

GOLD CUP PREVIEW

Plenty of comparisons have already been made between Arkle and **Best Mate**, and they're bound to become even more popular should the best staying chaser of the present day complete a hat-trick of Cheltenham Gold Cup victories in mid-March. Just for the record, the following paragraph from Chasers & Hurdles 2002/3 may help to put into perspective just how good Arkle really was:-

'In the 1965/6 season, Arkle ran four times before his third Cheltenham Gold Cup victory, starting off with a twenty-length win under 12-7 in the Gallaher Gold Cup at Sandown in November, setting a time record which still stands for the course and distance. Later that month, Arkle took his second successive Hennessy under 12-7, winning by fifteen lengths from Freddie who received 32 lb. Arkle made it three wins from three starts with victory by a distance in the King George VI Chase before again winning the Leopardstown Chase on his way to Cheltenham. Arkle conceded 42 lb to the second and third at Leopardstown; runner-up Height o' Fashion, who went down by a neck, did most of her racing in Ireland but was worth a Timeform rating of 168+ whilst third-placed Splash, beaten a further fifteen lengths, had won the previous year's Irish Grand National and earned a Timeform rating of 157. Arkle gave them a 43 lb and 55 lb beating respectively and was 10/1-on when making it five out of five for the season when taking

Best Mate jumps the second last in splendid isolation twelve month ago



the Gold Cup in a canter. If these reminiscences about Arkle conjure up strains of the theme from a brown bread commercial, we apologise—but if comparisons with Arkle had not been made we should not have had to refute them. Arkle's feats were extraordinary by the standards of his day, and nothing short of staggering by those of the present day. It is very difficult to envisage Best Mate or any other modern champion chaser—with the possible exception of Desert Orchid—arriving at the Gold Cup in circumstances even vaguely similar to those of Arkle.'

In other words, even if Best Mate does make it three in a row later this month, Arkle's achievements will still make him comfortably the greatest steeplechaser in living memory. That's not to decry Best Mate in any way. After all, he's consistently proved himself the best around over the last few seasons and he showed at Leopardstown over Christmas that his defeat by Jair du Cochet at Huntingdon was no more than a blip. Admittedly, closer inspection of what he achieved when defending his title in 2003 tells us the form isn't outstanding by any means—the eleven other finishers have subsequently run thirty-six times and failed to notch even a single win—but he was undeniably impressive in coming home with ten lengths to spare over Truckers Tavern and it's likely a reproduction of that form will make him very hard to beat again.

What of the opposition? Well, it's not looking so formidable now as it was threatening to do before Christmas. There was a period prior to Best Mate's win at Leopardstown when **Jair du Cochet**, **Keen Leader**, **Kingscliff** and even **Sir Rembrandt** were all shaping up as though they could be pretenders to his crown. Things haven't gone to plan for this quartet since, however, with Jair du Cochet sadly put down after shattering a leg recently. Keen Leader is a staying chaser of immense promise, but under the right conditions. Those conditions are probably a flat track and testing ground, but he'll never get the former at Cheltenham and the latter rarely prevails in the middle of March nowadays. Keen Leader had everything in his favour when dishing out a seventeen-length beating to Truckers Tavern in the Tommy Whittle at Haydock in December, but didn't look nearly so effective under less testing conditions when

Keen Leader makes a mistake en route to success at Ascot last year



only third behind Shooting Light in the AON at Newbury last time out. Possibly as a result of that Newbury defeat, when waiting tactics were rather surprisingly used, Liam Cooper has lost the ride to Barry Geraghty in the Gold Cup itself. Kingscliff will be the mount of Andrew Thornton, and he'll be bidding to put the disappointment of his most recent effort at Haydock behind him. Prior to that defeat, the 2003 Foxhunters winner had been improving at such a rate that it seemed likely he'd be the main threat to Best Mate. After all, he was unbeaten in seven starts (three points, two hunters and two handicaps), made jumping look easy and seemed to have an excellent mixture of speed and stamina. Sadly, it was clear from a very early stage at Haydock that Kingscliff wasn't happy. He 'put down' on several occasions when seemingly on a good stride and was fighting a losing battle from some way out to get on terms with the all-the-way winner Artic Jack. Connections have subsequently put that display down to Kingscliff pulling muscles in his back and, whilst it's often an idea to treat excuses with a pinch of salt, he did leave the impression that day that something was hurting him. A course of treatment by the famed Mary Bromiley has supposedly rectified the problem and, if he is back to his best, then it won't be a surprise if Kingscliff does prove to be Best Mate's chief threat.

