



2019 CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL PREVIEW

A comprehensive preview as:

- ***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: BBC and ITV Racing lead commentators provide their insight.***
- ***The telling stats from Paul O'Hara***
- ***Horses to follow exclusively from the Lambourn trainers***

Tuesday 12th

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



SLH: Grand Sancy displayed a marked improvement in form when winning the Kingwell Hurdle at Wincanton on his latest start. Although having form on testing ground, the Wincanton race was run on good ground and I feel ground no softer than good/soft would be ideal.

That one piece of form puts him top on my ratings and a reproduction of that effort puts him in with a big chance at the current 12/1 on offer.

Al Dancer is the favourite of the back of his success in the Betfair Hurdle, which was run at Ascot after we lost Newbury to the equine 'flu shutdown. A most progressive horse who handles soft ground well. He looks an ideal type for this race and deserves to be at the head of the market of the British trained horses.

DMC: It is an unusual year, in that there is no Willie Mullins banker to kick things off for the Irish in the curtain-raiser. In each of the last five years, the champion trainer has fielded the favourite or a joint-favourite, and for three of the last six, he has produced the winner.

Klassical Dream may go for the Ballymore Hurdle instead and, if he does, it looks like Aramon will be the Mullins number one this year. He was impressive in winning the Grade 1 Future Champions Novices' Hurdle at Leopardstown over Christmas, and he is a talented and battle-hardened individual who could run a big race.

It looks like the juvenile hurdler Fakir D'Oudairies may run here, with fellow JP McManus-owned, Joseph O'Brien-trained, Sir Erec leading the charge in the Triumph Hurdle. No juvenile since Hors La Loi in 1999 has won the Supreme Novices' Hurdle, but Binocular was beaten only by Captain Cee Bee in 2008, and the juveniles receive 8lb from their elders. Fakir D'Oudairies was seriously impressive in winning the Triumph Hurdle Trial at Cheltenham on January, and he could run a big race.

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

SLH: After his impressive Cheltenham success, where the form is solid, I was disappointed with Lalor's effort at Sandown. The testing ground was put forward as an excuse, but I'm not too sure. The Lalor we saw win at Cheltenham in November has a favourites chance. The Lalor we saw at Sandown cannot win.

Conversely Glen Forsa put up a career best effort when winning at Sandown on his latest start. He stays very well and I wasn't sure dropping back to 2 miles would suit him. However he was ridden positively and he jumped exceptionally well.

He looks sure to give his backers a good run for their money.

The above named British pair presently head the market at 3/1 and 4/1 generally.

DMC: It is a real shame that both Le Richebourg and Cilaos Emery have met with setbacks and will miss the Arkle. Either one of them would have been a worthy favourite.

Duc Des Genievres was impressive in winning at Gowran Park last time, and Hardline is interesting dropping back down to two miles from two and a half, but Paloma Blue could be the pick of the Irish.

Chris Jones's horse is a classy individual who finished fourth in the Supreme Novices' Hurdle last year. His jumping has not been overly fluent so far, but he has raced just twice over fences, and he won well at Leopardstown's Christmas Festival last time. If he can improve upon his jumping a little in terms of fluency, he could improve significantly in terms of performance and, given that he is trained by Henry de Bromhead, that is more than possible.

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

SLH: A peak form Buveur D'Air sets the home trained form standard, although not by far. He travels and jumps as well as any hurdler I can recall in recent times. A third Champion hurdle is a distinct possibility.

On the same day Buveur D'Air was winning at Sandown, Apples Jade put up an stunning performance when running away with the Irish Champion Hurdle at Leopardstown.

She is an amazing horse, being a high class stayer, who after her latest effort looks as effective if not better over 2 miles.

The pair are very tight in the market taking out over 60% of the book.

DMC: It is great that the two mares, Laurina and Apple's Jade, are set to take on the hat-trick-seeking Buveur D'Air in the Champion Hurdle. It makes this contest one of the most intriguing races of the week.



We still don't know how good Laurina is, but we know that Apple's Jade is dynamite. We knew that she was brilliant over two and a half miles, and we know that she was unbeaten over three, but we didn't know how devastating she could be over two miles before she won the Irish Champion Hurdle at Leopardstown last time. In beating Supasundae by 16 lengths, she put up one of the best performances of her life. She receives the 7lb mares' allowance from Buveur D'Air, and that could tilt the balance in her favour.

