



2017 CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL PREVIEW

Plenty of experience and expertise in this year's preview:

- ***Leading professional backer, Steve Lewis Hamilton (SLH) assesses the home challenge whilst top racing writer and presenter, Donn McClean (DMC) analyses the Irish contingent.***
- ***John Hunt and Richard Hoiles; two of the leading commentators in racing provide their insight.***
- ***The telling stats from Paul O'Hara***
- ***Horses to follow exclusively from the Lambourn trainers***

Tuesday

1.30 Supreme Novices' Hurdle (Grade 1) 4yo+ 2m¹/₂f

SLH: Ballyandy and Movewiththetimes boast the best form of the British horses having finished 1st and 2nd in the Betfair Handicap Hurdle at Newbury.

There is little to choose between the pair-both on Betfair Hurdle form and on C&D form last November.

To some effect they have shown their hand more than some of their rivals, although both can progress further.

However there are at least a dozen other home trained runners that can be expected to improve to the level already achieved by Ballyandy and Movewiththetimes.

Neon Wolf is favourite for the Neptune on Wednesday. However should connections decide to run him here I would give him serious consideration.

He was very impressive at Haydock and falls into the 'could be anything' category.

Last year we started with a good winner as Altior took the opener, but as there is no stand-out performer from Britain this time, I feel the winner of this race could well come from across the Irish Sea.



DMC: Melon (pictured) has been all the rage for a while now, even since before he made his debut for Willie Mullins at Leopardstown. He won well that day, he jumped well for a debutant with the exception of a slight mistake at the last, and he finished off his race really strongly.

The form of that race does not entitle him to be favourite for the Supreme Novices' Hurdle, and Flown is the last horse to win the Festival curtain-raiser on the back of just one run over hurdles. But add that to the regard in which Willie Mullins and Ruby Walsh clearly hold Melon, and it wouldn't be at all surprising to see him win.

2.10 Arkle Challenge Trophy Novices' Chase (Grade 1) 5yo+ 2m

SLH: No appeal as a betting medium with Altior (pictured) deservedly at very short odds.

I can find no each way or 'without the favourite' options either, with little to choose between the other British trained runners.

This is a race where I will be more than happy to see a very good horse strut his stuff.



3.30 Champion Hurdle Challenge Trophy (Grade 1) 4yo+ 2m½f

SLH: Yanworth heads the market having won his last two races at tracks that didn't play to his strengths.

In the Christmas Hurdle at Kempton he was never travelling until going to the last hurdle and eventually won comfortably.

It was the same story at Wincanton on his latest start, (where he wore cheek-pieces for the first time) being at his strongest at the end of the race.

There is every reason to think that Cheltenham will be a far more suitable course for Yanworth, and there is every possibility that he will produce a higher level of performance.

Connections have redirected Buveur D'Air to this race rather than the Arkle.

He couldn't have won any easier on the switch back to hurdles at Sandown and I consider him a very live danger.

However if I decide to bet on the day I will be keeping Yanworth onside. Currently 7/2 generally.



DMC: Petit Mouchoir (pictured) has not been overly fashionable for some reason, but he could be over-priced for the Champion Hurdle as a result.

A progressive novice hurdler last season for Willie Mullins, he has continued that progression this term for Henry de Bromhead. He won the Grade 1 Ryanair Chase at Leopardstown over Christmas, he then followed up by landing the Irish Champion Hurdle back at Leopardstown in January; clocking a good time on each

occasion. He is a real galloper who is well-suited by aggressive tactics. It will be exciting to watch him.

4.10 Mares' Hurdle (Grade 1) 4yo+ 2m4f

SLH: The British are really up against it here with all our challengers being of a similar level - which is quite a way behind a few of their Irish rivals.

On a point of pricing:

Lifeboat Mona, trained by Paul Nichols is 14/1 whilst from lower profile yards, Rons Dream and Briery Queen are both a general 33/1 and all have similar chances. The latter pair are far bigger on Betfair.

DMC: Limini surprised a few people – not least his trainer – with the performance that she put up in beating Apple's Jade on her debut this season at Punchestown.

She was a high-class novice hurdler last season: Her Aintree form ties in with Champion Hurdle aspirants Buveur D'Air and Petit Mouchoir, and she proved that she can operate under Cheltenham Festival conditions when she won the Mares' Novices' Hurdle at last year's Festival.

