at his first Kim Muir) defied all logic to storm home.

I am partial to defying a bit of logic, and will be wading in undeterred in a race which has become one of the cornerstones to this guide.

Taking it from the top, Abolitionist looks like a very interesting contender. Trained in Ireland last year by Ellmarie Holden, he had a fruitful campaign, winning the competitive Leinster National in March off a mark of 137, beating Folsom Blue (now rated 12lbs higher) with 10 lengths back to the rest. A subsequent 3rd to Our Duke in the Irish National off 145 was an excellent effort. After one late summer hurdles warm up Abolitionist has since moved to the stable of Dr Richard Newland, primarily with Aintree in mind. He pulled off a similar trick with Pineau de Re, and has an excellent record for finding improvement in new recruits. Rated 145 here, Abolitionist would be dangerous even without improvement, but with the Newland magic, he looks potentially very dangerous. There are no issues with first time out performances for a yard that usually has them ready, and although Aintree is in mind, he can safely win here without incurring a penalty. One to put on the ticket.

There is some déjà vu about the top of the market. The oft gambled on Squouateur again looks likely to be a short priced favourite. That was the case (9/4) when 7th in the Martin Pipe, and again (5/1) when falling in this race last year 3 out. I didn't think he was going quite as well as some observers believed, I may be wrong, but I am not sure this race is quite right for him, he doesn't look very fluent over those fences, and another mishap could easily await. He looks far too short.

Mall Dini was my choice last year and nothing much went right for him in finishing a close 5th. He has been campaigned sparingly this season waiting for the likely better ground he will get here. He looks to have at least as good a chance as last year running off the same mark, and with any better luck he has to be bang there. The stable are masters at getting their horses ready for the festival and expect this one to shorten into favourite if stablemate Presenting Percy does the business in Wednesday's RSA. Simply irresistible, Jamie Codd will hopefully ride, with 4 wins in the last 9 runnings – what's not to like.

Sugar Baron finished like the wind in this race last year to finish 6th having looked well beaten. He repeated that trick first time out this season over this course when again coming from a mile back to be narrowly beaten. He is 2lbs higher than last year and may well repeat his performance. Sometimes these mercurial types will only give of their best when seemingly beaten, maybe one day it will get him in front, but the chances are he will continue to frustrate.

Pendra had one run last season, when just beaten in this race. Sure enough, connections look to pull off the same trick this year as he has not been seen since. He has been 3rd and 5th at previous festivals also, so we know he loves these conditions. He has been left on an unchanged mark of 145 which allows him to run here again, and it would be no surprise if top Irish ace Derek O'Connor was re-employed. It is hard to rule him out, although as a 10yo the challenge is there for him to retain his very best.

Braqueur D'Or had good early season form including running 4th to Total Recall in the Ladbroke at Newbury. He looks the type who could still improve, and off 137 is likely to be near the foot of the weights. The Nicholls yard are attached to a number of good amateurs and he is sure to get good assistance from the saddle. He has good each way claims.

MALL DINI was unlucky last year and off the same mark looks sure to go very close again this year. With respect to one 10yo Pendra, it is another, **ABOLITIONIST** who makes added appeal with the stable switch potentially bringing about the key improvement.

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FRI: Race 1 The Triumph Hurdle - 2 miles for novices aged 4 years old

Selected Current Odds: 3 Apple's Shakira, 9-2 Redicean, 8 Mr Adjudicator, Farclas, Stormy Ireland

This is a traditional test of stamina for juveniles, and will come off the back of a true test of stamina for our by now bedraggled crew. Having arrived full of running on Monday night, we will have been feeling the pace by midweek, niggled along on Thursday before getting a few serious reminders, and then, just as we have taken up the bit, my wife Tanya arrives like she has just entered the race – because she literally has – with a late night Thursday arrival and the kind of injection of pace that will have us strung out all over Cheltenham. Andy will have wandered off a true line before a series of bad mistakes down the Montpellier back straight; Pete's charade of "Moon Racer" will have him up in front of the Stewards (and now I've written it, I just know it's going to happen...); after veering like Might Bite towards my stable, I'll have been driven back on course in time to watch Tanya cruise into the winners enclosure at the Beehive to the most raucous Irish reception since Danoli.