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

SLH: A race in which I would be surprised if the winner isn't Irish trained. At a big price Mia's Storm is arguable the pick of the British trained horses. After falling on her last two chase starts last season, she has been successfully returned to hurdles. She is suited by good ground.

DMC: We haven't seen Benie Des Dieux in a while, but the vibes about her from the Willie Mullins yard appear to be all positive. Mullins has won nine of the eleven renewals of the Mares' Hurdle, and Benie Des Dieux should bring that remarkable record to ten from twelve.

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

SLH: Ok Corral impressed when winning at Warwick and will have a top jockey Derek O'Connor riding. The Nicky Henderson 9 y.o. travelled strongly through the race at Warwick, jumping well. Having watched that race again, I just harbour a doubt about him being fully effective stepping up to this 4 mile trip. No doubt he will go well through the race. It's just the final climb up the Cheltenham hill where he may be vulnerable.

At a much bigger price, Now McGinty strikes me as a horse that will stay the trip well. He finished a staying on second behind Mister Malarky at Ascot on his latest start. He does have a tendency to jump to his right, although this has been less marked as he has gained experience.

DMC: Ballyward and Discorama head up a strong Irish challenge for the National Hunt Chase. Discorama was upsides Ballyward in a Grade 3 contest at Naas at the end of January when he came down at the final fence.

They both have Cheltenham Festival form. Ballyward finished fourth in the Albert Bartlett Hurdle last year, while Discorama came from the rear to finish second behind Blow By Blow in the Martin Pipe Hurdle. Both could run big races.

Wednesday 13th March

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

SLH: Champ is expected to continue his progression with another big performance here. After winning the highly competitive Ladbroke handicap at Newbury, he was ridden out to win the Grade 1 Challow Hurdle at the same course. Ground conditions shouldn't be an issue. Four lengths behind Champ in the Challow was Brewin'Upastorm. Bewin'Upastorm then fell at the final hurdle when looking to be holding Birchdale on the New Course at Cheltenham. The expected strong pace of this race, plus the uphill finish can see Brewin'Upastorm get much closer to Champ.

DMC: There is an awful lot to like about Battleoverdoyen. The Gigginstown House horse has always been highly regarded by connections, and he ran out an easy winner of the Grade 1 Lawlor's of Naas Hurdle last time.

Klassical Dream will also be a big player, if he runs here instead of in the Supreme Novices', but City Island could be the value. Martin Brassil's horse was impressive in beating Dallas Des Pictons in a good maiden hurdle at Leopardstown's Christmas Festival. Dallas Des Pictons went on and won his own maiden by 10 lengths next time, and followed up by landing a big three-mile handicap hurdle at the Dublin Racing Festival off a mark of 130.

City Island himself went on and ran out an impressive winner of a winners' race at Naas next time. Owned by the race's sponsor, he has a lovely attitude, he is talented and progressive, he is trained by an astute trainer, and he could be a little under the radar.

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

SLH: Topofthegame was beaten by Le Bague Au Roi at Kempton on Boxing day, where Santini was a fast closing third, finishing, just 2 lengths behind. With Le Bague Au Roi giving Cheltenham a miss, Topofthegame is expected to put up a big performance here. Santini would have been upside Topfthegame with another 100 metres to run in that Kempton race. There is a valid argument that he could reverse that form on this more demanding track. However I feel that Harry Cobden will ride a more patient race on Topofthegame and he can confirm his superiority.

DMC: It is difficult to get away from Delta Work in the RSA Chase. He won the Pertemps Final last year, so he has Cheltenham Festival winning form, but he has shaped in three runs over fences this season as if he is already a better chaser than hurdler.

On his penultimate run, Gordon Elliott's horse beat Le Richebourg in the Grade 1 Drinmore Chase, the pair of them finishing clear of good horses in Jetz, Cadmium and Discorama. The trip was probably shorter than ideal for Delta Work that day. Le Richebourg then enhanced the form by going on and winning two Grade 1 chases over an extended two miles.

Stepped up to three miles next time at Leopardstown at Christmas for the Grade 1 Neville Hotels Chase, Delta Work stayed on well to win nicely. He has pace and he has stamina and he has class and, still only six, he is probably still progressing.



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

SLH: Altior is a very special racehorse and should win at his 4th consecutive Cheltenham festival. It will also be an 18th successive victory over jumps. He is superior to every horse in opposition and is very short odds are fully justified.

DMC: It is obviously going to be difficult for any of the Irish to beat Altior. Min finished seven lengths behind Nicky Henderson's horse in last year's Champion Chase, and he finished seven lengths behind him in the Supreme Novices' Hurdle in 2016.