4.50 JT McNamara National Hunt Challenge Cup Amateur Riders' Novices' Chase (Grade 2) 5yo+ 4m

SLH: Not a deal to choose between the leading British runners on form already achieved. However Beware The Bear is a horse I noted on his latest start at Newbury in December. He gave me the distinct impression he would be ideally suited by the extreme test of stamina this race provides.

He has been brought along steadily and could well take a big step forward here.

Nicky Richards trained Baywing is also worth close consideration. After a disappointing chasing debut at Wetherby, he won the Grade 2 Towton Chase at the same course unchallenged at big odds. He is fully effective on soft and heavy ground, and if conditions are suitable on the day I will keep him onside.

Wednesday

1.30 Neptune Investment Management Novices' Hurdle (Grade 1) (4yo+) 2m5f

SLH: As mentioned previously Neon Wolf impressed at Haydock and has a solid chance here.

However with so many progressive horses in the field odds of 9/4-5/2 make little appeal.

I wouldn't be surprised to see his price bigger on the day. Finian's Oscar also appears short in the market at around 7/2. It's possible to pick holes in his form.



Willoughby Court (pictured) won well at Warwick, the form of which is sound. Although he has yet to race at Cheltenham, which is a slight negative, he impresses me as horse with plenty of potential.

Peter The Mayo Man is worth a look if taking his chance here, the step up in trip could bring marked improvement. At big odds Colin's Sister has already achieved a

similar level of form to many that are much shorter in the market. She receives the 7lb mares allowance.

At the double figure price currently on offer, Willoughby Court makes most appeal.

DMC: Shattered Love could run well here at a decent price. Gordon Elliott's mare wasn't beaten far by Airlie Beach at Down Royal in early November, nor by Let's Dance at Punchestown later that month. Those two mares are high-class novice hurdlers, that is high-class novice form. The Gigginstown House mare has won her last two, possibly helped by the fact that Asthuria fell in both, but she is a mare who finds lots for pressure, and it might have been close between the pair of them at Fairyhouse last time.

As importantly, the ultimate runner-up that day Forge Meadow came out and beat the boys impressively in a Grade 2 race at Naas next time, and it may just be that we have a highly talented bunch of novice hurdling mares this term.

Shattered Love should appreciate the step up to an extended two and a half miles, she gets 7lb from the geldings, and she could be a little under the radar.

2.10 RSA Novices' Chase (Grade 1) (5yo+) 3m½f

SLH: Might Bite was in the process of producing the best staying novice chase performance of the season when taking a heavy fall at the final fence in the 'Kauto Star' at Kempton on Boxing day.

Connections subsequently found a weak race at Doncaster where Might Bite basically jumped round and won unchallenged.

On his one chase start at Cheltenham back in November 2015 his jumping was not fluent. Might Bite is the clear form choice of the British trained horses and a decent round of fencing puts him in with every chance.

However he obviously comes with risks attached and at around 11/4 he makes limited appeal. There's very little to choose between the other leading home trained horses. Whilst I respect the Irish challenge, this presently looks wide open.

2.50 Coral Cup Handicap Hurdle (Grade 3) (4yo+) 2m5f

DMC: Tombstone was given a British rating of 149, just 1lb higher than his Irish mark of 148, and that may under-estimate his ability.

He was a good novice last season, and he was impressive in beating Jezki at Gowran Park last time. Gigginstown House were considering supplementing him to the Champion Hurdle, which is significant, he could be better than a 149-rated horse.



3.30 Betway Queen Mother Champion Chase (Grade 1) (5yo+) 2m

SLH: Similar to the Arkle, this is another Championship race where it is difficult to find a betting angle. Douvan (pictured) dominates the race and the market and deserves to be at very short odds.

Of the British horses, last year's 4th in this race, Gods Own, should run to his usual level of form. But he is not improving and a similar finishing position to last year would be a good run. Fox Norton was well beaten by Altior on his latest start at Newbury. I would expect a significant improvement on that effort, with his best days still to come. He has an excellent record at Cheltenham and a career best performance is possible. He may, at the very least, give Douvan a race.

DMC: This race can be summed up in one word: it begins with D and ends in ouvan. No need to back him though, you may not enjoy the race if you back him. Just watch him and appreciate him.