If we make it to Friday after the threatened Thursday all-nighter, it will be this 2 mile test for 4yos that will test our ability to focus, visually and mentally.

In recent seasons this has been a JP McManus hotpot benefit, and after the wins of Ivanovich Gorbатов and Defi Du Seuil, his hopes of a hat-trick lie with favourite Apple's Shakira. She is 3 from 3 in the UK, all at Cheltenham and all in relatively easy fashion. It is fair to say she hasn't been tested yet, even though jockey Barry Gerraghty has looked to educate her by seemingly deliberately getting her into a bit of a race before going on to win. She is a full sister to the brilliant mare Apple's Jade, who was second in this race two years ago. Shakira gets the mares allowance and looks a real stayer who will be well suited if the ground is testing.

Alan King has a good record in the race and his Redicean won a good trial at Kempton last time in really eye-catching fashion. That win displayed a terrific turn of foot and completed a hat-trick of Kempton hurdle wins. Whilst Kempton juvenile form tends to translate pretty well even though the courses seem radically different, it would have been good to see this speedy type tested on a more testing course. His speed is impressive, but speed rarely wins Triumphs.

Working out Willie's best is a race within a race. Mr Adjudicator won Ireland's best juvenile hurdle wearing down the maiden Farclas of Gordon Elliott's yard on the run-in having travelled sweetly through the race. Farclas seems widely tipped up, so often punters like to latch on to the promise of the runner-up or the third, when the obvious winner is staring them in the face. I expect Mr Adjudicator to win that battle again.

Willie also has the lightly raced maiden winners, Stormy Ireland, and Saldier. Stormy is a mare with a big reputation. She won her maiden in mid-December and I can't help but think that we should have seen her again since, and it was disappointing that she didn't take up an engagement at the Dublin festival. She is a short price on reputation given the sparsity of what we have seen on the track.

Saldier also has just the one run, a very easy win at Gowran in mid-February. That was impressive but against poor opposition. He could be anything, but again it would have been better if we could have seen him more highly tested.

We Have A Dream is on a winning run for the Henderson yard, and is noticeably always mentioned in the same breath as Shakira, suggesting the yard don't see too much between them. After two very impressive wins, his latest two wins have been a bit more workmanlike. I would have liked to see him get some Cheltenham experience, many of this yard's previous Triumph winners have seen this track before, but Apple's Shakira has been hogging the Cheltenham races.

I prefer **APPLE'S SHAKIRA's** course form over the other leading UK challengers, with Redicean's speed likely to be blunted. She is the clear pick on very soft ground, which should also suit Willie's ex-French brigade of Stormy Ireland, Saldier and Elliott's Farclas. There is value to beat them all in Mr Adjudicator if we have some dry days.

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FRI: Race 2 - The County Handicap Hurdle - 2 miles

Selected Current Odds; 8 Max Dynamite, 14 Deal D'Estreval, Flying Tiger, 33 Mohaayed

Always like a punt at the County Hurdle. My good friend John will be hitting fever pitch as his usual betting system of 1. Anything owned by Trevor Hemmings, plus 2. Anything trained by Venetia, Alan King, Jonjo O'Neill or Nicky Henderson, plus 3. Anything he has ever backed before, will have him scrambling to back at least 23 of these.

Willie Mullins has an outstanding recent record in this race, he has a great stock of classy 2 mile hurdlers, and he has had success dropping some of the better ones back into handicap company in this event.

The market would have us believe he is about to pull off the same feat here with Max Dynamite. This horse has improved so much on the flat that we see him rarely over jumps these days. His flat rating of 113 is stellar, gained from two place efforts in Melbourne Cups, and should have him campaigning for a Champion Hurdle. That logic would have him thrown in here off just 141.

That said, he should have been thrown in off 137 when 4th in this race in 2015, or when 2nd in the Galway Hurdle off 136 that year, or when 9th in the Galway hurdle off 141 last Summer. He clearly is a strong contender, but reading flat form across to jumps is perilous, and all known jumps form says Max has a good solid chance, but he is beatable.