Even so, winner of the John Durkan Chase and the Dublin Chase in his two runs this season, Willie Mullins' horse could again be the one who will give Altior most to do.

A look at the remaining races on the second day...

DMC: Tiger Roll's achievements are quite incredible. Bred for the flat, by Authorized out of an Entrepreneur mare, he has won a Triumph Hurdle, a Munster National, a National Hunt Chase, a Cross Country Chase and, famously, a Grand National. Yet, when Gordon Elliott's horse won the Grade 2 Boyne Hurdle at Navan last month, he put up one of the best performances of his life on ratings.

That run was supposed to bring him forward with the Cross Country Chase at Cheltenham in mind again and, afterwards, the Grand National. He is such a willing and likeable horse. It is right that he is clear favourite for the Cross Country.

Band Of Outlaws was impressive in winning at Naas last month, and could go well in the Fred Winter. Rated 93 on the flat, Joseph O'Brien's horse showed a fine turn of foot that day off a relatively sedate pace, and a hurdles rating of 139 for the Fred Winter looks fair.

Surin could also go well if she takes her chance in the Fred Winter. In three runs over hurdles for Gordon Elliott, the Gigginstown House filly has proven that she is not far off the top juvenile hurdlers, and the fast pace that she should get in the Fred Winter should suit her well.

Envoi Allen sets a high standard in the Champion Bumper, but his stable companion Abacadabras may not be far behind him. He was giving him a real race in the Grade 2 bumper at Leopardstown when he crashed out through the rail. Reported none the worse for that incident by trainer Gordon Elliott, he could out-run his odds.

Thursday 14th March

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

SLH: There was very little to choose between Defi Du Seuil and Lostintranslation in the Scilly Isles chase at Sandown, Defi Du Seuil winning by 3/4 length. Defi Du Seuil was reversing earlier Cheltenham form where Lostintranslation had just come out on top. Cheltenham suits both horses and they head the market.

The bigger the test of stamina the better the prospects of Lostintranslation, who would have been a live chance in the RSA. He certainly has the build to carry on improving and the Cheltenham finish may enable him to finish in front of his old rival. The pair head the market at around the 3/1 mark.

DMC: Voix Du Reve will be interesting if he takes his chance in the JLT Chase. Willie Mullins' horse won the Craddockstown Chase at Punchestown in November, when he had Hardline seven lengths behind him in second place. He has just come up a little short in his last two runs in Grade 1 company over two miles, but the step up to two and a half miles could bring about the requisite improvement.

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

SLH: Frodon and Top Notch head the British challenge. However I will be surprised if either of them can see off the strong Irish challenge. Over to you Donn!.

DMC: Monalee also has the option of the Gold Cup, but he will be a big player in the Ryanair Chase if he runs here. Henry de Bromhead's horse has finished second in an Albert Bartlett Hurdle and in an RSA Chase, so we know that he can go well at the Cheltenham Festival, and he looked very good last time in landing the Red Mills Chase at Gowran Park over two and a half miles under Rachael Blackmore. This intermediate trip and a forward-going ride could represent optimum conditions.



His stable companion, and last year's Ryanair Chase winner, Balko Des Flos would also be of interest if he lined up here. The Gigginstown House horse has been below top form this season to date, but a performance like the one that he put up in winning the race last year under Davy Russell would take him very close.

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



SLH: Current 7/4 favourite on the exchanges, Paisley Park went to the head of the market after showing improved form to win over today's course and distance on his most recent start. Ground conditions shouldn't be an issue. That performance puts him significantly ahead of the British trained horses, and if he is to be beaten it will be by a horse from across the Irish Sea.

DMC: Faugheen is up against the stats here as an 11-year-old. No horse aged older than nine has won the Stayers' Hurdle since Crimson Embers won it in 1986 and survived the ensuing stewards' inquiry. But Faugheen is an extraordinary 11-year-old. He would obviously be a hugely popular winner.

Supasundae won the Coral Cup in 2017 and he ran a cracker to finish second to Penhill in the Stayers' Hurdle last year. He has chased Apple's Jade home in two of his three runs this season, and he finished second to Sharjah in the Ryanair Hurdle in between those two runs. Jessica Harrington's 9yo could be the over-looked horse of the Stayers' Hurdle.

Bacardys could also out-run his odds. Willie Mullins' horse probably would have finished third in the Stayers' Hurdle last year had he not come down at the final flight, and that was after coming from behind in a race that was run at a sedate pace. He hasn't been fluent over his fences in attempts to make a steeplechaser out of him and, switched back to hurdles, he could be underrated.

