



2018 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: Kalashnikov was an emphatic winner of the Betfair Hurdle at Newbury. That run sets the British form standard, with further progress highly likely. He is clearly effective on soft ground and could prove even better on a sounder surface.

At much bigger odds Vision Des Flos is worth keeping a close eye on, especially on soft ground.

Kalashnikov is my preferred.

DMC: Getabird has been all the rage for this since he beat Mengli Khan over two miles at Punchestown in January. Willie Mullins' horse showed a fine turn of foot that day. As a point-to-point winner who won his maiden over two and a half miles, he should have the pace for two miles, especially if the ground comes up on the easy side.



Mengli Khan remains a player, despite the defeat by Getabird last time. He clocked a good time when he won the Grade 1 Royal Bond Hurdle and is reported to be in good form by Gordon Elliott.

Paloma Blue could out-run his odds. Second to Fayonagh in the Champion Bumper at Punchestown last April, Henry de Bromhead's horse has taken a little while to find his rhythm over hurdles. But he ran better than his finishing position suggests behind Samcro in the Deloitte Hurdle last time. He was keener than ideal behind a sedate early pace that day and travelled well into the home straight before his early exertions probably took their toll. He should do better behind a faster pace that he will surely get in the Supreme. He could run a big race, especially if the ground does not come up too soft.

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

SLH: Saint Calvados has impressed with the manner of his three chase victories. He is a prominent racer, who jumps well and continues to progress. He is my favoured of the British trained.

However, he is not at the level achieved by Irish challengers Footpad and Petit Mouchoir.

DMC: The Arkle is shaping up to be one of the races of the Festival, and it could be a 1-2 for the Irish, with Footpad and Petit Mouchoir setting a high standard.

There may not be much between the two of them. Footpad was a classy hurdler and he is already a better chaser. Willie Mullins' horse has been just about flawless in his three chases, his jumping is accurate and effortless, and he has been impressive in winning all three races. Which included the Irish Arkle last time, when he had Petit Mouchoir five lengths behind him in second place.

That said, it was Petit Mouchoir's first run since October, and was just his second chase. Also, Henry de Bromhead's horse made a bad mistake at the second fence that day. There is every chance that he will get closer to Footpad at Cheltenham than he did at Leopardstown.

This pair met three times over hurdles with Petit Mouchoir coming out on top on each occasion. At a bigger price, the value may lie with the Gigginstown House horse.

3.30 Champion Hurdle Challenge Trophy (Grade 1) 4yo+ 2m¹/₂f



SLH: Buveur D'Air has coasted to his three wins this season, having to be nowhere near his best. He is a class apart and certainly gives the impression of being at least as good as ever.

The only conceivable threat would be a peak form Faugheen.

It will be a major shock if Buveur D'Air is beaten.

DMC: It would be brilliant if Faugheen could bounce back to his best. If anyone can get him there, then Willie Mullins can. The 2015 Champion Hurdle hero wasn't far off his best on his debut this season when he won the Morgiana Hurdle. A peak-form Faugheen versus a peak-form Buveur D'Air would be a race to savour.

Melon disappointed in his first-time hood at Leopardstown last time, but his run in the International Hurdle at Cheltenham in December brings him into it. He was keener than ideal that day when he raced away from the favoured stands rail up the home straight. Plus he was conceding 6lb to the winner My Tent Or Yours. He is only six so he has potential for improvement.

Wicklow Brave is also interesting. He hasn't run since he finished 10th behind Rekindling in the Melbourne Cup in November. His impressive record of achievement includes winning the County Hurdle in 2015, the Irish St Leger in 2016 and the Champion Hurdle at Punchestown in 2017. He is a top class horse and the vibes about him recently from Team Mullins have been positive.

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

SLH: The home trained runners are led by La Bague Au Roi, who has been progressing race on race. Although she stays 3 miles well, a strong gallop over this trip will be fine. She looks sure to run a very big race. The concern is whether that proves to be good enough to fend off the Irish challenge.

Verdana Blue is worth a look. She travelled as well as anything into the home straight at Newbury in the Betfair Hurdle before weakening, and was eased home. Good ground may see her put in an improved performance.

DMC: It is difficult to get away from Apple's Jade. She is rock solid. She won this race last year and she looks like an even better mare this season. She was seriously impressive in the Hatton's Grace Hurdle and she battled on well last time to get the better of subsequent Irish Champion Hurdle winner Supasundae in the Christmas Hurdle over three miles.