That is far from the end of Willie's challenge. Duc De Genievres would be hugely interesting but is unlikely to run, but any permutation of Sandsend, Deal D'Estreval, Bleu Et Rouge, Bunk Off Early, Abyssial and Bleu Berry could bulk out the challenge.

Bleu Et Rouge is the most proven, but an 8lb rise for coming second at Newbury leaves him plenty to find at 2 miles. Perhaps Abyssial is one to watch for carefully. His festival form is dire, a crashing fall at the third in a Triumph and a non-staying last in a World Hurdle as a 5yo. He was nearly 3 years off the track when running at Gowran recently, and his 4th of 6 there was understandable rusty, but also full of promise. It would be a Willie masterstroke – but he is worth an eye in the market.

Flying Tiger is a previous festival winner having sprung a surprise in the Fred Winter last year. That was off 134, and a mark of 140 here looks very generous. A literal reading of his 4th at Wincanton last time, close up behind Elgin, Ch'Tibello and Call Me Lord suggests he has been let in lightly, and we know he acts under the conditions. Definitely in the mix.

Another ex-festival winner is Ivanovich Gorbатов. Just how he beat Apples Jade in the 2016 Triumph remains a mystery, one which was immediately evident when beaten 41 lengths by that rival immediately afterwards at Aintree. At that stage, championship events were pretty much consigned to the bin, and plotting for handicaps began. He was duly sent off favourite for this race last year off a mark of 150, and although running well, ended up a well beaten 6th. The same plan has been pursued

since, and his mark now is down to 148. He looks likely to go well again, but that doesn't look like quite enough leniency. If he suddenly found his Triumph form he should be a shoo-in, but the sense is he is still a few pounds too high.

Mohaayed ran a good race when 7th in this last year. For a lightly raced novice, he ran wide to see his hurdles well, challenged wide, and only weakened out of it late on. He seems a stronger horse this year, and although finding it hard to win a race, it was noticeable how close he came to Buveur D'Air and The New One at Kempton. That may have been misleading, but it was a true run race on the ground and he finished just under 4 lengths behind the 161 rated The New One. A mark of 139 looks workable and he has each way claims at least.

FLYING TIGER should have this run to suit and can follow up last year's Fred Winter success. I'll be keeping an eye on Abyssial, but it is **MOHAAYED** getting the each way value (for which read, greed) vote.

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FRI: Race 3 The Albert Bartlett Novice Hurdle - 3m

Selected Current Odds: 9-2 Santini, 6 Chef des Obeaux, Duc des Genievres, 20 Calett Mad

The Albert Bartlett is an absolute war of attrition. A seemingly never-ending and usually hopeless marathon, like Arsenal's search for a holding midfielder, or binge-watching a box-set of Michael Portillo's Great Railway Journeys.

The agony of this race rarely turns to ecstasy for punters, but the race is a bit two-faced, and the ground appears to be the pivotal key. On decent ground we can get a race like last year when the decent ex-flat horse Penhill showed class to beat a good horse like Monalee. If the mud flies, I may as well enter my dog Rufus, freshly gelded, wearing a first-time sparkly collar, and (unfortunately) in desperate need of a wind operation. In truth anything can happen.

We may not get decent ground this year, but if it is reasonably raceable then the head of the market has some class acts.

The favourite looks likely to be from Nicky Henderson, which one will depend on the rain. Santini is an extremely impressive horse in the flesh, an athletic looking type, perhaps not as powerful as an Altior, but a sweet mover. I have little doubt that he is the best horse in the race – but that wins far less often in this event than it should. He won here over 2m4f in heavy ground in January, very much despite of the ground, and if it is soft here then I suspect there will be hardier types to outstay him. If it is decent ground then his class should make him hard to beat.

Henderson's Plan B is the slogger Chef Des Obeaux. He was no match for Santini over 2m4f on softish ground at Newbury, but has since won three straight including a plough like effort to win by 15 lengths at Haydock last time. That may not have been the best of races, but the manner on which he just pounded away is precisely the ceaseless gallop that does so well in this race once the ground cuts up. Looks like Henderson could have this covered either way.