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

SLH: Posh Trish holds Indefatigable on Taunton form, although the latter did improve further when finishing a respectable second behind Lady Buttons at Doncaster. On my figures there's little between them, so the 25/1 about Indifatigable makes more appeal than the 7/1 Posh Trish. However, once again the Irish look to hold a far stronger hand than the Brit's.

DMC: Honeysuckle has been impressive in her three races for Henry de Bromhead, and she has a big chance in the mares' novices' hurdle. Unbeaten in four runs now, one point-to-point and those three hurdle races, there is no telling how good she could be.

5.30 Fulke Walwyn Kim Muir Handicap Chase (5yo+) 3m 2f

DMC: In this amateur riders chase, Measureofmydreams is also interesting. He ran a really encouraging race on his comeback run to finish third behind Snugsborough Benny and Call It Magic in a three-mile chase at Fairyhouse. That was his debut for Gordon Elliott, and it was his first run since he finished ninth in the Irish Grand National in 2017.

His British handicap rating of 137 is identical to his Irish rating, and that is 10lb lower than his peak. Also, he finished third behind Minella Rocco and last year's Gold Cup hero Native River in the National Hunt Chase in 2016, so we know that he can operate under Cheltenham Festival conditions. And he could have Jamie Codd for company.

Friday 15th March

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

SLH: Not a deal to choose between the leading contenders from Britain. Quel Destin, Pentland Hills and Adjali boast the best form, but they all look vulnerable to a particularly strong Irish challenge.

A horse worth keeping an eye on is Montestrel. After impressing on hurdles debut when beating Quel Destin at Chepstow, he has disappointed twice. It's possible that a strongly race race on soft ground may get him back on track. He's available at a little risk price of 100/1.



DMC: Sir Erec is a monster. A top-class stayer on the flat with a rating of 109, JP McManus' horse battled on well to win his maiden hurdle at Leopardstown's Christmas Festival, and he stepped forward from that last time to land the Grade 1 Spring Juvenile Hurdle back at Leopardstown. That is a race that is a really strong pointer to the Triumph Hurdle, and the Joseph O'Brien-trained gelding sets a high standard.

It was a little disappointing that Tiger Tap Tap did not get closer to Sir Erec in that Spring Hurdle than he did. Willie Mullins' horse got to within a neck of him in his maiden hurdle, the pair of them clear. He just seemed to get tired on the run-in in the Spring Hurdle. But it is not just the winners of the Spring Hurdle who can do well in the Triumph Hurdle, and Tiger Tap Tap could be under-rated.

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

SLH: Lisnager Oscar showed significant improvement when stepping up to 3 miles at Haydock. That win was achieved on ground that was on the easy side of good. Nadaitak also put up an improved performance on his latest start when cheek-pieces were fitted for the first time over hurdles, having previously worn them on the flat. Good ground looks essential to his big odds chance. This looks another race in which the Irish look to have the stronger hand.

DMC: Commander Of Fleet has a big chance in the Albert Bartlett Hurdle. Winner of the Land Rover Bumper last April, Gordon Elliott's horse was just a little out-paced over two miles and off a sedate pace when he could finish only fourth of four in the Royal Bond Hurdle at Fairyhouse in December. He was seen to much better effect last time in the Nataniel Lacy Hurdle at Leopardstown, however. He stayed on really well over that two-mile-six-furlong trip to beat Rhinestone. The step up to three miles should suit.

Derrinross is also interesting. Philip Dempsey's horse has won his last two, both over three miles, a Grade 3 contest at Cork and a Grade 2 race at Limerick, a race that has been won in the past by Faugheen, Penhill, Martello Tower and Weapon's Amnesty. He has stamina in abundance, and he is the type of tough horse who could go very well in an Albert Bartlett Hurdle.

3.30 Cheltenham Gold Cup Chase (Grade 1) 3m2½f

SLH: On actual form achieved there is very little to choose between a host of this seasons contenders.



Clan Des Obeaux has impressed, but I have my doubts whether he will truly see out this trip, certainly if ground conditions are testing.

At around 33/1 Bristol De Mai has to be considered. He beat all of the leading British contenders just two starts ago when winning the Betfair Chase at Haydock. Subsequently fell in the King George at right-handed Kempton, which is a track he doesn't act on as he needs to go left handed. His ability to be effective at

Cheltenham has been questioned, but he has previous form at this track and I see no reason why he shouldn't act here.