Benie Des Dieux has been chasing and she is a talented mare. This is probably her optimum trip. She could be the one to chase Apple's Jade home.

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

DMC: Dounikos looked a likely horse for this, however it looks like he is now going for the RSA Chase instead. In his absence, his stable companion Jury Duty is interesting.

Gordon Elliott's horse ran a big race at last year's Cheltenham Festival when he finished third behind Presenting Percy in the Pertemps Final. He has progressed nicely this season over fences, beating another stable companion Shattered Love in the Grade 2 Florida Pearl Chase and then finishing a close second to her in the Grade 1 Neville Hotels Novice Chase at Leopardstown over Christmas. It looks like he will have Jamie Codd for company and that is a massive asset.

Wednesday

1.30 Ballymore Novices' Hurdle (Grade 1) (4yo+) 2m5f

SLH: The Henderson pair On The Blind Side and Ok Corral are the two of most interest of the home trained runners.

On The Blind Side won impressively at Sandown in early December. That form sets the British trained form standard. He hasn't run since (reported to have sore shins) but is reported in top form for this race.

Ok Corral is very lightly raced for an 8yo. He won easily at Kempton in early February and falls into the "could be anything" bracket.

DMC: Samcro has generated more column inches this season than most other horses have and in my opinion, every single inch has been justified.

Gordon Elliott's horse has done everything that has been asked of him in his life. He won his only point-to-point, he is three for three in bumpers and now he is three for three over hurdles. He has never been beaten.

He has won his three hurdle races this term by an aggregate of 32 lengths, never looking in any danger. He oozes class and he does everything well: He settles, he travels, he jumps, he has pace, he has a turn of foot, he has stamina. There is no telling how high he could go.

Next Destination is a high-class horse, he is also three for three over hurdles. He won the Grade 1 Lawlor's Hotel Novice Hurdle at Naas last time and proved that he could handle Cheltenham Festival conditions when finishing fourth behind Fayonagh in last year's Champion Bumper. He could make this a 1-2 for the Irish.

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

SLH: Black Corton has been one of the stars of this season. Remarkable progress has been made by this horse, who was winning last summer at Worcester and Fontwell.

With just a couple of brief "holidays" he has been on the go since, and is a great credit to the Nichols stable. He arguably put up his best performance when winning at Ascot on latest start. He sets the British form standard. Although effective on any ground, drying conditions will suit him, where that could count against some of his chief opposition.

Elegant Escape has been in excellent form (ties in closely with Black Corton), with this test of stamina looking sure to suit.

DMC: The Irish could dominate the RSA Chase as well. Monalee was second in the Albert Bartlett Hurdle last season and is two for two over fences this term.

Henry de Bromhead's horse was impressive in winning his beginners' chase at Punchestown in mid-November. He then bounced back from a heavy fall at Christmas to land the Grade 1 Flogas Chase at Leopardstown's Dublin Racing Festival in February. He should progress again from that.

He needs that progression if he is going to beat Presenting Percy. Pat Kelly's horse improved to win the Pertemps Final last year and it looks like he has continued his progression this term. He won the Porterstown Handicap under top weight of 11st 10lb, he won the Galmoey Hurdle and he was a close second to Gold Cup prospect Our Duke in the Red Mills Chase last time. He should be even better on the better ground that he should get at Cheltenham, He sets a high standard.

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

SLH: If Altior is anywhere near his best, then he will be very hard to beat and deserves to be at short odds.

If fact Politologue looks his main danger on recent form and Altior beat him comfortably at Newbury.

A back to form Douvan would be a very live threat.

DMC: You would love to see Douvan bounce back. We haven't seen him since he was beaten in last year's Champion Chase at long odds-on. It would be some training performance if he were to come back twelve months later

without a run in the interim and win it. But it is possible, after all, he is trained by Willie Mullins. (Ref. Faugheen)



Min is a player and last year's winner Special Tiara is under-rated and again under the radar They are all going to have to go to beat Altior.

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

DMC: It looked like Hollowgraphic was going to be the Willie Mullins number one when he won at Punchestown in December but then Blackbow won at Leopardstown in February and now the picture has changed a little.

Blackbow was very good that day. He showed a fine turn of foot to come away from his field around the home turn and, while Rhinestone closed on the run to the line, it is difficult to argue that Blackbow was not the best horse in the race on the day.

Rhinestone is a player, Joesph O'Brien's horse should progress from that run, but so should Blackbow and he could be the one.