Duc Des Genievres is in the same ownership as the Chef, but trained by Mullins. He really impressed me in chasing home Samcro at Leopardstown looking like he needs a step up in trip, This would be a big step up, and one I could only support if the ground was decent. If that were the case then he will be giving Santini a great race – although I would prefer to see him in a handicap of a very generous looking mark, and as a general rule I don't like to back 5yos in 3 mile hurdles, so a switch to a 2m4f handicap would be preferable.

Calett Mad has been around a while, and takes the unusual route of possibly running here a year after running 9th in the 4 mile chase. He is eligible also for the Pertemps final off a mark of 142, that might be tempting after a smooth win at Musselburgh, but trainer Nigel Twiston-Davies is nothing if not an optimist and he may well throw him in here. He is a slugger and he could go close on softer ground.

A similar sentiment applies to Chris's Dream who has sprung from nowhere for the Henry de Bromhead stable, but was so impressive in dishing out a destruction job when winning a Grade 3 on heavy ground at Clonmel by 64 lengths (not far short of a lap). That was a first try at this distance since his point-to-point days and was so overwhelming it is hard to put a value on it. He pretty much made all and that

guarantees that should it be soft there will be no hiding place. He would be the big threat to Chef in the mud.

I was also very impressed by Blow By Blow's last win when pulling out Rachael Blackmore's arms before winning at Thurles in a Grade 3. That was a fair little race and he was getting the better of stablemate Roaring Bull when he fell at the last. He is a big beast and an ex Grade 1 bumper winner. He is another with an eye-catching handicap mark should he go that route. Running him here may allow for a reunion with Rachael, he will need to settle a little better, but he could just be about to realise his potential over hurdles.

On decent ground, Santini is the best horse in this race. But not only does the best horse rarely win, the ground also looks like this could be a real test. **CHEF DES OBEAUX** gets the nod over Chris's Dream for first choice mud-lark, whilst **CALETT MAD** if running here, edges out Blow By Blow for the each way value.

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FRI: Race 4 - The Gold Cup Chase 3 1/4 miles

Current Selected Odds: 4 Might Bite, 6 Native River, Sizing John, 9 Our Duke, 10 Killultagh Vic

My wife Tanya is fantastically understanding of my racing fanaticism, my Cheltenham obsession, and my seemingly unquenchable thirst for all things sport related, although she'll only "stand up if you love the darts" after a suitably mammoth prescription of prosecco. She loves coming to Cheltenham, and each year she adds "an investment piece" to her racing wardrobe. This year she is only racing for Gold Cup day, and we will doubtless be treated to her Louise Kennedy black and gold coat. Suffice as to say, I am going to need to land the tricast to break even !!

Thankfully the Gold Cup is a race which has some distinctly regular characteristics. In short, unless you are dealing with a potential superstar (Kauto Star, Best Mate), then don't back a horse for a repeat win, in fact go further – don't back a horse who has ever run in the race before. Only Kauto, Best Mate, See More Business and The Fellow won this race having previously competed in it in the last 30 years.

That throws down the gauntlet to a few here that they need to be a roughly 1 in 8 historic event. Is that just a statistical fluke – probably not. Observation tells us that long distance chasing at this level is terribly attritional, either through career ending injury, or through the cumulative effects of having to go deep in the well too often. Even giants like Denman and promising sorts like Long Run were never able to physically match the efforts of their Gold Cup wins.

Sizing John returns as defending champion and as one of the market leaders. For a long time he looked like he could be withstanding the Gold Cup hoodoo by following up in impressive fashion at Punchestown and winning well there again in a Grade 1 seasonal debut. As a 7yo Cup winner he has a better chance than most of holding his form, however he was just awful when beaten out of sight in the Christmas Chase at Leopardstown, and hasn't been seen since. Nothing has come to light to explain that effort, although it should be noted that his Punchestown victim Djakadam, usually very consistent, was even worse at Christmas also, so it could be argued that both trainers, Harrington and Mullins, failed to recognise the physical impact of that first clash coming just 18 days before the Leopardstown run.

Whatever the theory, we now have to trust firstly that Jessica Harrington can get the horse back to his best, and secondly that his best will be as effective this year as it was last year. On balance that's a few too many ifs. Setting aside the physical, as Jessie is a genius, his win last year was achieved in stylish fashion by nearly 3 lengths – however that was on good ground. He will be lucky to get the same conditions, and the thorough stayers who chased him home that day, Minella Rocco and Native River (both had run in the 4 miler the previous year) will both have good cause to think they can reverse that form if there is any cut in the ground. Jockey Robbie Power is staying faithful, and if you won on him last year then why not, but he doesn't look the likeliest winner.