DMC: Victory for Presenting Percy would be some story. Winner of the Pertemps Final in 2017, Philip Reynolds' horse was really impressive in winning the RSA Chase last year. He has raced just once this term, over hurdles. It is an unorthodox preparation for a Gold Cup. But he won that race, the Galmoy Hurdle, with his ears pricked, and Pat Kelly gave him an unorthodox preparation last year too in advance of his RSA Chase win. He is one of the most exciting horses in training.

Al Boum Photo could be the pick of the Willie Mullins team. Joe Donnelly's horse won the Ryanair Gold Cup at Fairyhouse last year, and he probably would have won the Growise Chase at Punchestown had he not run out at the final fence. He has run just once this season too, he was seriously impressive in winning the Savills Chase at Tramore on New Year's Day, when he had the Thyestes Chase first and second, Invitation Only and Alpha Des Obeaux, behind him in third and fourth, giving them 3lb. He is going to have to improve if he is going to win a Gold Cup, but he is only seven and he has run just seven times over fences, so he has lots of potential for that improvement.

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. It has been an unusual season with stable preparations for the festival disrupted by the unsuitably firm ground and then the equine 'flu shutdown.



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



John Hunt: *The BBC Racing and Olympic commentator highlights four horses at the festival...*

My I remember so clearly those Festivals back in the 1980's and 90's when Irish trained horses barely got a look in at the Festival. Mister Donovan and Bit Of Skite were charismatic names of my youth along with Bobslime, Danoli and Harcon. Some flopped badly, others were imperious. Incredible to this day to recall Galmoy's success in the 1987 Stayers Hurdle as

Ireland's sole victory. Nowadays things are completely different and if I'm to have a good Festival punting, the Emerald Isle contingent need to perform well.



Last year Presenting Percy did us a wonderful turn winning the RSA, but I really think he is too short in the market for an open looking Gold Cup this year. Willie Mullins has never won the Blue Riband but he must have a good chance this year with four targeted at the race currently. Kemboy was terrifically impressive winning the Savilles Chase over Christmas (distant runner up Monalee also heading to the Festival in top form), but it is Mullins' second string AL BOUM PHOTO who excites me at the prices.

No one will ever forget Paul Townend's "brain freeze" moment when trying to steer Al Boum Photo around the final fence in the Champion Novices Chase at the Punchestown Festival. He would have won well that day and there were some really solid horses behind him on that occasion, including Shattered Love and Rathvinden. He seems a fast improving young horse to me, lightly raced and his win on New Year's Day at Tramore continued his upward progression. Looking forward to cheering him on at a very decent price.

I'm fully expecting Mullins to be in great shape once again this year and there is not a bumper horse I've seen that has impressed me more than BLUE SARI who demonstrated a wonderful turn of foot to dispatch what looks a very promising JP McManus/Joseph O'Brien youngster called Front View at Gowran Park in late January, devouring the soft ground in the process. He looks very exciting.



Jessica Harrington has trained some of the best horses ever seen around Cheltenham including Moscow Flyer and Gold Cup winner Sizing John. She also struck with Rock The World in the Grand Annual Chase a couple of years ago and she has another handicapper well entered up at the Festival. His name is WHISPERINTHEBREEZE, a six year old son

of Kayf Tara. He is entered up in all sorts of races, including the four miler at Cheltenham. What is striking about him is the way he goes about his job. He is such a good jumper and bowls along beautifully on genuinely good ground. I can't stress that enough, he must have good ground to be at his best. His win at Leopardstown during the Dublin Festival was terrific and he is only just starting out as a chaser really. A really likeable animal.



I suppose I had better put up a British trained horse too and Dr Richard Newland is always capable of getting tremendous improvement out of his horses. So wherever ABOLITIONIST runs will be of interest. A good quality chaser when trained by Ellmarie Holden in Ireland, in his time he has been runner up in the prestigious Troytown Chase as well as a fine third to Our Duke in the 2017 Irish Grand National. I'm sure a crack at Aintree for the Grand National itself will be the firm priority this spring but a win at Cheltenham would guarantee a run at Liverpool and judging by the way he has been looked after since his win over

hurdles back in the autumn, he is a horse to have an interest in at Cheltenham and through the spring.

Richard Hoiles: *The ITV Racing lead racing commentator has three to be with, three to be against and four handicappers....*



It is that time again. The time when jumping fans descend on Cheltenham to settle arguments that have raged for months as to who will be the 28 to taste success at this year's Festival.