Thursday

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

SLH: No outstanding candidate from this side of the Irish Sea.

After displaying a high level of form as a novice hurdler Finian's Oscar was expected to improve into an even better chaser this season. After a promising start, things haven't gone to plan. He has undergone a breathing operation since being pulled up in the Cleeve hurdle and it is reported blinkers will be fitted for his return to chasing in this race.

Plenty has to be taken on trust, which is reflected in his price of around 16/1.

Terrefort would be of interest if taking his chance-it is reported he will only run if the ground is considered soft enough. The form of both his Sandown and Huntingdon successes is solid.

DMC: Invitation Only won well at Navan and Punchestown before running a fine race to finish third behind Monalee and Al Boum Photo in the Grade 1 Flogas Chase at Leopardstown last time. This intermediate trip is a good trip for him for now and it looks like he is set to line up here.

Shattered Love is also interesting at a decent price. Gordon Elliott's mare was a progressive staying novice hurdler last season and she has won four of her five chases this season. The Grade 1 Neville Hotels Chase at Leopardstown last time did not take as much winning as it might have, as Monalee fell and brought down Rathvinden, but she still kept on well to beat Jury Duty nicely. She continues to progress.

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

DMC: Sort It Out could run well here. Eddie Harty's horse was a progressive hurdler three seasons ago, finishing second behind Wicklow Brave in the 2015 County Hurdle, so we know that he can handle Cheltenham Festival conditions.

He returned from over a year on the sidelines to embark on a chasing career this season, during which he went zero for four. However, his return to hurdles last time at Punchestown was much more like it. He stayed on well from the home turn to force a dead-head for third place behind his stable companion Kilfenora.

His British handicap rating of 141 is 4lb higher than his Irish mark, but it is 3lb lower than his peak, and that gives him a chance. That run at Punchestown was his first run over three miles and he has potential for further progression at the trip.

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

SLH: Waiting Patiently's beating of Cue Card at Ascot is the best of this seasons British form. Frodon and Top Notch finished well behind that pair at Ascot, and it's difficult to make a case for either of them turning that form around. Waiting Patiently's connections are by-passing Cheltenham in favour of Aintree.

At the current prices, Cue Card does make some appeal.



DMC: Un De Sceaux is a horse who probably doesn't get due recognition. Winner of 20 of his 26 races, he stayed this trip well last season when he won the Ryanair Chase on good ground. Has looked as good as ever this term in winning the Hilly Way Chase and the Clarence House Chase. Any easing of the ground would be a bonus.

Willie Mullins' horse sets a high standard, but Balko Des Flos would be interesting if the ground does not ride too soft. Winner of the Galway Plate last August, the Gigginstown House horse ran a cracker last time to finish second to Road To Respect in the Leopardstown Christmas Chase. He was travelling well when he came down at the fourth last fence in the JLT Chase last March, he could run a big race in the Ryanair.

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

SLH: At the start of the season I thought Wholestone was a horse that could prove to be a live challenger for this race. However, although running well I was disappointed with his finishing effort when finishing second in the Cleeve Hurdle on his latest start.

The New One is an admirable race horse, but staying this trip is very doubtful.

Sam Spinner is the progressive home trained horse. Soft ground would suit him well, and if getting those conditions he is expected to figure.



DMC: The case for Supasundae is strong. He is a top class hurdler who had the pace to win the Irish Champion Hurdle last time, yet we know that he stays much further than two miles.

Jessica Harrington's horse won the Coral Cup at last year's Cheltenham Festival, so we know that he handles Cheltenham Festival conditions. And he was beaten just a length by Yanworth in the Liverpool Hurdle at Aintree, so we know that he can be effective over three miles.

He has never won over the trip, but he was only just beaten by Apple's Jade in the Christmas Hurdle at Leopardstown on his only other run over three miles. He does have that length to find with Yanworth on their Aintree running, but it looks like he has improved since then.

4.10 Brown Advisory Plate (Grade 3) (5 yo+) 2m5f

Tully East could run a big race here. Alan Fleming's horse was an impressive winner of the Close Brothers Chase at last year's Cheltenham Festival, probably winning with more in hand than the bare winning margin.

He is 10lb higher this year, but he looks like an improved horse. He ran a fine race in the BetVictor Gold Cup on ground that was too soft for him, and he ran a cracker last time, again on soft ground, in the big two-mile handicap chase at the Dublin Racing Festival to finish third behind Patricks Park and Three Stars.