At the time of writing, it's looking as though **Therealbandit** could well make the Gold Cup field after just two completed starts over fences. There's been plenty of debate in the media as to whether it would be sensible to go for the novice race instead, but connections also have the immensely promising Our Vic for that event. The proof of the pudding is in the eating and the only way we'll know whether Therealbandit is ready for such a test is by running him in the Gold Cup. It's true to say he failed when upped in grade for the Pillar on his most recent outing, coming down four out when still moving strongly. He hadn't made any mistakes as such prior to his departure but, equally, his jumping hadn't been so fluent as when gaining a couple of facile wins in novice company at the same course previously. There's little doubt he's a very good chaser in the making, but the chances are he'd need to be an outstanding novice if he was to win the Gold Cup with such limited experience. Lack of experience isn't so much of a problem for **Beef Or Salmon**, but there is still a doubt as to whether he'll be able to get round without mishap. That might seem a little harsh given the only time he's come to grief in nine starts over fences was when tipping up at the third in the 2003 renewal, but his jumping has been less than convincing on at least a couple of occasions since then and, though he reportedly gurgled when a well-held third behind Best Mate at Leopardstown over Christmas, he went through that race like the third-best horse from a long way out.

It's hard to make a case out for many of the longer-priced ones, either **Harbour Pilot**, who might well have beaten Florida Pearl in the Hennessy Cognac Gold Cup at Leopardstown last time but for unseating his rider two out, is essentially a stayer and likely to be seen to best advantage under more testing conditions, though it was only good when he claimed a never-nearer third at 40/1 last year. He'll be fresh and, though his tendency to miss out the odd fence remains a worry, at least we know he's proven in the ultra-competitive heat of battle that the Gold Cup provides. The other one to consider, particularly if the field cuts up, is **First Gold**, who was able to dominate when winning at Aintree and Punchestown last spring and showed his well-being when third to Edredon Bleu in the King George last time.

To summarise, it almost goes without saying that Best Mate is comfortably the most likely winner, but his odds reflect his chance and, without wanting to necessarily oppose him for the sake of it, Kingscliff is forwarded as the best alternative. The Gold Cup is invariably won by a young horse on the up and, if it hadn't been for his performance at Haydock, there's little doubt he'd have been a shorter price, with everyone still claiming him to be the next big thing.

CHAMPION HURDLE PREVIEW

Over the years, the race with the strongest bearing on the outcome of the Champion Hurdle has been... the previous year's Champion Hurdle! Most people are aware that there have been several multiple winners of the race, but after a trawl through the form books it still comes as a surprise to discover quite how strong an influence previous runnings of the race have on the result of hurdling's two-mile crown.

Take the decade following World War Two. National Spirit in 1947 and 1948, Hatton's Grace in 1949, 1950 and 1951, and Sir Ken in 1952, 1953 and 1954. Fast-forward to the end of the 'sixties. Persian War took hurdling's Blue Riband in 1968, 1969 and 1970. Aiming for a four-timer in '71, he was beaten only by Bula, who followed up himself in 1972. Comedy of Errors won the 1973 renewal, was second in 1974 and won again in 1975. Night Nurse won the next two runnings, and in the second of those he beat Monksfield, who won in 1978 (with Night Nurse third) and 1979. Runner-up both times to Monksfield was Sea Pigeon, who won himself in 1980 (from Monksfield) and 1981.

And there's more. In the mid-'eighties See You Then won three consecutive Champion Hurdles, in the middle one beating Gaye Brief, who'd won the race himself in 1983. And of course Istabraq was successful in 1998, 1999 and 2000, denied the chance of an unprecedented fourth win only by the abandonment of the meeting in 2001.

It's not just previous winners of the race who do well in subsequent Champions, either. In recent years there have been a number of horses placed in more than one renewal. Nomadic Way repaid each-way support at 8/1 and 9/1 when chasing home Kribensis and Morley Street in 1990 and 1991. Even more lucrative for each-way punters was Ruling, who was third at 20/1 in 1992 following his same placing (at 50/1) the previous year. Oh So Risky was second in 1992 and 1994, and Large Action was third in 1994 and second in 1995. In the era of Istabraq, it's often forgotten that his stablemate Theatreworld also had a tremendous record in the race, finishing runner-up in 1997, 1998 and 1999, at 33/1, 20/1 and 16/1. Just to bring things up to date, Hors La Loi was second to Istabraq in 2000 and won the next running of the Champion in 2002. Hopefully, that was a history lesson which will continue to prove profitable.

Twelve months ago, there were still some who doubted that **Rooster Booster** was the best two-mile hurdler around. In spite of the fact that he went into last year's Champion Hurdle with clearly the best form, some clung on to the belief that he was a glorified handicapper who'd be found out at the highest level. Those doubts were dispelled in no uncertain terms in one of the most memorable Champions since the golden era of the late-'seventies, Rooster Booster travelling powerfully throughout, jumping accurately, and quickening in tremendous style to beat **Westender** by eleven lengths, with favourite **Rhinestone Cowboy** a further three lengths back in third.