A cauldron of anticipation overflows with the release of the tapes for the Supreme and careers through a week which tests the stamina of horse and human alike before the curtain descends this year with the Martin Pipe being the final race for the first time.

That is one of the changes recommended as part of the review into last year's fatalities so before embarking on views which will no doubt split opinions let's start with a sentiment all will agree with, by wishing all who compete safe passage.

Down the years I have learnt that sitting on the fence gets you nowhere so here are a few thoughts (right or wrong!) as to how to make the 2019 Festival not just enjoyable but profitable as well.

Three Jollies to be with

Benie Des Dieux – OLBG Mares Hurdle.

There are some very good mares around but Benie Des Dieux looks the only one of the quality trio of hurdlers to be lining up here with Laurina and Apple's Jade destined for a crack at the Champion Hurdle. A race the stable has dominated it lacks strength in depth and so plausible opposition is thin on the ground. She looks destined to repeat last year's victory when she lowered the colours of a below par Apple's Jade.



Tiger Roll – Cross Country

Absolutely bolted up over hurdles last time and now the National weights are out expect a bold bid to repeat last year's victory in the Cross Country. Unlike last season there does not appear to be a new horse coming through the ranks in this discipline and he is largely up against the same bunch of horses he beat last year.

Sir Erec – JCB Triumph Hurdle

Fewer quality Flat horses go hurdling these days, so in many ways Sir Erec is a throw back to the days of the likes Kribensis, Royal Gait and Alderbrook. Rated 109 on the Flat (and still improving), he was beaten less than 3 lengths by Stradavarius on British Champions Day. Still an entire he has shown no sign of being distracted nor lacking hurdling fluency. David Casey used the phrase 'never flinched' to describe his hurdles races to date at a preview in Belfast and since the inception of the Fred Winter this race is no longer the bunfight it used to be.

Three short ones to oppose

Al's Dancer – Supreme

This year's rescheduled Betfair Hurdle lacked a competitive edge with a horse bought out of a seller filling third place. As such Al's Dancer looks one to oppose with plenty of opposition the best value of which may be Grand Sancy who has a similar rating going into the race as Paul Nicholls other winners Noland and Al Ferof and is battle hardened from running in competitive heats especially the handicap at Ascot before Christmas which looks better form than the Betfair.

Champ – Ballymore

This race looks at the mercy of the Irish this time around as the home division's form has plenty of holes in it. Challow winners have a poor record in this race usually because in deep ground it proves more of a pointer for the Albert Bartlett. That was not the case this time but Champ still pulls hard and could well get lit up on the big day. His name and the AP McCoy connection has led a price based on potential and hype rather than what he has actually yet achieved on the track.



Clan Des Obeaux – Gold Cup

His chance would be improved by decent ground which would be against Presenting Percy and Native River but I require plenty of convincing that he will see out the trip. He has always been described as a horse who has taken time to develop and with no Festival form under his belt this brutal race could exploit any cracks that may remain.

Handicappers to have onside

Benatar – Brown Advisory Plate

Split Terrefort and Kemboy when 3rd in the JLT twelve months ago at the Festival. On the face of it disappointed at Ascot when leading the chase in pursuit of Cyrname but subsequent events showed that may have been an impossible task. Ridden more quietly in a big field he should get the strong tempo to help him settle and the silver lining to his quiet season is that he looks off a very reasonable mark.

Bouvreuil – Grand Annual

Placed three times at the Festival in the Fred Winter, Close Brothers and the Plate he was sent off 10-1 for the Grand Annual off exactly the same mark twelve months ago when trained by Paul Nicholls and brought down early on. His price this time around is inflated by the fact he is now trained by Ben Haslam, but he has had an excellent season including when winning with Bouvreuil on his first start for the yard. That ensured he would get in here so his subsequent defeat can be readily overlooked as the Festival would have been the objective. He holds plenty of entries but the Grand Annual would be the best target.



Early Doors – Martin Pipe

Is in both the Coral Cup and Martin Pipe but given the mark he was given was 145 would expect him to line up again in the race in which he placed 3rd off 142 last year. He picked up the pieces behind Apple's Jade in the Christmas Hurdle but that still reads well enough in the context of a 0-145 handicap and whilst the owner JP McManus was unhappy with the treatment of a few of his horses by the UK handicapper this wouldn't be one of them.