5.30 Champion Bumper (Grade 1) (4-6yo) 2m½f

DMC: The bumper is difficult as there are so many unknowns: Carter McKay is well-regarded by Willie and Patrick Mullins, and the Jessica Harrington-trained Someday battled on well to beat another well-regarded Mullins horse in Voix Des Tiep at Leopardstown on his only run this season. Those two could be the pick of the Irish.

Thursday

1.30 JLT Novices' Chase (Grade 1) (5yo+) 2m4f

SLH: Top Notch looks sure to run a big race. He has been brought along steadily, starting off his chasing career at Uttoxeter, Warwick and Plumpton before putting in his best performances at Ascot and Sandown on his latest two starts. Top Notch finished fifth in last year's Champion Hurdle and was second in the previous year's Triumph. He remains progressive over fences and is a horse I will keep onside.

On official figures Politologue has a similar level of form, but in my view that form is questionable. Flying Angel and Cloudy Dream are both worth keeping a close eye on with a view to future races.

DMC: Disko (pictured) could go well here. This intermediate trip is his distance, at least for now. Noel Meade's horse was just out-stayed by Our Duke over three miles at Leopardstown over Christmas, but he was much happier dropped back down to two miles and five furlongs when he won the Grade 1 Flogas Chase back at Leopardstown six weeks later. Under a fine aggressive ride from Sean Flanagan, his jumping was super and he kept on all the way to the line to comfortably gain revenge over Our Duke. Similarly aggressive tactics could have most his rivals in trouble a fair way out.



2.10 Pertemps Network Final Handicap Hurdle (Listed Race) (5yo+) 3m

DMC: Presenting Percy won a handicap at Fairyhouse last time off a mark of 130. He was impressive in winning, and the Irish handicapper rewarded him with a 10lb hike, with the British handicapper adding another 6lb. His British mark of 146 means that he will have 11st 10lb at least to carry in the Pertemps Final, and that makes it tough.

That said, he may be progressive enough to cope with that mark and that weight. He is a hugely likeable individual, and his trainer Pat Kelly and owner Philip Reynolds won this race last year with a similar type in Mall Dini.

2.50 Ryanair Chase (Grade 1) Class 1 (5yo+) 2m5f

SLH: 2015 winner of this race Uxizandre ran very promisingly on his reappearance after injury, indicating that he retains plenty of his old ability. It would be one of the festival highlights if he regained his crown. Emotion aside, he has every chance, although in my view the 6/1 available is just about the right price.

Josses Hill is the other home trained contender to consider. His jumping has improved with experience but I'm not convinced of that holding up in the pressure of a championship race. The Irish challenge is led by current favourite Un De Sceaux. After an extended season last year to race in France, he has run just twice this season to win the Tingle Creek and Clarence House. Worth watching the market as we lead up to this race.

3.30 Stayers' Hurdle (Grade 1) (4yo+) 3m

SLH: Unowhatimeanharry's odds of around 5/4 would be fair if he was only taking on other British trained horses, but he makes no appeal at short odds taking into account the Irish challenge.

We still don't know how good he is, but on form achieved he hasn't too much in hand of a few of the Irish horses, certainly not enough to justify his prohibitive price.

DMC: Unowhatimeanharry is going to be difficult to beat here, but better ground could bring Jezki into it.

Jezki (pictured) is the 2014 Champion Hurdler, he has class and he thrives under Cheltenham Festival conditions, and we know that he stays three miles. He beat Hurricane Fly and Zabana in the World Series Hurdle on his only attempt at the distance at the 2015 Punchestown Festival.

It was disappointing on the face of it that Tombstone beat him last time at Gowran Park, but Tombstone is probably a lot better than people appreciated at the time, and the ground was very soft that day. Jezki should be much better back on better ground at Cheltenham, and back up at three miles.



4.50 Mares' Novices' Hurdle (Grade 2) (4yo+) 2m1f

SLH: A race that has little appeal at present, there is little to choose between our best mares. The form level achieved by them not that high.

Coillte Lass, Colin's Sister and La Bague Au Roi are all progressive.

But overall the Irish mares look to boast the stronger form and I will expect them to come out on top.