He should be much happier back on better ground and back over two miles and five furlongs and, in a highly competitive handicap, he could go well.

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

SLH: Maria's Benefit is the best of the home trained horses, but I have doubts if she will be good enough to repel the Irish challenge.

DMC: Laurina is short, but she is a very exciting mare. Impressive in winning her maiden hurdle at Tramore in December on her debut for Willie Mullins, she was even more impressive in winning the Grade 3 Solerina Hurdle at Fairyhouse in January.

She had Alletrix well behind her in second place that day. Alletrix went out next time and won a competitive mares' handicap hurdle at the Dublin Racing Festival by five lengths.

Laurina should improve further as her jumping improves with experience; there is no knowing how good she could be.

Friday

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



SLH: Nicky Henderson has a strong hand with Apple's Shakira, We Have A Dream and Style De Garde.

Apple's Shakira looks sure to take some beating. All three of her victories have come at Cheltenham, the last two over the "new course", on which this race is run.

She doesn't however look the most straightforward to ride.

After travelling well through the early part of her races, she has had to be ridden along coming down the hill, before staying on to win going away, being very strong at the finish.

She has only raced on soft ground, but slightly quicker ground isn't expected to be an issue.

So don't be surprised to see her being pushed along going to two out, but she will respond to pressure and is proven up the hill. She receives a 7lb sex allowance and is a worthy favourite.

Redicean has really impressed with the manner of his three wins, all of them being at Kempton. He has shown a good turn of speed when winning those races, but will face a different test coming up the hill at Cheltenham. His chance is respected, but I suspect Aintree may be more suitable to his run style.

DMC: The Irish horses may be under-rated in the Triumph Hurdle market. Stormy Ireland won on her Irish debut by 58 lengths and Mr Adjudicator fought out the finish of the Spring Juvenile Hurdle last time.

Recent history tells you that the Spring Hurdle is a really strong pointer to the Triumph Hurdle and, in winning this year's renewal, Mr Adjudicator clocked a time that was faster than the time that Samcro clocked in winning the Deloitte Hurdle over the same course and distance thirty-five minutes later. There may not be much between him and Farclas again but, at a similar price, Willie Mullins' horse could be the value.

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

SLH: There are no outstanding challengers from Britain, with very little to choose form wise between a dozen or so of the home trained contenders.

Henderson trained Santini beat Black Op in January and features near the head of the market.

On soft ground I would consider another Henderson trained runner in Chef Des Obeaux. He is a strong stayer, with his latest success at Haydock confirming the impression he made when winning at Kempton previously.

Whatever the outcome in this race, he is very much worth noting when sent over fences next season.

3.30 Cheltenham Gold Cup Chase (Grade 1) 3m2½f

SLH: The Blue Riband of chasing is as open as I can remember. A case of some sort can be made for half the field.

Unless something takes a big step forward, which I have been unable to find, then the outcome may well revolve around such factors as the "run of the race", "clean jumping" and "good fortune."

Colin Tizzard's Native River is expected to feature. He returned from an absence to win at Newbury, looking to have retained all of his ability. A winner of the Hennessy Gold Cup in 2016, he is a prominent racer, who jumps and stays well. He should certainly give backers a good run.

DMC: Road To Respect may be the value. Noel Meade's horse won that Leopardstown Christmas Chase. It was a fine performance by the Gigginstown House horse under a top ride from Sean Flanagan. He settled well in his first-time hood, better than he had when he was just beaten by Outlander in the JNwine.com Champion Chase at Down Royal on his previous run, staying on well all the way to the line.

Outlander was an impressive winner of the Brown Advisory Plate at last year's Cheltenham Festival, so we know that he can excel under Festival conditions. He was only six years old then, it looks like he has progressed significantly from six to seven, as these high-class staying chasers can. He is at his best going left-handed and he should appreciate the goodish ground that he should get. He could run a big race.



5.30 Johnny Henderson Grand Annual Challenge Cup Handicap Chase (Grade 3) (5 yo+) 2m 62y

DMC: Three Stars could run well at a decent price in the Grand Annual. Henry de Bromhead's horse ran a cracker last time in first-time cheek-pieces in that big two-mile handicap chase at the Dublin Racing Festival to finish second behind Patricks Park.

He hit the front a fair way out that day and looked the most likely winner when he kicked about five lengths clear around the home turn. A mistake at the final fence didn't help, and was caught by Patricks Park on the run-in, but he kept on well all the way to the line to retain second place.