Both Minella Rocco and Native River have those historical stats against them. Minella's festival form is certainly interesting, but his form this season so far has been awful, and for all that Jonjo peaks his horses for these big events, he has a hell of a lot of peaking to do to get this fella back to his best.

The market suggests Native River may be the best option from last year's race. That probably reflects his known aptitude for handling soft or heavy ground. He did very well to grab third last year having tried to stretch the field from the front on ground that simply allowed pacey horses like Sizing John to comfortably sit behind the pace. Grinding away in boggy ground he is much more likely to run the finish out of many of these. He has been kept fresh deliberately with just one pretty impressive Newbury warm up race, and the lack of added mileage in those legs is a clear defence against the wear and tear risks. He should run really well if he gets his ground.

The horse with the most obvious chance on historical trends is Might Bite. Horses having their second season chasing are just the ticket for this event, and there is no better guide to the best such horse coming through than the previous seasons RSA Chase, in effect the Gold Cup for novices. Might Bite won that race in remarkable fashion, simultaneously stamping his claims for this event and piling up the doubts as well.

He looked set to be one of the most impressive RSA chase winners for years when sailing clear of his field a long way from home. He was a dozen lengths in front over the last, when he suddenly started to run straight at me. That would have been fine if I was standing at the winning post, but I was nearly the chute where horses come out onto the course, and Might Bite was effectively running sideways in a seeming attempt to get the hell out of Dodge. Having slowed to pretty much a walk, it was an incredible effort to regather his galloping stride and overhaul Whisper on the line, who had pinched a lead of several lengths plus full momentum.

Since then he landed the King George at Kempton, another pretty good guide to this race, although he probably wasn't as impressive there on pretty soft ground as might have been expected given his good novice form on the track, and the fairly weak opposition. He clearly has ticks in a lot of the right boxes and a whole load of talent, but there are things to be wary of.

Will he make a swerve for the chute as he did last year, and as he did in his other Cheltenham run as a novice hurdler? I was asked at a Preview Night by a non-racing attendee if it was the same course – and before I was about to say the obvious, I realised it isn't. The New Course, for this race is on the far inside of the track, whereas the Old Course for the RSA is the outer track and hence closer to the chute. So either he won't see the chute from farther away, or he'll have a hell of a sideways trek to get to it !!

For all that Might Bite was deeply impressive at times last year, he was no more impressive than Our Duke, who won an Irish National as a novice off 11st 4lbs by 14 lengths. That was a sensational performance that had Gold Cup written all over it. However, this season has been far from easy. He was another to completely bomb out when awful on his Down Royal return. He did scope abnormally afterwards suggesting a respiratory issue, and the Harrington team gave him 3 months to recover before

returning in the Irish Gold Cup. He didn't fire again there, finishing beaten around 16 lengths, but he looked to get tired, that impacted his jumping, and he did plug on when he got a second wind. The benefit of that run could be seen when two weeks later he got the better of the very good Presenting Percy over a shorter than ideal 2m4f on heavy ground at Gowran. He was a gutsy winner there giving 7lbs away and outfighting a 160-rated horse who was seemingly going the better.

He is a bit of a hit and miss project this season, but he is a second season chaser, and that Fairyhouse run is an indelible memory. If he can progress again from Gowran then he could be Jessie's best chance. My concern is that his campaign can not have been the plan, and after his break this will be three runs in about 6 weeks, and that feels a fraction rushed as a prep for such a tough race. I'd like to back him, but that's just too much.

Road To Respect is well named as he had been treading that route since turning up at last year's festival as a 145 rated handicapper. He showed what a blot that was by running away with the Plate off that mark, and rubbed further salt in the handicapper's wounds by following up in a Grade 1 at Fairyhouse beating Yorkhill. He looked the best horse in the race at Down Royal when he reappeared (with Our Duke bombing), and may just have been short enough of peak fitness to get outrun in the shadow of the post by the mercurial Outlander.