Nothing that has happened since then has altered our view that Rooster Booster is once more the likeliest winner of the Champion Hurdle. Admittedly, he was beaten on his next three outings after last year's Champion, but there were excuses on each occasion. At Aintree in April he was beaten by lack of stamina over two and a half miles, finishing a close second to Sacundai, and then on his first two outings this season he was undone by lack of finishing speed in tactical races for the Bula at Cheltenham and the Christmas Hurdle at Kempton. Rooster Booster showed he's effectively ridden up with the pace when beating **Hasty Prince** by seven lengths at Haydock in January, but it was in defeat on his most recent start that we saw him right back to his best. In a highly competitive Tote Gold Trophy at Newbury,



A race-rusty Rooster Booster (grey) loses out in a sprint for the Bula, which is won by outsider Rigmarole (right)

Rooster Booster was conceding 13 lb and upwards to his twenty-four rivals, and in going down by just a short head to **Geos** he showed himself every bit as good as ever. Indeed, he might well have held on had he not made a mistake at the final flight. Rooster Booster will be 17 lb better off with Geos in the Champion, and, although he's not the value he was last year, he'll surely prove very hard to beat. The race should be run to suit him, and his record at Cheltenham is an excellent one.

On Timeform Ratings, Rhinestone Cowboy comes out second best, but the rumours over the last four weeks have been indicating he'd bypass the Champion for a tilt at the Coral Cup and this was confirmed on Thursday.

Rhinestone Cowboy's stablemate **Intersky Falcon** has been Rooster Booster's main market rival in the ante-post book. He beat Rooster Booster in the Christmas Hurdle, seeming suited by a change to more patient tactics, but he proved disappointing next time when only second to **Rigmarole** in the Kingwell at Wincanton. Intersky Falcon failed to impress with his finishing effort at Wincanton, and he's by no means sure to relish the final climb up the Cheltenham hill. He was only fifth to Rooster Booster in last year's Champion and may fare little better this time around. Rigmarole was promoted to second favourite after Wincanton, but he still has plenty to prove so far as we're concerned, likeable sort though he is. The Kingwell win probably owed much to an indifferent effort from Intersky Falcon, and the balance of Rigmarole's form suggests he has nothing in hand of horses at much longer odds for the Champion.

One of those is last year's runner-up, Westender, and Martin Pipe's eight-year-old could well prove the each-way value. For a start, Westender goes very well at Cheltenham, having been second in the Supreme Novices and the Champion at the last two Festivals and gained his two most recent successes there in the autumn of 2001. A number of the principals in the betting could find themselves at a disadvantage if the ground at Cheltenham is good or firmer, as has been the case in the last six renewals, but not Westender, whose five wins have all come on good or good to firm ground. Westender took little interest when pulled up in the Fighting Fifth at Newcastle on his reappearance, but he reportedly finished distressed that day, and he was much more like his old self when sixth to Rooster Booster in the Tote Gold Trophy. Judged by the betting, Westender is the forgotten horse in this year's Champion, but should anything go wrong with Rooster Booster he'll be one of the best equipped to take advantage.



Intersky Falcon (blinkers) becomes the latest high-profile scalp for the much-improved Rigmarole

With the Venetia Williams stable in such outstanding form, **Limerick Boy** warrants a mention. He's failed to complete the course on two of his three most recent outings, but on the other occasion he turned in his best effort to edge out Perouse in the Lanzarote Hurdle at Kempton. Strictly speaking, Limerick Boy has a fair bit more to find, but he's still lightly raced over hurdles and there's a good chance he'll post another personal best if taking his chance in the Champion.

In conclusion, then, we'll stay loyal to Rooster Booster. He's by some way the likeliest winner of the Champion, and if all goes to plan there'll be few better sights than him swinging along on the bridle as the field turn for home. At more rewarding odds, Westender makes some appeal to make the frame again.

QUEEN MOTHER CHAMPION CHASE PREVIEW

If it was a boxing match, the clash between **Moscow Flyer** and **Azertyuiop** in the Queen Mother Champion Chase would have a multi-million-dollar purse and been hyped up to epic proportions by now. Admittedly, there will of course be a few other contenders for the title of champion two-mile chaser, but to all intents and purposes this year's Queen Mother has had the look of a two-horse race for the best part of a year; in fact, ever since Moscow Flyer pulverized the opposition in the race last March and Azertyuiop toyed with his rivals in the Arkle a little over twenty-four hours earlier. The pair are so far ahead of the rest on Timeform ratings it will be a major surprise if one of them isn't crowned the undisputed two-mile champion chaser come March 17th.

The pair have locked horns once already this season, in the Tingle Creek at Sandown in December, when the reigning champion produced one of the best performances in a two-mile chase in the last dozen years to dispose of his younger rival by four lengths, soon having the race won after quickening after three out and just needing to be kept up to his work on the run-in. Moscow Flyer went on to accomplish a simple task at Leopardstown over Christmas and will turn up a fresh horse at Cheltenham, where his devastating turn of foot and generally excellent jumping will again make him very hard to beat.