The Irish handicapper raised him by 4lb for that run to a mark of 141, and the British handicapper has given him another 3lb, but he is in the form of his life. He could still be over-priced.

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. The latter is a major factor after a particularly wet winter and the recent heavy snowfall.

For more information about Donn's work, go to:
www.donnmcclean.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 plus the recent Winter Olympics.*

My Four for Cheltenham...

Best bet of the entire meeting has to be **Presenting Percy** who possesses all you need when looking for a really solid bet and I'm really hoping that the RSA Chase is the perfect race for him

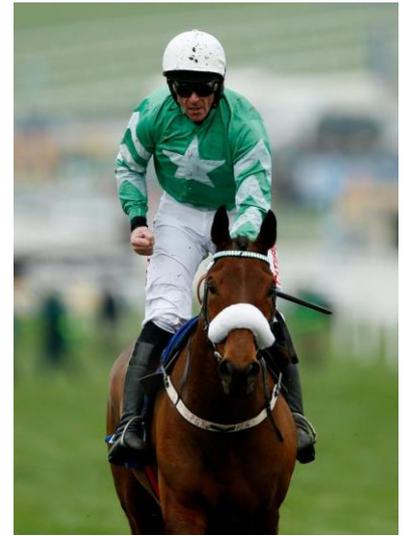
on Wednesday 14th March.

I love following returnees back at the Festival and its worth, first of all, retracing this talented horses footprint at last year's Festival when, you'll no doubt recall, he was an up and coming hurdler. There was so much talk about the weight allocated to Presenting Percy for last year's Pertemps hurdle race over three miles which followed on from a ridiculously easy win at Fairyhouse. Carrying 11st 8lbs at Cheltenham, he couldn't have been more impressive, smashing really talented horses like Barney Dwan and Jury Duty with ease and more to the point, clearly relishing the climb up the hill to the line.

So the switch to the chasing game? Well that could hardly have gone any better. He has demonstrated from the word go that he is a complete natural. As good a jumper as you could wish to see. He slammed a decent field of handicappers at Galway looking every inch a top class horse in the making. Then returning to hurdles he won the Galmoy at Gowran Park. His most recent run, back at Gowran for the Red Mills Chase, resulted in a narrow defeat at the hands of a rejuvenated Our Duke. All of his form suggests that he is easily good enough to win an RSA but it is his running style that gives me most confidence; Davy Russell is brilliant at switching him off to the rear of the field. So often, the RSA turns into a real slog and in my mind's eye, I can clearly see him picking rivals off one by one on that final lap of the track. I really feel all he needs is a little good fortune. Class and stamina guaranteed, Presenting Percy is the real deal.

As it happens, the aforementioned **Barney Dwan** also strikes me a potentially well treated horse if he takes up his handicap option in the Close Brothers Chase on day one of the Festival.

I get the feeling that Fergal O'Brien has been very astute in protecting this horse's mark. Lightly raced over fences, he has looked classy every step of the way. Slightly novicey, he was still pretty impressive at Market Rasen and then again, winning his prep race at Musselburgh. Useful pair Keeper Hill and Peter the Mayoman were still very much in contention when they fell in that race but Barney Dwan hadn't been asked one question either when they departed and I'm confident he would have won anyway that day. Barney has four entries at the Festival but I don't ever see him being as well handicapped as he is right now so a crack at this race has to be the way to go.



One of the best images of recent Cheltenham meetings was Warren Greatrex celebrating his Stayers Hurdle win with Cole Harden and in the form of his lovely mare, **La Bague Au Roi**, I'm sure he has another who can fly the flag for Lambourn with distinction. If I owned her I would run her in the Stayers Hurdle as I feel the track would really suit her later in the week when they move to the New course with that really long run from the second last hurdle.



She has twice this year demonstrated her resilience firstly when seeing off Gers Girl at Kempton followed by completely destroying a Grade 2 field at Ascot looking as though she was only just getting going at the finish that day. On ratings I suppose that the Mares Hurdle would be the more winnable race but I would far rather see her over the three mile trip rather than two and a half. A really lovely, classy mare.

Hollowgraphic is the one I want to be with in the bumper which rounds off day two at Cheltenham.