He reversed that form when winning a Gigginstown-only finish of bafflingly multi-coloured caps in the Christmas Chase. Missing the Irish Gold Cup was probably a wise call, and he will come here as a second season chaser on an upward curve and kept fresh for the occasion. Amazingly he was veteran Irish trainer Noel Meade's first festival chase winner last year, and if he gets decent ground then there has to be a fair chance he can be the second as well.

The winner of the Irish Gold Cup was Edwulf in an amazing story of recovery from a nearly fatal injury incurred late in the 4 miler at last year's meeting. I am not sure I'd want to bring him back to this course with all the memories that entails, and heart-warming though that win was, a neck defeat of Outlander is probably not good enough for this.

The horse who might have won the Irish Gold Cup was Killultagh Vic, who was having only his second run in two years, and his first in two years over fences when looking likely to win until crashing out at the last. That was the same last fence that he so nearly fell at 2 years previously and jumping is clearly a concern for an otherwise hugely talented horse. He was good enough to beat Thistlecrack as a novice hurdler at 3 miles, but he is unproven yet as a staying chaser. Talented, but pretty short in the market considering the risks.

Definitely Red was a good winner of a poor Cotswold Chase. The balance of his form to that point didn't really say Gold Cup, and he looks more a National type. He will run well, he nearly always does, but it would be a much bigger surprise to me than his 16/1 odds were he to prove the best of this bunch.

The similarly priced Total Recall could have scope to out run that price. He was switched to Willie Mullins at the start of the season and immediately set about making a mockery of his handicap mark winning the Munster National off 129, then the Ladbroke at Newbury off 147. He beat Whisper a neck that day in receipt of a stone. He was probably worth more than the winning margin that day, but he was in receipt of a stone. If Willie is improving the horse rapidly then maybe he can make the next leap forward, my suspicion is he just got a very well handicapped horse, and whilst there will be some improvement that might be enough to make him equivalent to the absent Whisper, but it won't be enough to see him win.

Bachasson is wholly unexposed, but by the same measure pretty inexperienced at this level. His only top level from was a narrow defeat by Edwulf over 2m4f as a novice last year. That puts him in the mix here if improving for the trip. He looked a stayer when plugging on in the 2106 Albert Bartlett prior to a last flight departure.

Shocks look unlikely. Tea For Two doesn't seem to be the same horse here as he is at Kempton, whilst Saphir du Rheu is capable of putting up a good show but didn't quite make the frame last year, and this looks a better race. I could though give a random squeak to Sub Lieutenant. He seems to have been around for ages but has just one festival run, when chasing home Un de Sceaux in the Ryanair last year. That was miles better than his form going into the race, and he does seem to stay this trip, if he can find a similar level of season's best here then he could run on into the frame at a huge price

Tricast time.....Might Bite, Our Duke and Road To Respect are the three second season chasers who are likely to provide the winner here. Native River looks the most likely of the older horses to bustle up the frame and make an impact on the places. With Our Duke's rushed preparation, he falls out of the frame. **MIGHT BITE** is the likeliest winner in the hope that the distant new course insulates him from his chute antics. Native River would be close to first choice if the ground becomes really testing. **Sub Lieutenant** gets some fun money in the each way market.

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FRI: Race 5 - The Foxhunters Chase - 3 1/4 miles for Amateur Riders

Current Selected Odds – 7-2 Burning Ambition 6 Wonderful Charm,

Tally Ho !! It's time for the hunter chase, the annual opportunity for top class amateur riders to expose the race riding shortcomings of the gilded UK sub-aristocracy, or at least that is the norm.

Last year saw a superb ride from Bryony Frost – a glimpse of the talent that was to come – when she had Pacha Du Polder in perfect position throughout and was able to pinch the lengths jumping the last that he needed to hold on up the hill.

That raced bucked the trend of this event. Historically the pace was always suicidal, and the best race positioning was usually very near the back. Last year, fancied veteran On The Fringe was given just such a miles-back ride by legend Jamie Codd, but his older legs couldn't quicken, and the pace up front was that bit better judged, and On The Fringe ended up staying on dourly for minor honours.