5.30 Fulke Walwyn Kim Muir Challenge Cup Amateur Riders' Handicap Chase (Class 2) (5yo+) 3m2f

DMC: Mall Dini could be the answer here.

Pat Kelly's horse has been beaten in all five of his chases this season, but four of those races were run over two and a half miles or less, and all five were on soft or heavy ground. He should be able to show his true credentials on better ground and back over an extended three miles. He won the Pertemps Final last year, so we know that he can go well at Cheltenham, and his British handicap mark of 143 is fair. It is just 2lb higher than his Irish mark, and just 4lb higher than the hurdles mark off which he won the Pertemps last year.

Friday

1.30 Triumph Hurdle (Grade 1) (4yo) 2m1f

SLH: Master Blueyes showed improved form to win well at Kempton after Charlie Parcs fell two hurdles from home.

Although under pressure at the time I think Charli Parcs would have gone very close to winning if standing up. There isn't a deal to choose between the two of them.

Both horses have yet to run at Cheltenham, although the manner of their running styles suggests a stronger stamina test should suit them both.

Defi Du Seuil on the other hand, has had plenty of experience at Cheltenham, having won on all 3 visits to the course. The first of those was on the old course back in November, the latest two wins coming on the new course, which the Triumph is run on.

His other two successes were gained at Ffos Las, and more notably Chepstow in a Grade 1 event, where he demolished a decent field despite numerous jumping errors,.

Defi Du Seuil's jumping will improve with experience. He sets a high standard of the British trained horses and is a very worthy favourite.

DMC: Mega Fortune put up the best performance of his career when he won the Grade 1 Spring Juvenile Hurdle at Leopardstown last time.

That race is a really accurate pointer to the Triumph Hurdle, having produced four of the last five Triumph Hurdle winners. Mega Fortune was probably helped by the soft ground that day, but he also appeared to improve for his first-time cheek-pieces and for a fine aggressive ride by Davy Russell. He may not have to improve an awful lot on that run to go close in the Triumph Hurdle and, as long as the ground does not come up fast, he could run a big race.

2.50 Albert Bartlett Novices' Hurdle (Grade 1) 3m

SLH: West Approach (pictured) is a horse with plenty of racing experience who had appeared to have reached a decent level of form that had then plateaued. However that view has now been adjusted with him



producing much improved performances on his last two starts.

The first of those runs was in the Long Walk Hurdle at a very foggy Ascot. West Approach led the field into the home straight. The field then disappeared into the fog jumping two out -when they eventually emerged on the run-in West Approach wasn't with them. It transpired he had unseated his jockey at the final flight of hurdles. Finishing within ten lengths of the second would have constituted improved form.

That improvement was confirmed in the Cleeve Hurdle on this course, finishing third, just over 3l behind Unowwhatimeanharry. That sets a pretty decent standard of the home trained horses and I fully expect a big performance.

The Worlds End impressed in his latest success at Haydock and is progressive. I would expect him figure.

DMC: Gordon Elliott says that Death Duty is a better novice hurdler than No More Heroes was, than Don Cossack was, and that is massive.

He has been impressive in all his runs this season, he is four for four, and he galloped on strongly to win the Grade 1 Lawlor's Hotel Hurdle at Naas last time. He is a real galloper who could even improve for a step up to three miles. He is a hugely exciting individual.

3.30 Cheltenham Gold Cup Chase (Grade 1) 3m2½f

SLH: Unfortunately the potential superstar Thistlecrack is absent, although Colin Tizzard still trains two of the market leaders in Cue Card and Native River.

Cue Card was visually very impressive at Ascot, with connections saying they believe him to be as good as ever. However the bare facts of his four starts this season do not back up that statement. I believe him to be a vulnerable favourite.

Stablemate Native River remains progressive and on recent form has a similar chance to Cue Card.

The Irish challenge is very strong, with the runner-up for the past two years Djakadam (pictured) having a great chance to go one better.



DMC: This could be Djakadam's year. Second in the last two Gold Cups, he has had a trouble-free preparation this year, unlike last year, and the vibes about him are strong. He could go off favourite.

That said, Sizing John may represent better value at about twice Djakadam's odds. Jessica Harrington's horse was a top class novice hurdler and novice chaser when he was with Henry de Bromhead, but he seems to have improved this year for stepping up in trip. He stayed on well to beat Sub Lieutenant in the Kinloch Brae Chase over two and a half miles on his penultimate run, and he stepped up from that when he stepped up to three miles for the first time last time to win the Irish Gold Cup.