At Punchestown a fortnight before Christmas, he put up a ruthless display, turning in to the straight in third place behind Dunvegan and Not Many Left before blitzing those two rivals, winning by 13 lengths and 18 lengths respectively. That form is useful too. Dunvegan came out next time to win a Fairyhouse bumper by six lengths whilst Not Many Left



stepped up to win a maiden hurdle so impressively that he was then made favourite to win the Grade 3 Michael Purcell hurdle at Navan last time out. Hollowgraphic looks well up to standard and I believe it will take a very good one to lower his colours at Cheltenham.

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.*



The battle between punters and bookmakers at Cheltenham this year could be all over by mid-way through Day 2.

Seldom can the early Championship races have featured as many potential bankers as this time around with Getabird (Supreme), Footpad (Arkle) , Buveur D'Air (Champion Hurdle), Apple's Jade (Mares), Samcro (Ballymore) and Altior (Queen Mother) - all currently best priced at 13-8 or less.

How these horses fare will have a key bearing on the approach the books will take to pricing up races later in the week. Getting a couple of early results in their favour, and with the threat of significant roll up liabilities removed, then expect a far more aggressive attempt to get other short priced horses beaten. By contrast if the first couple go in then firms will be desperately trying to keep the market leaders as tight as possible to limit the damage the accumulators can wreak.

Last year saw the biggest domination ever by the Irish with a record breaking nineteen successes and for the early part of the season it appeared that domination would continue. As Apple's Jade, Faugheen and Sizing John all made successful returns, the emergence of strong novices like Presenting Percy and Samcro bolstered the Irish hand whilst those this side of the Irish Sea were beset by setbacks or injuries.

In the last few weeks the balance has shifted with Apple's Shakira, Santini and the returning pair Altior and Native River all looking to be peaking at the right time to ensure that the Anglo-Irish battle will be more even than looked likely.

It will be interesting to see whether the new Dublin Festival acts as a help or a hindrance to the Irish challenge. It was certainly a fantastic two days of very competitive racing, but does that prepare those involved for the battles ahead or will tough races leave their mark just six weeks out from Cheltenham?

Meanwhile Buveur D'Air in particular has benefitted from the ridiculously 'flabby' nature of the UK fixture list facing just nine opponents in three races at odds of 1-6, 2-11 and 1-16. Particularly in the 2m hurdle division it is an issue that needs addressing if the trial races are to retain credibility.

Most of my personal betting will once again revolve around the handicaps but for those looking for short priced horses to underpin their multiples then Samcro, Apple's Jade and Altior are to my mind safer than Buveur D'Air and Getabird whilst the exchange drift on Footpad means he also has to be in the latter group.

So on to the key question of horses that can make Cheltenham 2018 a profitable one:



Cause of Causes – Foxhunters

The lack of competition in this division since it moved to a level weights race continues to be underestimated by the market with the result that those towards its head are over the odds. As it is not a race that really floats punters boats it also doesn't attract the same liabilities off the other more 'sexy' races.

Cause of Causes needs little introduction with his victory in last year's race being his third Festival success all in different races.

Hardly seen since his National second his main danger may well be from stable companion Tiger Roll who has had a similar preparation to that followed by Cause of Causes last season. Tiger Roll is a much smaller horse and if the ground is deeper than usual because of the snow that drifted against the fences on the build up to the meeting he will find it tougher.

Cause of Causes looks an ideal inclusion in any each way multiples in conjunction with some longer priced handicap horses.

Mall Dini – Kim Muir/ NH Chase

As it is still not clear which entry Mall Dini will take up then make sure the NR-NB concession is taken. Winner of the Pertemps at the Festival in 2016 his effort looked to be delayed too long in the Kim Muir last season where he ran on strongly to finish 5th.

His whole campaign this time around looks to have been arranged with Cheltenham in mind and even though his trainer has touted the 4m National Hunt Chase as a target (he is yet to win over fences) then it may be the sense of unfinished business in the Kim Muir which proves the stronger lure.

Bouvreuil – Advisory Plate/Grand Annual

Placed at the last three Festivals, Bouvreuil is entered in both the Plate and the Grand Annual but it is the former where he looks to have been given a chance off a 3lb lower mark than when 3rd to Road To Respect last year.

Paul Nicholls poor record in handicap chases at the Festival (4/132 since 1997 Actual/Expected 0.45 (Par 1.00)) is a much quoted Festival stat and Bouvreuil has gone off double figure odds for all of his Festival placings. He looks a few points over again this year, with the slight caveat that he wouldn't want the ground too deep.