His chances of making amends look slim if he reappears at 13, but one who might make amends is a horse who tracked his every move last year. Wonderful Charm was ridden by Katy Walsh, and she justifiably tracked Codd on assumption he would be the one to beat, and to nurse the arguably suspect stamina of her mount. In the end that left her out of her ground at the crucial stage and the horse stayed on really well all the way up the straight to be a fast finishing second.

Now they know the horse stays, and in fact he does do anything too fast, I expect to still see a waiting ride from top amateur Sam Waley-Cohen, but not giving up so much ground. Provided we avoid a bog, this horse has the best combination of class and experience beneath and above the saddle to make amends for last year's near miss.

A number of younger hunters have made the progression from the Irish scene and are due some respect, with warm favourite Burning Ambition top of that list. The Scorpion gelding has put together a 4 race point-to-point winning streak without breaking sweat, before a debut Rules win at Limerick again in easy fashion. The streak was broken by the top notch Gilgamboa (not eligible here), but that was a very creditable effort. He has inexperience to beat here, and looks heavily overbacked at the odds – he could win, but its not as likely as the markets may have you believe.

The formerly top class Foxrock was a step above all of these at his peak. That said he was disappointing in both previous Festival runs, and his second to Gilgamboa was considerably more distant than Burning Ambition's.

WONDERFUL CHARM probably should have won last year. I tipped him then, and this looks no harder to win so I'll go back in again. Clearly Burning Ambition could be anything, but it may be a year too soon.

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FRI: Race 6 - The Martin Pipe Handicap Hurdle - 2 1/2 miles for Conditional Jockeys

Current Selected Odds – 8 Flawless Escape, 10 Diese des Beiffes, 20 Hardlin, Blow by Blow

The formula for this race, is both well-defined and not hugely helpful. We need to find a novice, from a leading yard, with the potential to be better than he's shown.

Mullins x 3, Nicholls x2, Henderson, and last year Elliott account for 7 of the 9 winners since the inaugural running of this race, and winners include subsequent Grade 1 winners, Sir Des Champs, Don Poli, Killultagh Vic and Champagne Classic.

Elliott is expected to deliver again and the bookies are cautious in pricing up his novice Flawless Escape. This grey Sagamix gelding won a Roscommon bumper before a good maiden hurdle win at Leopardstown over Christmas. I always think the bookies watch that meeting closely and a good effort there has you trimmed 4 points for Cheltenham. A subsequent 3rd to easy winner Total Recall at the Dublin Festival was again in full glare, and whilst he has a good chance, he looks a fraction short in the market.

Of his other dozens of entries, it is former Punchestown Grade 1 bumper winner Blow By Blow that really catches my eye. He has that perfect mix of top class back catalogue, and slow building current form that could have him in here off a golden mark. After an 18 month break and a switch from Willie to Gordon, it has been slow work as a novice this season, but overdrive looked well and truly engaged last time when storming home for Rachel Blackmore at Thurles. That was a massive improvement and he could be on the way back to his very best. If Gordon picks this race then take the hint.

Amongst a squad of Gigginstown owned potential alternative should Blow By Blow be switched elsewhere, Hardline appeals most. He has had a busy season, but looks to be getting better, and his hard-fought win over the useful Impact Factor a few weeks ago was an excellent effort. He can go well.

The Mullins gang looks likely to be headed by Deal D'Estuval, a good second at the Dublin Festival, and Sandsend, a good winner last time in the grade 3 Limestone Lad hurdle. I prefer Sandsend as that novice form may be harder for the handicapper to assess, and the horse dug deep in encouraging fashion to hold off the much more experienced Forge Meadow. Further behind that day, the Mullins trained Dolciano Dici was getting a very soft ride on a first run since importing from France 18 months previously. Not sure he'd be ready for this race, but interesting to see if Willie thinks so.

This looks destined for the Emerald Isle. **BLOW BY BLOW** is an outstanding top choice. If he runs elsewhere then Elliott's **HARDLINE** gets the call.

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FRI: Race 7 - The Grand Annual Chase - 2 miles

Current Selected Odds – 11 Vaniteux, Theinval, 12 Don't Touch It, 14 Patricks Park

This historic chase is the anchor leg of the 28 leg festival relay race, and its well worth finding a top tip to take the baton on the race to the line as we have an awful long wait til the 2019 Supreme.