That's not to say connections of Azertyuiop don't fancy their chances of turning the tables from Sandown, with some justification too. Azertyuiop was effectively making his seasonal debut in the Tingle Creek after unseating Mick Fitzgerald at the first on his reappearance at Exeter, and next time out put up an outstanding display to run Isio to a neck conceding him 19 lb in the Victor Chandler Chase at Ascot. That performance was very reminiscent of Flagship Uberalles' in the same race four years earlier, when he failed equally narrowly to give 24 lb to Nordance Prince at a time when he was also under the care of Paul Nicholls. Flagship Uberalles was a previous Arkle winner himself and did go on to land the Queen Mother, but he had to wait another two years to do so and was with Philip Hobbs by then. A smooth success for Azertyuiop in the Queen Mother Memorial Fund Game Spirit Chase at Newbury has set him up nicely for a return to Cheltenham and rematch with Moscow Flyer. The prospect of the two battling it out up the hill is a mouthwatering one and it will certainly be a race to savour.

It is over ten years since the Champion Chase took on the look of a two-horse race to the extent it does this season, when for the 1993 renewal the bookmakers went 11/1 bar the 1991 winner Katabatic and Waterloo Boy, placed in the previous three runnings of the race. In the event neither won, Waterloo Boy shaping as though all wasn't well and tailing off to be last of the six finishers, and Katabatic below his best and beaten by both Deep Sensation and Cyphrate. Clearly, all is not lost then for those who do take their chance against Moscow Flyer and Azertyuiop.

Nearly another ten years before those events, back in the Badsworth Boy era, the race virtually was a match, when in 1985 only three complete outsiders were pitched in against the previous season's Arkle winner, the Irish-trained Bobsline, and Badsworth Boy. Bobsline was odds on to prevent Badsworth Boy completing his Champion Chase hat-trick and probably would have done so had he not stumbled and overbalanced on landing at the third last when seeming full of running.

Moscow Flyer is one of a quartet of champions who are favourites to retain their title this season and complete a hat-trick of victories at the Cheltenham Festival, having also landed the Arkle the year before his Champion Chase success. A top-class hurdler, twice profiting from uncharacteristic jumping lapses from the mighty Istabraq to land big races at Leopardstown, he also won a couple of Grade 1 events over timber as a novice and, though he's fallen or unseated on four occasions over fences, his record as a

chaser is exemplary, unbeaten on twelve completed starts, ridden on every one of those by Barry Geraghty, who will again be in the saddle barring accidents or suspension.

Viking Flagship was the last to put together back-to-back wins in the Champion Chase in the mid-'nineties but before him there are plenty of instances of horses winning the race at least twice, Badsworth Boy (the only triple winner), Pearlyman and Barnbrook Again landing all bar one renewal between them over an eight-year period from 1983, and Hilly Way, Skymas and Royal Relief all dual winners in the 'seventies. Moscow Flyer would be the first Arkle winner to land the Champion Chase more than once, indeed it took a long time for the winner of the Arkle to also put his name on the Champion Chase roll of honour, but two others apart from Moscow Flyer and Flagship Uberalles have managed it since 1990, Remittance Man and Klairon Davis.

It's no guarantee of course that Moscow Flyer and Azertyuiop will both produce their 'A game' at Cheltenham, nothing is certain in this sport, but if they are anywhere near their best on the day the rest are going to be racing for third. Who then might sneak into a place? Not it would seem Native Upmanship, runner-up in the last two renewals of the Champion Chase but ruled out of a return to Cheltenham by his trainer after being turned over at odds on in the Newlands Chase at Naas. Nicky Henderson has a number of options open to him with Isio but has said he'd be disinclined to take on Azertyuiop again at level weights, twelve lengths having separated the pair in the Arkle.

Paul Nicholls has indicated he's likely to run at least a couple of others apart from Azertyuiop, with Cenkos heading his 'B' team. Placed in the Arkle in 2000 and in the Champion Chase in each of the last two years, he did land the Tingle Creek on his reappearance last season but has been generally found wanting at the very highest level. The same can certainly be said of his stable-companion Kadarann, who beat Flagship Uberalles in the three-runner Castleford Chase at Wetherby on Boxing Day but has since finished a long way behind Azertyuiop at Newbury and reportedly broke a blood vessel when pulled up in a valuable handicap at Newbury last weekend. Flagship Uberalles did fill third spot behind Moscow Flyer and Azertyuiop in the Tingle Creek, a race he's won three times for three different trainers and jockeys, and goes to Cheltenham fresh, which has worked to his advantage in the past.