Long House Hall – Coral Cup / Advisory Plate

2nd to handicap blot Diamond King in the 2016 Coral Cup he has been very lightly raced since, returning off an absence of 560 days when seeming not quite to get home over 3m in the Skybet Chase. Both his Festival entries are over shorter trips and with so few miles on the clock he has not yet had many opportunities to rise in the weights.

His listed win the Summer Plate at Market Rasen made him look as least a 150 horse so he is well treated under both codes off 146 fences and 143 hurdles. He is unlikely to be risked on deep ground so NR-NB is important.

Mister Whitaker – Close Bros

Also holds an entry for the Advisory Plate but it is against fellow novices that his athletic jumping will act as more of an asset. A very well balanced agile horse, he is extremely quick over his fences and looks the ideal type for a big field fast run handicap given his sound jumping, strong travelling nature and the fact he can idle and look around if hitting the front too soon.



He is a different profile to the other horses mentioned in that he doesn't have previous Festival experience but he won at the track on Trials day and in doing so has hopefully done enough to make the cut off 137.

Eureu Du Boulay – Fred Winter

A real long shot to end up with but one that fits my profile of a horse that is largely (in this case completely) handicapped on his French form. French horses get going over hurdles far sooner than their English counterparts and that gives them much more experience early on in their careers. Secondly the fact the form occurs early on time wise in comparison to the UK means it is difficult for their marks to be too high.

Eureu Du Boulay has been purchased by Richard Hobson, who is a good buyer of young horses from France, with this race in mind. Not the biggest if he can be improved for the change of stables he could well outrun his large price.

Good luck for the week and above all enjoy National Hunt racing as its supreme best.

Cheltenham Trends 2018 from Paul O'Hara...

Before I start analysing this year's Festival statistics I would like to give a mention to the 2016 Supreme Novice's Hurdle. Won by Altior and now considered as the best novice hurdle ever run in the U.K. From it we have the favourites for the Champion Hurdle, Champion Chase and the Stayers in Buveur D'Air, Altior and Supasundae, with a supporting cast of second favourites in Min (Champion Chase) and Petit Mouchoir (Arkle).

Trivia dispensed with, now down to business of the trends in the big four races over the last 10 years:

Champion Hurdle - 10 Year Trends

10/10 – finished in the first four at a previous Festival

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

10/10 - won in season

10/10 – 1 to 5 starts that season

10/10 – placed in the first four last time out

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

Last ran at Sandown, Kempton, Wincanton, Leopardstown or Punchestown

Trends here point to one horse only and that's last year's winner **Buveur D'Air**.

With so many questions marks over what will run and doubts over form, this could potentially be a one horse race. However, if Faugheen lines up we do have the mouth-watering clash we have longed for. The big question here is can he get back to form and be the 'machine' or is he now a 'has been'. Now 10, age also not on his side, with the last 10 year old to win being Sea Pigeon back in 1980 and only two horses have ever lost and regained their crown.

Of the rest, third favourite My Tent or Yours is also a bit long in the tooth and the forecast ground will not suit, whilst Yorkhill could allegedly win anything. He's aborting an established but inconsistent chase career to run here and whether he needs the drop back to two miles is also questionable.

As I've mentioned earlier unless the real Faugheen turns up, it's going to be very difficult to see past **BUVEUR D'AIR** despite his facile victories this season

Champion Chase - 10 Year Trends

10/10 - ran 2 or 4 times that season

10/10 – last run at least 32 days ago

10/10 – placed in first three on last completed start

10/10 - ran in the same calendar year

10/10 – ran in graded race last time

9/10 - age 6 to 10 (exceptions won race twice)

Last ran at Cheltenham, Ascot, Kempton, Newbury or Punchestown

Trends here are limited to two **Min and Politologue**

Although the trends don't point to Altior, last year's Arkle winner gave a beating to Politologue and it would be very hard to see him turning the tables. Min (when favourite) was second to Altior in the Supreme of 2016 and has seven lengths to find. He's had one minor blip this season but has been impressive otherwise and could be the one to give Altior most to think about. The forgotten horse (if he lines up) is Douvan, who was odds on last year and supposedly unbeatable, but you guessed it he got beat! He's been off with injury since, but if Willie Mullins can get him to Cheltenham anywhere near his best then who knows - and like the Champion Hurdle this could be the race we have all wanted to see.

The worthy favourite though is **ALTIOR** and it was hard not to be impressed with his seasonal reappearance that was on ground plenty soft enough. He's bidding to win a third race at the Festival and would be the selection despite not fitting the trends.