Of course, he has to prove his stamina for the Gold Cup trip, but he is by Midnight Legend out of a mare who won over two miles and five furlongs three times over hurdles at Sedgefield on soft ground, so there is every chance that he will stay the trip. He is classy, he has top-class two-mile pace, and there is precedent here – Kicking King, War Of Attrition, Best Mate, even Kauto Star, were all two-milers before they stepped up in trip and won the Gold Cup.

Sizing John is only seven, he still has bags of scope for progression as a staying chaser, and he could run a big race in the Gold Cup.

SLH: Donn and I trust you have found our section of the preview informative and wish you the best of luck at Cheltenham. There is a lot more information gathering and analysis for me to undertake in the coming days as running plans and course conditions become clearer. I will keep members fully up to date about my work as we progress.

For more information about Donn's work, go to: www.donnmclean.com.





John Hunt: *Awarded the prestigious Peter O'Sullivan trophy as racing broadcaster of the year and has commentated at the past two Olympic Games. From Friday 10th March you can find him on BBC 5 live Sports Extra as he presents a new show from a variety on race tracks including Cheltenham and Aintree.*

In terms of top class talent, the Festival '17 is a shadow of what it should be. For me, Altior, Douvan and Cue Card are the only genuine established stardust acts heading in to the Festival and if they fail to shine then it will be down to those who have hinted at brilliance so far to help ease the pain of losing the likes of Thistlecack and Vautour.

Death Duty

Top of my list of likely heroes is the exciting Death Duty who will represent the talented Gordon Elliott in the Albert Bartlett Novices Hurdle over 3 miles on the final day of the meeting. I've been taken with him from the day he won his Point to Point and I now firmly believe that he will develop into a major Gold Cup force over the next three or four years.



Death Duty has yet to taste defeat when racing over 2 1/2 miles and there is every reason to think he will be even better over 3. He has spent much of his racing life winning races at Navan stepping up through the grades each time on his last three starts, culminating in a much discussed victory in the Lawlors Hotel Novice Hurdle. The debate was fierce as to whether or not Augusta Kate would have won had she not fallen at the last flight? Let's end the debate here and now. No chance. I'm simply not having it. Death Duty was only just getting going whilst Augusta Kate was at full pelt. Watch that last 200 metres again; Death Duty ripped to the line showing a great attitude as well as abundant talent. He is the banker of the week, no doubt.

Politologue



Another novice capable of causing a fair old stir, this time over fences, is the grey Politologue. He is trained by Paul Nicholls and owned by John Hales. Johns' best horse by far was the amazing One Man and there were hints of his type of swagger when Politologue sauntered around Ascot to win the Noel Novices Chase just before Christmas. He was able to show off his main asset so well that day; he is the most beautiful jumper of a fence you will ever see. Allowed to bowl along, he soon had some good horses in trouble; a thrill from start to finish and I must admit, there and then, I decided he would win at Cheltenham.

I don't mind admitting to being shell shocked when Waiting Patiently went on to beat Politologue at Haydock. In hindsight, I think the winner was much better suited to the sticky ground that day and in any event, Malcolm Jefferson has always regarded the winner very highly.

Encouragingly for both horses, just take a look back to the third horse in that Haydock contest . That's a horse called Its'afreebee, a talented horse who had only been beaten 8 lengths by Yorkhill in last year's Neptune, over hurdles. Its'afreebee admittedly hasn't looked as good over fences so far but nevertheless, I'm sure the Haydock form stacks up. Politologue will run in the JLT Novices' chase where Yorkhill is favourite, despite continued speculation that Willie Mullins will switch him to the Champion Hurdle. I hope Yorkhill does run as he makes the market and looks vulnerable after a curious effort at Leopardstown last time out.