Martin Pipe has the dubious distinction of training the three horses who fell in the Champion Chase last season. **Seebald** had chased home Moscow Flyer in the Arkle the previous year and would probably have done so again had he not come down two out, where Latalomne, when still with Brian Ellison, capsized when holding every chance for the second year running. Seebald has had real problems with his jumping this season, but he did run a much more encouraging race when third behind Isio in the Vodafone Gold Cup at Newbury last time out. **Tiutchev** has been raced over longer trips this winter, with some success too, finishing second in both the John Durkan Memorial Punchestown Chase and the King George at Kempton, where he got to within a length and a quarter of Edredon Bleu on his first try at three miles. He has since disappointed when bidding to win the Ascot Chase for a third time but would seem as good as ever judged on his previous two starts. He did win the Arkle of course in his younger days when trained by Nicky Henderson but connections have indicated he may bypass Cheltenham this time.

Bizarrely, no horse among the fourteen left in the Champion Chase has attracted more recent publicity than **Venn Ottery**, even though he has no conceivable chance of winning. A distinctly poor performer when trained by his octogenarian owner Oliver Carter, he has shown massive improvement to win four of his five starts since switching to Paul Nicholls, the last two in handicaps at Newbury and Hereford from a BHB mark of 117. He's been backed at huge odds for Cheltenham, but it will be the training performance of all time if he reaches the frame at the Festival.

If Venn Ottery doesn't win, then who does, Moscow Flyer or Azertyuiop? A toss of the coin would be as good a way as most to help with the decision of which one to back, but it's probably worth siding with the reigning champion rather than the young pretender for now. Azertyuiop is three years Moscow Flyer's junior and, if he doesn't win this time, there's always next year. Ask any Man Utd fan!

CHAMPION BUMPER PREVIEW

Since the inaugural Champion Bumper at the Festival in 1992, the race has quickly become part of the fixtures and fittings of the meeting. Montelado's success that year began a sequence of eight Irish-trained winners in the first ten renewals, among them Florida Pearl, who went on to appear at the next five Festivals. Florida Pearl was one of four Willie Mullins-trained winners of the Bumper from 1996 until 2000, and in a memorable renewal in 2000 Mullins trained three of the first four home despite losing his supposed main contender for the race (Adamant Approach) through injury. In recent years the unfancied Monsignor and the heavily-backed Liberman have restored pride for British trainers.

That brief history lesson concluded, we'll begin the task of sifting through this year's entries. Long-time ante-post favourite for the race is Christy Roche's **Martinstown**. Quite how much ability this unbeaten son of Old Vic possesses is hard to gauge, but the fact that his owner J P McManus named him after the County Limerick townland where he has his home and stud farm suggests he's long been well regarded. The bare form of Martinstown's wins at Naas and Fairyhouse is nothing special, but on both occasions he won with much more in hand than the margins suggest, and he's clearly an exciting prospect. At the current odds, however, we're happy to take him on.

Given his tremendous record in the Bumper, Willie Mullins' runners have to command respect. The problem is where to start! The County Carlow trainer had twelve original entries, and as many as eight of them are seen as likely runners. Timeform Ratings point to **Templeusk**, who created a good impression when beating twenty-four rivals at Leopardstown in December, as being among the best. However, Gowran winner **Knocknabooly** is also unbeaten, as are **Malahide Marina**, **Major Vernon**, **Gayle Abated**, **Our Ben** and **Mrs Wallensky**. Determining a pecking order is impossible at this stage, but jockey bookings will be revealing, and if Ruby Walsh, who rode Alexander Banquet to success for the stable in 1998, gets the leg-up on any of Mullins' runners this year, the hint will be worth taking.

Unusually, a very small stable is responsible for the horse who goes into the Champion Bumper with clearly the best form. **Total Enjoyment**, trained by Tommy Cooper, has progressed in leaps and bounds in her three races to date and turned in an excellent effort at Leopardstown between Christmas and New Year to win a six-runner event by twenty-five lengths, with the odds-on shot Farranfore only third. There seems little fluke in that performance—Total Enjoyment set a good pace and galloped on relentlessly—and with a handy 7-lb mares' allowance the five-year-old has credentials as good as any. Jim Culloty has apparently been booked for the ride, and there have been good reports of Total Enjoyment's racecourse gallops since her win.

Two other five-year-old mares head for the race with decent claims. **Blazing Liss** ran in three bumpers in 2003 and won all of them, putting up her best effort when landing the odds at Navan in December by three and a half lengths from Mr Murphy. Blazing Liss may lack size, but she looks a smart performer and has shown herself effective on a firm as well as a soft surface. The mares' allowance will come in handy for Jonjo O'Neill's **Refinement**, too. In the paddock before her latest outing, in a well-contested event at Ascot, Refinement looked weedy compared with many of her rivals, but that hardly mattered once under way as she travelled powerfully in mid-division, led on the bridle two furlongs out and beat Corrib Eclipse by four lengths. She's open to plenty of improvement.