Notwhatlam – Pertemps

My biggest ante post position of the Festival at the time of writing off the back of an eye catching 4th in the qualifier at Warwick. Given the set-up of the track that day and the prevailing decent ground he was in an impossible position in trying to come from the back of the field but caught the eye running on to ensure qualification for the final. At the time his mark of 135 looked likely to put him right on the cusp of getting in but he looks certain to get a run being 27th on the list with a maximum field size of 24. Always in this race punters are at the mercy of an Irish plot horse such as a Presenting Percy but he is definitely better than Warwick and is still quite unexposed for a yard that improve horses that join their ranks.



Cheltenham Trends 2019 from Paul O'Hara...

The 2019 Cheltenham Festival is almost upon us and looks to be another great one in prospect. For the trends this year I've chosen five key criteria for each of the main races and this has significantly reduced the number of qualifying horses. Hopefully in here is a winner or two, or it confirms what you may have been hoping for. I'm sure there'll be thrills, spills, ups and downs, winners and losers, and hard luck stories, but let's hope all the horses come back safely. Whatever you're backing, good luck, and let's hope it's a Festival to remember and may the trends be with you!

Champion Hurdle - 10 Year Trends

8/10 – finished in the first four at the Festival in the Supreme, Neptune or Triumph (exception was the great Hurricane Fly who had never run at Festival prior to winning this race in 2011 and went on to win again in 2013)

10/10 – last ran between 24 and 78 days ago

10/10 - won in season

10/10 - age 6 to 9

10/10 - had their prep run at Sandown, Kempton, Wincanton, Leopardstown or Punchestown

Trends here point to two horses only and that's last year's winner **Buveur D'Air and Apples Jade**.

This arguably could be the race of the Festival, with both Laurina and Apples Jade looking to change the crown to a tiara. Laurina is the unknown quantity and this will be by far her biggest test to date. She may lack the experience for a race of this stature but the record of trainer Willie Mullins merits the greatest respect. Mullins has had the winner or a place in seven of the last eight runnings. He may also run last year's gallant runner up Melon, who has been below form this season and Sharjah who was highly thought of as a novice and now starting to fulfil that potential. Apples Jade who has one Festival win to her name in the Mares hurdle of 2017, will be bidding to double her tally. Last year's failure Mares Hurdle is still fresh in the memory. However, she was reported to be 'in season'. This time round everything couldn't have gone better and arrives here in fine fettle. The worry is can lightning strike twice? Of the rest Global Citizen could go well at a price and Verdana Blue could be a danger after beating Buveur D'Air at Kempton. The worry with her is she's ground dependent (best on good) and this is not necessarily her main target. Finally, we come to the two time champion, who is bidding to become only the sixth horse to complete the threepeat and that's **BUVEUR D'AIR**. Not seen at his best so far this season, but surely will be spot on for this. He's a worthy favourite and won't give up his crown without a fight. He is just about the selection here, but if the real Apples Jade turns up then we could see something special. Either way a great race on paper and let's hope it lives up to it on the track.

Champion Chase - 10 Year Trends

10/10 - ran 1 or 4 times that season

10/10 – last run at least 32 days ago

10/10 - ran in the same calendar year

10/10 - age 6 to 10

10/10 has their prep race at Cheltenham, Ascot, Kempton, Newbury or Punchestown

Trends here point to two horses only and that's last year's winner **Altior and Diego Du Charmil**

This race is all about one horse and that's Altior. Last year's impressive winner on ground that didn't suit and you had to be impressed with the way he came up that hill. Altior has already proved to be a true champion and is bidding for a fourth consecutive victory at the Festival. Of the rest, it's difficult to know until the final declarations are made, but the suspicion is this could cut up quite significantly as trainers look to the Ryanair as an alternative. The other horse in the trends has been thumped twice by Altior, so would need a miracle to turn the tables. Turning to potential runners, Willie Mullins has indicated one of either Min or Footpad will run here and the other re-routed to the Ryanair. Min was a gallant runner up last year, but has seven lengths to find with Altior. In fact he has been beaten twice by Altior at the Festival by the same distance. The real danger could be Footpad who was faultless last season. However, this season has been a disappointment so far. The good news is Willie Mullins reports him in good form at home. If the Footpad of last year turned up then we could be in for a cracker. Remember his Arkle win last season was run five seconds faster than Altior's Champion Chase. Finally, to sum up in one word it has to be **ALTIOR**.