The race is about attrition at speed. The pace is always relentless, and there is no way back from any serious jumping error.

The pattern for winners is just like the other festival handicaps, with, if anything, even more bias towards a well weighted novice or second season chaser.

Last year Jessie Harrington landed this with Rock The World, who had been a close third when favourite 12 months earlier. She clearly has a good idea what is needed to win here, and she brings the very interesting Don't Touch It here along with the reigning champ.

Rock The World is 6lbs higher than last year, but has to be on a shortlist given his efforts in the race. He has shown no form since, but he really needs the better ground he is likely to get here rather than the domestic bog-racing that is his intra-festival diet.

That said, it is hard not to think the Don't Touch It is Jessie's no1. He signed off his hurdling career with a grade 1 Punchestown festival win over Petit Mouchior (now rated 158), Brain Power (156), and Yorkhill(163), Charbel (156) and Ball D'Arc (157) in which context his rating here of 149 looks very generous.

Clearly he hasn't earned that rating by showing form akin to his Punchestown victims, but after a quiet novice campaign he was produced to land a good Punchestown festival handicap off a mark of 144. He travelled very well that day and scrambled home after an iffy last jump. He didn't get unduly punished for that win and after a winter break had a quiet run round the back at Fairyhouse, before unseating halfway around at the Dublin festival. You are not backing him on current form, but on back catalogue and trainer record, he has to be in the mix.

Nicky Henderson always targets this race named in memory of his father. His horse Theinval was a very good third last year as a novice. He had been a busy novice and was having his 7th run over fences, a further 8 runs since should have well and truly ironed out any novice tendencies. He followed his festival run last year with runner-up spots at Aintree and Ayr, and looks to have been set up for this return trip off a rating of 141, which despite all those good runs is precisely his rating from last year. Better ground should suit, and he looks impossible to keep out of the frame.

The usually powerful David Pipe yard have had a quiet season by their standards. One side effect of that is the potential for a lot of horses to get well handicapped. They have a few aimed at the festival handicaps, and by the time we get to this race we should know whether they have had a well-timed resurgence. If so, then Vaniteux could look well weighted off a mark of 151. When with Henderson he was chasing Douvan in a close second when unseating 2 out on an Arkle. Nothing went well for him after, but this is a lowest mark since, so he should be watched in the market.

One horse extremely well handicapped for the festival should be Patricks Park. He switched to Willie Mullins two runs ago, and won a valuable Dublin festival handicap on his first chasing start for Willie looking like he had a ton in hand. A 12lb rise may look punitive, but it wouldn't have stopped him that day, and it was needed to give him any chance to make it into a festival race. He will probably be left in the Plate and this race as they are the two handicaps which often cut up the most. If he gets in here then he would be a massive danger.

Ordinary World fits the bill as a second season novice running for the Henry de Bromhead stable who seem to do well at the meeting with a small travelling squad. He ran 3rd to Altior in last season's Arkle when looking to have gone too fast too early chasing the pace. He ran noticeably well at Leopardstown when looking to be the main challenger to Champion Chase hope Min until a huge error at the last brought him to a standstill. A mark of 157 is certainly challenging, but he could run well under a big weight, and even better if under Davy Russell.

Duke of Navan has looked better than ever aged 10, and did well to get up and beat the very useful Bigmartre in a helter-skelter race at Doncaster. He travelled with ease that day off a breakneck early pace, and that could be a good sign given the likely similar pacing to this race. He could challenge the frame.

These handicaps don't always reward the consistent, but if you are inconsistent and yet capable of occasional outstanding form, then a going day may be all that is required to strike. You don't get much more inconsistent than Foxtail Hill, who loves to bowl and along and dominate from the front, but sulks the moment he doesn't get his own way. But give him enough time in front and he can be very hard to pass. Not really an each way bet, but a lively outsider.

A crucial race forgoing out with a bank not a whimper. Dinner will taste a lot sweeter if first choice **THEINVAL** gets his revenge for last year's third. **PATRICKS PARK** has to be backed as the leading Irish challenger, but if he can't make the field then Jessie's **DON'T TOUCH IT** has to be backed.

362 days to wait.....

...the horror, the horror....

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