Forest Bihan

We've already mentioned Altior as taking star billing this year. He should be running in the Champion Chase after what we saw at Newbury but he will take the conventional route for a top two mile novice and heads to the Arkle Chase on day one as red hot favourite. That shouldn't stop us having a bet though. Either each way or in the "Betting without Altior" market. With the latter option I'm very sweet on the prospects of Brian Ellisons' Forest Bihan , a horse who has barely caused a ripple en- route to Cheltenham. His form however is pretty striking and he will run well, I'm sure. Forest Bihan has won three of his four starts over fences (his only defeat came at the hands of the aforementioned Waiting Patiently at Newcastle) but it was his most recent run at Doncaster on really decent ground that marked him down as well above average. A small mistake at the third last was soon brushed aside and he fairly flew after that to crush the very talented Cloudy Dream (a horse who should have won the Scottish Champion Hurdle last year) and Ben Pauling's A Hare Breath. That really was a terrific run, a repeat of which may not beat Altior but would certainly put him as a leading place hope.



Good Luck!!

Richard Hoiles: *Vastly experienced and much travelled lead commentator for ITV's racing coverage. For the last six years Richard has also been lead presenter for the World Feed of the Dubai World Cup which has the highest worldwide audience of any horse racing programme.*



Four days, 28 races and everyone expects plenty of winners!

The conundrum that is the Cheltenham Festival is now once again just around the corner, the place where reputations are forged and shattered, where a wrong move can be rued for a lifetime or opportunity seized.

The Championship Races have undoubtedly suffered from the high profile absentees this time around. The winners of all four of last year's feature Championship races are all amongst those retired or side-lined through so my first hope is that Douvan and Altior both dominate their rivals in the Queen Mother and the Arkle.

Whilst the Festival is very much about betting it is also about saluting excellence and these are the two most dominant forces in National Hunt racing at present. It is understandable that this time around they should be kept apart but if they perform as expected their potential future meeting would be the most celebrated clash since Denman and Kauto Star.

Staying at the top of the 2m tree is easier than the staying division where races are not won by high cruising speed and instant acceleration but more by dour attrition which is far harder to sustain even in the medium term.

The Champion Hurdle in particular looks wide open with at least four horses who are absent from the race who would have gone of favourite over the bunch likely to contest it – Faugheen , Annie Power and the aforementioned Altior and even Douvan. With the very real possibility of significant supplementary entries the shape of this race makes it impossible to have a strong view on at this stage and it is just to be hoped that it makes for a good competitive race.

As a fully paid up member of the Thistlecrack camp his absence was the cruellest blow of all. The experience in going head to head with such a tough opponent as Many Clouds looked certain to stand him in good stead for the Gold Cup but instead it brought on the injury which will keep him in his box. It would be great to see Colin Tizzard win the race, not least because all three sets of owners (including Thistlecrack's in this), have been long standing supporters of the yard and not 'Johnny Come Lately's.' My worry is though that Cue Card could well be too old and Native River looks short enough for a horse whose best form remains in handicaps where the tempo's can be very different. His Denman win is not on its own strong enough to answer those doubts for me and his best chance could well be if it comes up very soft , thus increasing the emphasis on stamina. Without that he may find the cruising speed of a Gold Cup very different.

On decent ground Outlander could be the one to take advantage though it truth any result would not particularly surprise me.

My personal betting week always revolves around the handicaps. The sustained tempo of these races make for horses coming back year after year, both because they can handle the hurly burly and also because having gone close once connections are far more likely to gear their whole season (and handicap marks!) around a the Festival.

One success is also usually enough to ensure a profit for the week so here are the horses of most personal interest this time around.

Holywell – Ultima Handicap Chase 2.50 Tuesday

A Festival regular who comes alive in the Spring. 5lb lower than when finishing second last year he also won the race in 2014 and it would be no surprise if he once again turned around some moderate looking form again here. Chief danger could be another previous winner The Druids Nephew.



Its'AFreebee – Close Brothers Novices Handicap 5.30 Tuesday

Third to Yorkhill and Yanworth in last year's Neptune he hasn't excelled over fences but that is the reason he is eligible for this 0-140 handicap creeping in right at the maximum. As Ballyalton showed last year this race can be won by a horse with good back class hurdles form who hasn't looked a natural over fences prior to the Festival.

Taquin Du Seuil – Coral Cup 2.50 Wednesday

Reportedly connections are taking a bit of persuading that Taquin De Seuil should run here rather than in one of the Championship races over fences but this clearly represents his best opportunity of success. His handicap mark over hurdles is based on form he showed prior to the improvement when going over fences and his eye catching Chepstow seasonal return behind Ballyoptic off this mark over the smaller obstacles suggests he would be very competitive. Given the uncertainty of his participation he has to be backed Non Runner - No Bet.