Refinement's form suggests she's the pick of O'Neill's entries, but, judged by ante-post support, her once-raced half-brother **Manners** has been impressing in his work at home. Manners fits into the "could be anything" category. The bare form of his debut win, in a weak race at Haydock, is nothing to write

home about, but he did prove a class above the opposition that day, cruising to the front three out and just shaken up to go clear. O'Neill has had little luck in previous runnings of the Bumper, his Riverdale Boy fatally injured in 1996 and Rhinestone Cowboy unfortunate not to be awarded the race in 2002, but, with the stable hitting form at just the right time, Refinement and Manners must go on the short list. The same stable's **Millenaire** holds an entry, too, but he flashed his tail and carried his head awkwardly when making a winning debut at Haydock and may find things happening too quickly for him in a much stronger affair at Cheltenham.

Nicky Henderson has yet to win the Champion Bumper, but he went close with Inca in 2000 and Trabolgan in 2003, and he has a pair of likely types this year in The Thunderer and Demarco. **The Thunderer**, the shorter of the pair in ante-post lists, was a disappointing favourite on his debut behind Refinement at Ascot, but he more than made amends two months later over course and distance when easily beating Senor Sedona by three and a half lengths. A son of Derby runner-up Terimon, The Thunderer looks sure to improve further and should be a major contender. His stablemate **Demarco** boasts even better form at this stage, and if he makes the final line-up he could well prove the each-way value. Like Martinstown, a son of the King George winner Old Vic, Demarco did all that was required of him when making a winning debut at Ludlow in January. It was in defeat on his next outing that he made an even better impression, however, finishing third behind Secret Ploy in probably the hottest bumper of the season so far at Newbury. Stamina looks like proving Demarco's strong suit, and after finding himself short of room on the home turn he looked every inch a stayer in galloping on relentlessly down the straight, all but snatching second on the line. The likely good gallop at Cheltenham should suit Demarco.

The dark horse in the race is **Royal Paradise**, trained in France by Francois Doumen. Not many four-year-olds contest the Champion Bumper (there were none at all in 2003), but Rhythm Section and Dato Star were both that age when successful in 1993 and 1995, and Royal Paradise proved up to making a winning debut against his elders at Sandown in February. He was heavily backed and, even on worse terms, can be expected to confirm his superiority with the third that day **Woodlands Genpower**. But there are a number with better form than Royal Paradise at this stage, and, with his lack of experience another minus, we'll look elsewhere for a bet.

In a typically tricky Champion Bumper, we'll side with Total Enjoyment, our form pick, for the main bet. The Henderson-trained pair The Thunderer and Demarco should go well, too, if making the final line-up.

FOXHUNTER CHASE PREVIEW

Much of the pre-race speculation on the Christie's Foxhunter Chase has centred on **Lord Atterbury**. David Pipe's talented eight-year-old is potentially one of the best hunters of recent times, and he was unbeaten in three races in 2003, winning quite valuable events at Aintree (by a distance) and Cheltenham on his last two starts. A bold-jumping front-runner, he appeared to show his well-being with a points win at Barbury in January, and if he turns up at Cheltenham in good shape he's the one to beat. But that is an "if". His trainer reported Lord Atterbury "under the weather" in February, and although he did a pleasing recent gallop there are still some doubts about whether he'll be one hundred per cent come Thursday. On balance we'll look for an each-way selection with which to take him on.

Just behind Lord Atterbury in ante-post lists come the Irish pair Arctic Times and Never Compromise. Ted Walsh's **Never Compromise** comes into the race in good form, having won all three of his starts this season, at Downpatrick, Down Royal and Leopardstown. However, he won the last of those with nothing to spare and by our reckoning showed only fair form in doing so. The improving Derek O'Connor should give him plenty of assistance from the saddle, but Never Compromise still looks to have plenty to find with several of the home-trained runners, and at current odds he makes little appeal as far as we're concerned. **Arctic Times** is a bit more difficult to weigh up. He's been in good form in Irish points, winning two of his three recent races and beating another Foxhunter entry Spot Thedifference in the last of them at the end of January. The fact remains, however, that Arctic Times was slammed by Lord Atterbury at Aintree last April, and unless he's improved a good deal in the interim he too represents poor value.

One who would be sure to go well on his best form is last year's runner-up **Bright Approach**. Better than ever in 2003, he found only the mighty Kingscliff too strong twelve months ago, always well placed and closing down on the winner up the hill. Polly Gundry, who gets on well with him, will presumably take the ride again, but the big negative about Bright Approach is that he ran a stinker on his reappearance at Wincanton. The horse has bounced back from the odd dismal run before, and if he's on top of his game at Cheltenham he ought to make the frame.

Paul Nicholls has a fancied runner in virtually every race at the Festival, and he holds a strong hand in the Foxhunter too with the thirteen-year-olds Torduff Express and Earthmover. **Torduff Express** ran a blinder in the race two years ago, chasing home Last Option and Gunner Welburn in a thrilling finish, and judged on that form he'd have every chance. There is a doubt as to whether he's quite that good anymore, but he shaped with some encouragement when second to Gun'n Roses at Haydock on his reappearance, disputing matters with the winner for a long way.