Stayers' Hurdle - 10 Year Trends

9/10 - between 2 and 4 runs that season (exception Penhill)

9/10 - won in season (exception Penhill)

10/10 - last run at least 46 days ago

10/10 - age 6 to 9

10/10 – finished in the top four on last completed start

Trends here point to three horses and they are: **Bachasson, Paisley Park, Apples Jade**

With Apples Jade going for the Champion Hurdle and Willie Mullins indicating that his runners here will be Faugheen and Bacadys, that would rule out Bachasson and leave Paisley Park as the only runner fitting the trends. Sadly, last year's winner Penhill has been ruled out. He was the horse who just about bucked every trend last year by winning first time out. Looking at the race and firstly Faugheen. Could he really complete the unique double of Champion Hurdle and Stayers Hurdle? Trends say not, but what a story that would be! His heavy fall behind Apples Jade last time left more questions than answers, as it was too far out to tell if he could have troubled Apples Jade. If the real 'Machine' turned up here then who's to say he cannot win. Others that merit a mention are Black Op and Kilbrichen Storm. Both have had chase careers aborted to come here. Black Op was second to Samcro in last year's Ballymore, while Kilbrichen Storm won the Albert Bartlett. Both are available at around 14's and could represent the each way value. I mentioned Samcro and if he turned up in this race at the Festival and fully recovered from a lung infection, then he could make them all go. Supasundae was second last year and has been campaigned over shorter distances this season, but must have a chance stepping back up in trip. Finally to **PAISLEY PARK**, who has done nothing but improve this season and has beaten the majority of the British contenders through a faultless campaign. He's the worthy favourite for the race and would have to be the selection.

Gold Cup - 10 Year Trends

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

10/10 - last run at least 33 days ago

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

10/10 - won in last four runs

10/10- had their prep run at Kempton, Newbury, Leopardstown or Thurles

There are five horses that fit the trends, starting with last year's winner **Native River** along with **Bellshill, Bristol De Mai, Kemboy, Road To Respect**

This looks like one of the most open Gold Cups for some time. The current favourite is Presenting Percy who is bidding to become the first horse for 90 years to win without have their prep run over fences. A class horse and winner of last year's RSA but clearly had his problems, as only making it to the track once since. Fighting for favouritism is the Paul Nicholls trained Clan Des Obeaux, who has done nothing but improve all season. The only question mark would be will he stay up the Cheltenham hill. Moving on to horses who fit the trends, one guaranteed to stay is last year's winner Native River and if the ground came soft or worse he could prove very hard to beat again. Bristol De Mai looks to save his best form for Haydock and may have too much competition for the lead. Kemboy is the new kid on the block and won well from several other entries over Christmas. Two previous runs at the Festival over shorter are not particularly inspiring and there are doubts over staying up the Cheltenham, hill. Bellshill and Road to Respect fought out a cracking finish last time, when Bellshill came out marginally on top. On the form book there isn't much between them. However, Road To Respect ran in last year's Gold Cup and looked a possible non-stayer. **BELLSHILL** on the other hand will stay and looks to be improving this season. He also has the ability to go on any ground and is my tentative selection in a bid to give Willie Mullins an elusive first victory in the race. Finally, a mention for Might Bite who looked the winner all over last year but was undone by ground that was plenty soft enough. He's had a troubled season and as a result been given a wind operation. Nicky Henderson reports him in good form following a racecourse gallop and if back to his best he could represent the each way value.

Finally, five horses that are declared in the handicaps and could go well.

Benatar
Ballyandy
Cubomania
Spiritofthegames
The Worlds End (pictured)



Lambourn Trainers Horses to Follow

A mixture of National Hunt and flat with a few comments directly from the trainers worth noting:

Nicky Henderson

**Angels Breath
Chantry House**

*'Angels Breath for the Supreme Novices and one to follow is **Chantry House**'*

Charles Hills

**Equilateral
Autumn War
Clematis**

Daniel Kubler

Fronsac

'Gelding should see him focused on his job and he is from a family that improves with age.'

Jamie Osborne

Unnamed as yet

'2yo Bungle Inthejungle/Lucky Leigh filly. Very quick 2yo, hopefully a Royal Ascot and Weatherbys Super Sprint contender (keep everything crossed this does not put the kybosh on it!).'

Jamie Snowdon

Fact of the Matter

*'We might have a couple heading to Cheltenham, but it might be fun to follow **Fact of the Matter** – he won the Glenfarclas Cross Country race at the December meeting having been 2nd on debut over the unique fences in November. He's had a wind op over the winter and will head straight to the Festival now. He is entered in the Grand National too, but let's win at the Festival first!'*

Mark Usher

**On The Right Track
Four Mile Bridge
Waqas**