Diamond King – Brown Advisory Plate 4.10 Thursday

An impressive winner of last year's Coral Cup he somehow finds himself back off a similar mark over fences this time around.

Much has been made of the handicapping of the Irish horses but for a horse that was a beaten favourite in a Grade 1 just two starts ago there can be no complaints here.

Winter Escape – County Hurdle 2.10 Friday

My most interesting horse of the entire week though his lack of Festival experience coupled with potential physical frailties make him a higher risk one and so again NR-NB is advised. Last seen when sent off a very well backed favourite for the Greatwood, it is hard to imagine him not being a single figure price should he line up on the day. Whatever you end up backing, the very best of luck and enjoy the finest four days jumping on the planet.



The stats from Paul O'Hara...

CHELTENHAM TRENDS 2017

It is a year since we saw Annie Power blow away a Champion Hurdle field in scintillating fashion and a track record to boot. Cheltenham 2017 is well and truly upon us and no doubt there'll be drama, we'll laud the winners, and talk of what might have been. Throw in the odd bit of controversy, and we're close to what makes Cheltenham 'the greatest National Hunt Festival on turf'. But it really is so much more than that. There's the Cheltenham Roar, Festival Fever and not forgetting those vital statistics. Here are my stats for the four major races. I have looked at the trends over the last 10 years, starting with the Champion Hurdle through to the Gold Cup:

CHAMPION HURDLE - 10 YEAR TRENDS

10/10 - finished in the first 4 at a previous Festival

10/10 - run since Christmas

10/10 - ran between the last 24 and 78 days

10/10 - won in season

10/10 - won in last 3 starts

10/10 - finished in the first 4 last time out

9/10 - age 6 to 9 (exception age 5)

8/10 - finished in the first 4 in the Supreme, Neptune or Triumph hurdles

Trends here have several horses in the running, indicating how open this race is without the likes of Faugheen or Annie Power, both sadly missing through injury. They are **Buveur D'Air**, **Nichols Canyon**, **Petit Mouchoir**, **The New One**, **Yanworth** and **Vroum Vroum Mag**.



With doubts about Nichol's Canyon and Vroum Vroum Mag's participation, attention turns to the other four. **The New One** has already been soundly beaten by **YANWORTH** this season and there's no obvious reason why he should reverse that form.

Buveur D'Air has had his chase career aborted in favour of this and gained a facile victory on his return to hurdles, but the strength of that race is questionable. There are also question marks concerning the ground and while Cheltenham traditionally starts on a softer surface, it's debatable whether it will be soft

enough to see **Buveur D'Air** to maximum effect. **Petit Mouchoir** appears to be the best of the Irish (unless Limini is supplemented), but finished behind **Buveur D'Air** twice last season. He has clearly improved on that but it's difficult to weigh up how good his Irish form is. Finally, there is **YANWORTH**, who has been more workmanlike than spectacular this season. He gives the impression the Cheltenham hill will play to his strengths and providing he doesn't get outpaced he appears to have a great chance and would be my idea of the winner.

CHAMPION CHASE - 10 YEAR TRENDS

10/10 - between 7 and 16 runs over fences

10/10 - ran in the same calendar year

10/10 - last ran at least 32 days ago

10/10 - finished in first 3 on last completed start

10/10 - won over at least 2M 1F

10/10 - ran in a Graded race last time
9/10 - between 2 and 4 runs that season (exception ran 5 times)
8/10 - age 6 to 9 (2 exceptions won race twice)

Trends here point to **Un De Sceaux, Fox Norton, Douvan**

Un De Sceaux looks set for the Ryanair and who can blame him! **Fox Norton** a decent horse in his own right, but this is possibly the closest you'll get to a one horse race. **DOUVAN** is the MAN, potentially the Champion Chase Wonder Horse! The impression is this is a man against boy's race and barring a fall this should be a formality. **DOUVAN** is bidding to win his third different race in his third Festival and elevate his status even higher than it already is. Arguably the best horse in training and destined to give Willie Mullins his first win in the race. Of the rest, Special Tiara and Gods Own, who finished a respectable third and fourth last year, could be in the mix for the places again and represent the each way value.