On balance, however, **Earthmover** looks a better bet. A game and largely consistent sort, he finished a close fourth in the Foxhunter last year despite putting in a mixed round of jumping, giving the impression he'd have been second at worst had he not all but unseated his rider and lost his position at the twelfth. Earthmover, who has four successes to his name at Cheltenham (including the 1998 Foxhunter) and acts on any ground, was below form on his reappearance when second to County Derry at Fontwell, but he shaped as though needing the run, finding no extra after diving at the last. **County Derry** himself is another worthy contender. Fifth in the last two renewals, he had a fitness advantage over Earthmover at Fontwell but did show himself in excellent heart, jumping well and leading throughout the second half of the race.

We'll take Earthmover as our main each-way bet with a saver suggested on County Derry. Both are available at double-figure odds at the time of writing and look much better value than some others at shorter prices.

N H REVIEW

The wait is nearly over. On Tuesday at approximately 2.00 the tapes will go up for the Supreme Novices' Hurdle and the Cheltenham Festival will be under way. Unusually, the markets for all four championship races are headed by last year's winners and all of them look to have good chances of winning again. If you had asked someone earlier in the season who was the least likely to successfully defend their crown in March, many of them would have said **Rooster Booster**, especially after he was beaten on his first two starts of the season. However, he has bounced back to form on his last two starts and his odds have contracted as a result. Having won the Champion Hurdle Trial at Haydock, Rooster Booster carried top weight in the Tote Gold Trophy at Newbury, and, conceding 13 lb and upwards in a vintage renewal of the most valuable handicap hurdle of the season, he produced a performance every bit as good as the one he put up when winning last year's Champion Hurdle, looking the likely winner when going to the front approaching the last but nailed late on by Geos, who was giving Nicky Henderson his fourth winner in this prestigious contest in the last seven years and had also landed him the race in 2000. The improvement that Rooster Booster has made in the last two seasons is highlighted by the fact that he filled the same position in 2002 from a 28 lb lower mark. **Iris's Gift**, second to Baracouda in a thrilling Stayers' Hurdle at the Festival last year, gave away 19 lb to his nearest rival when he made his belated reappearance in a handicap at Haydock on the same day and shaped as though retaining all of his ability in finishing second to his stable-companion Tardar. That run should put him spot on for the Stayers' Hurdle and he looks the chief threat to Baracouda's bid to win the race for a third successive year.

Azertyuiop put up the handicap performance of the season to date when he was second to Isio in the Victor Chandler Chase at Ascot in January and concluded his Champion Chase preparations with a smooth win in the race preceding the Tote Gold Trophy, the Game Spirit Chase. Azertyuiop faced just five rivals and didn't have to match the form of his previous two starts to beat his stable-companion Armatürk easily by twelve lengths. As the market suggests, he is the main danger to Moscow Flyer and, with him looking to have improved since the pair met in the Tingle Creek at Sandown in December, the contest promises to be a race to savour. The Gold Cup trial at Newbury on that day, the AON Chase, caused an upset when 33/1 shot **Shooting Light** overcame a lengthy absence to beat **Irish Hussar** and **Keen Leader**. Sadly, Shooting Light broke a leg in the Racing Post Chase at Kempton on his next start. Keen Leader didn't enhance his Gold Cup claims but would have been suited by more emphasis on stamina and was staying on strongly at the finish. Jonjo O'Neill has made no secret of the high regard in which he holds Keen Leader and a bold show shouldn't be discounted, but his jumping remains a concern, particularly if the going is good or firmer.

The following weekend's feature race, the Kingwell Hurdle at Wincanton, did nothing to threaten Rooster Booster's position at the head of the ante-post market, but it did cause of a bit of change in behind him. **Intersky Falcon**, who'd been promoted to second favourite behind Rooster Booster after beating him in the Christmas Hurdle, went off as favourite for the last major Champion Hurdle trial but had no response when **Rigmarole** went by him two out, a performance which prompted bookmakers to reverse their positions in the market. Rigmarole is an admirable horse and was winning his sixth race of the season, but the likelihood is that Intersky Falcon wasn't at his best and the proximity of some of those in behind suggests the form is suspect. Rigmarole's success was the second leg of a treble for Ruby Walsh and Paul Nicholls on the day, **Exit Swinger** initiating it in the Country Gentleman's Association Chase and the other winner being **Thisthatandtother** in a novice chase. Alan King's Royal & SunAlliance hope **D'Argent** went off as favourite for the Country Gentleman's Association Chase but,

going right handed for the first time over fences, he was let down by his jumping and Exit Swinger came through to beat his stable-companion Royal Auclair by half a length. Thisthatandtother faced just three rivals in the race that Azertyuiop had won en route to success in the Arkle last year and accomplished a straightforward task, jumping fluently and winning by a distance.