Of the rest, Special Tiara had his day last year, whilst Charbel was serving it up to Altior before falling in the Arkle and could make the frame at a price.

Stayers Hurdle - 10 Year Trends

10/10 - age 6 to 9

10/10 - between 2 and 4 runs that season

10/10 - placed in top four on last completed start

10/10 - last run at least 46 days ago

10/10 - won in season

9/10 - ran at a previous Festival

Last ran at Cheltenham, Newbury, Naas or Leopardstown

Trends here have a few in the frame and they are **Sam Spinner, Yanworth, Colin's Sister, La Bague Au Roi**

This race has thrown up only one winner bigger than 10-1 and that was Cole Harden trained by Warren Greatrex who could have La Bague Au Roi in the line-up. The mare is also engaged in the Mares Hurdle but gets a 7lb pull here in the weights. She has been impressive against her own sex, but yet to be seen if she has enough in the locker to win this.

Colin's Sister is also a mare and whilst she has race against the boys, the suspicion is she's not quite good enough (may also run in the Mares). The favourite Supasundae last won over two miles and there has to be question marks over stamina. He was beaten by Yanworth at the Grand National meeting last year over an easy three miles.

Turning to Yanworth, who has had his career over fences aborted for this. He went of favourite for last year's Champion Hurdle but couldn't cope with the pace and when stepped up at Aintree proved he needed further. He could be a danger to them all, while **SAM SPINNER** has done nothing but improve all season and has the profile and stamina for this. The only question mark is the ground, but if it stays soft he would be the one to be on and is my tentative selection.

Of the rest, Bacardys could represent the each way value after being freshened following his fall in December. At longer odds The World's End has the potential to run a big race. He was an unlucky faller last year and could run well at a big price.

Gold Cup - 10 Year Trends

10/10 - last run at least 33 days ago

10/10 - won a Grade 1 race

10/10 – placed in the top six on last completed start

10/10 - one to four runs since 01/09

10/10 – won in last four runs

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

Last ran at Kempton, Newbury, Leopardstown or Thurles

Like the previous trends, the majority of horses that fit the bill are prominent in the betting. There are four: **Mite Bite, Native River, Road To Respect and Edwulf.**

This and the stayers are by far the toughest races to call of the big four. Starting with Edwulf, a surprise winner in Ireland last time, he never seems to run two races the same and his inconsistency could well be his undoing here. Road To Respect, a winner at last year's Festival and had plenty of Ireland's best behind him last time out. He must rate a danger to all. Native River finished third last year and the softer the ground the better for him, If he gets his ground then he could make them all go with stamina assured. Questions still surround Mite Bite after last year's Festival win when he nearly pulled up on the run in. Impressive in King George on softer than he'd like but you could argue he didn't beat much that day. He's been progressive through the season and is favourite on merit. Last year's winner Sizing John has not had an ideal preparation and only Best Mate in the last 45 years has retained their crown.

This is the one championship race that eludes Willie Mullins so far and this year he has a few live chances, with **KILLULTAGH VIC** appearing to be his best. He was arguably an unlucky loser when taking a heavy fall at the last in the race won by Edwulf. Has been unlucky with injuries over the years, but shaped well on both starts since his latest return. While he doesn't quite fit all the trends he's my selection to give the Mullins yard a maiden win in the race.

Finally, a mention for Minella Rocco who seems to be following the same path as last year when he finished second and if he runs anything like that again he could make the frame in what looks a very competitive renewal.

Five horses that are declared in the handicaps and could go well.

Le Rocher
Long House Hall
O O Seven
The Organist
Valdez



Lambourn Trainers Horses to Follow

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

Henry Candy

Eula Varner – well handicapped.

Harry Dunlop

Black Abbey
Whispering Sands

Nicky Henderson

Away from the obvious, Rather Be in the Close Brothers Novices Handicap Chase

Daniel Kübler

Involved

Charlie Mann

Pickamix

Jonathan Portman

Mrs Danvers
Goodnight Girl
Mandalayan

Mandalayan has future Cheltenham Festival potential.

Oliver Sherwood

The Organist in the Pertemps Final, if the ground is good she will be knocking on the door.

Jamie Snowden

Midnight Chill - runs in the EBF final at Sandown.

Mark Usher

Dreamboat Annie: An underachiever last year, too big and backward. Works well and is genuine.