STAYERS' HURDLE - 10 YEAR TRENDS

10/10 - age 6 to 9
10/10 - top 4 finish last time out and had won in the season
10/10 - between 2 and 4 runs that season
10/10 - last ran at least 47 days ago
10/10 - last run at Cheltenham, Newbury or Naas
9/10 - won in last two runs
9/10 - top 2 finish on their last run
9/10 - ran at a previous Festival

Trends here point to one horse only and that is **Unowhatimeanharry**.



UNOWHATIMEANHARRY has been as dominant in this division as Thistlecrack was last year and a worthy favourite for the race. He has already seen off most of his rivals this year and on varying ground. He looks the one to beat. Irish form looks completely mixed and inconclusive. Any challenge is likely to come from whatever Willie Mullins decides to run and they have to be respected. Of the rest, Ballyoptic has finished behind **UNOWHATIMEANHARRY** on his last three runs with the last being a little below par. If he runs to his best then he could be the each way value.

GOLD CUP - 10 YEAR TRENDS

10/10 - last ran at least 33 days ago
10/10 - won a Grade 1 race
10/10 - finished in the first 6 on last completed start

10/10 - no Irish Hennessy winner (won this year by Sizing John)

10/10 - no previous winner of the Stayers' Hurdle won the race

10/10 - last run at Kempton, Newbury, Leopardstown or Thurles

9/10 - age 7 to 9 (exception age 6)

9/10 – between two to five runs that season

Like the previous trends, horses that come into the reckoning are at the sharp end of the betting. There are four, all of which come with risks and they are **Don Poli**, **Outlander**, **Native River** and **Djakadam**.

his is arguably the toughest race to call of the big four at the Festival. **Don Poli** is a good horse but lacks the scope of some of the others and after finishing third last year you can't help feeling he doesn't have the gears to win a Gold Cup. **Outlander** is an improving horse and one that could be in the mix providing his stamina holds out up the hill. **Native River** has stamina in



abundance and already won the slog of the Welsh National this season. If this turned into a slog then he would be worth siding with. However, ground may be an issue and you could question the quality of opposition he has beaten this season. **DJAKADAM** has had a lighter campaign and has beat and been beaten by Outlander. He has been brought along steadily and has already finished second in the last two Gold Cups. Willie Mullins has already alluded to a much smoother preparation this time round and he is still only eight. This could be his year and would be my selection.

This incidentally another race Willie Mullins has yet to win. Looking at the rest of the field, cases can be made for several others including Cue Card, but age would appear to be against him. Of the outsiders, the McManus pair are worthy of a mention. More of That had a return to form when he fell at the last (in contention) in the Irish Hennessy and Minella Rocco beat Native River in the National Hunt Chase at the Festival last year and could be overpriced if getting his act together.

HANDICAPPERS

Finally, here are five horses that are declared in the handicaps and could be weighted to go well:

Arpege D'Alene

Dandridge

Hargam

Holywell

Pearl Swan

Whatever you back, good luck and let's hope it's another great Festival and all the horses come back safely.

Lambourn Trainers Horses to Follow

A mixture of National Hunt and flat directly from the trainers, with a few comments to note.

Henry Candy

Limato – not very original!

Turnpike Trip should make a nice middle distance horse.

Harry Dunlop

Assanilka could be a stakes filly this year.

Harbour Town hopefully well handicapped.

Nicky Henderson

Daphne Du Clos. She is a really smart 4yo bumper filly and looks to have a really bright future.

Charlie Hills

Our horse to follow is SOME KINDA LAMA. He is a lovely horse who has had 3 runs and won twice. He has had a Hobday operation since his last run and will hopefully be ready to run in the next few weeks.

Richard Hughes

Havens View

Daniel Kubler

I Wouldn't Bother

Jamie Osborne

Long John Silver

Oliver Sherwood

Monkey Puzzle - Really wants good ground – should win a few novice hurdles in the spring.

Henry Tett

An un named 2yo colt by Arcano out of Kylemore, he is closely related to Charming Thought (Middle Park winner)

Ed Walker

Know Your Limit - He is a big, slow maturing, now gelded, 3yo who can only improve as he matures. He showed promise in backend maidens last year and is one I hope can climb the handicap ranks this year.