Arguably, the most impressive performance of the day came from **Our Vic** in the Reynoldstown Novice Chase at Ascot, a race that Keen Leader had won the previous year. Our Vic promises to go right to the top over fences. He again impressed with his jumping, albeit showing a slight tendency to go to his left (which shouldn't be a problem at Cheltenham), and he didn't need to come off the bridle to beat Rosslea by six lengths. Connections also have another leading novice in Therealbandit but he is likely to go for the Gold Cup, with Our Vic going for the Royal & SunAlliance Chase. Timmy Murphy was aboard Our Vic on this occasion as Tony McCoy was on the sidelines with a fractured cheekbone. Remarkably, McCoy was back in action nine days after the incident at Plumpton and, with an abundance of plaster over his face to protect the cheekbone, rode a double on his comeback at Ludlow.

The Richard Guest-trained **Tyneandthyneagain** won his second valuable staying handicap of the year in the Tote Eider Chase. Another rise in the weights won't stop him being a leading contender for the Midlands National at Uttoxeter, but he is prone to the odd error and makes less appeal as a Grand National sort. An ideal type for the latter is the Martin Pipe-trained **Jurancon II**, an impressive winner of the Red Square Vodka Gold Cup at Haydock who is impervious to the state of the ground, stays well without being a sluggard and is a good enough jumper to cope with the fences.

The Adonis at Kempton on Racing Post Chase day is usually the most significant juvenile hurdle in the build-up to the Triumph, and this year's winner **Trouble At Bay** currently heads the ante-post market for that race. Successful on all five of his starts over hurdles since his debut, he is likely to be well suited by how the race will be run at Cheltenham and should be thereabouts. The Rendlesham Hurdle, carried over to the Saturday after the abandonment of Friday's card, is in theory a trial for the Stayers' Hurdle, but the first and second in this renewal, **Monkerhostin** and **Mistanoora**, will have different targets at the Festival. Monkerhostin, who was third to Geos and Rooster Booster in the Tote Gold Trophy on his previous start, is likely to aimed at the Coral Cup, while Mistanoora is due to go for the Pertemps Final.

The Racing Post Chase itself was weakened by the defection of seven horses, including the likely favourite Irish Hussar and last year's winner La Landiere, and was won by **Marlborough**. The veteran chaser clearly isn't the force of old but, having dropped in the weights, he showed he was still capable of very smart form in beating the 2002 winner Gunther McBride by four lengths. Nicky Henderson completed a double on the day with **Calling Brave** in the Pendil Novice Chase. All three of Henderson's stable jockeys were injured at that time and the stable was employing the best riders available, in Marlborough's case Ruby Walsh and in Calling Brave's Tony McCoy.

Henderson's stable jockeys still hadn't made their comebacks by last weekend and it was Barry Geraghty who took advantage with a high-profile success on **Isio** in the Vodafone Gold Cup, a new race this season and a welcome addition to the pre-Cheltenham programme. Stepping up to two and a half miles for the first time, Isio jumped and travelled well and soon had his race won after quickening to the front before two out. Henderson reported afterwards that Isio is likely to bypass Cheltenham and go for the Melling Chase at Aintree, though he could meet Moscow Flyer there.

Last but not least, the rise to fame of **Venn Ottery** since switching from being trained by his owner Oliver Carter to Paul Nicholls. A maiden after twenty-three starts with Carter, Venn Ottery hasn't looked back since changing stables, easily winning four of his five races. His only defeat in the care of Nicholls came at Market Rasen on his penultimate outing, when he pulled too hard and had his stamina stretched. Best at two miles with the emphasis on speed, Venn Ottery has further improvement in him, and at his owner's request he will take on his Azertyuiop and Moscow Flyer in the Champion Chase, for which Carter has backed him at 1000/1!

HANDICAPPERS' CORNER

The Cheltenham handicaps are some of the most competitive of the National Hunt Season but, nonetheless, they still offer some good betting opportunities and this issue focuses on four horses that are expected to run well in these events.

● **Haut Cercy** (Timeform Rating c143) failed only narrowly to land the William Hill National Hunt Chase in 2003 and looks to have at least a good a chance of going one better this time around. Henry Daly's charge pulled nine lengths clear of the remainder when second to Youlneverwalkalone in last year's renewal and has been kept fresh for a repeat bid. Indeed, he shaped as if better than ever when finishing second to Gold Cup contender Kingscliff, keeping on strongly from a relatively unpromising position to be beaten six lengths, the distance back to Marlborough in third the same. That performance looks even better in the context of Marlborough's success in the Racing Post Trophy, and Haut Cercy is confidently expected to go very well with ground conditions unlikely to be any problem to him. At first glance, odds of around 4/1 at the time of writing don't appear over generous, but the race looks very short of unexposed sorts and it's possible to argue that Haut Cercy is still on the upgrade, so this notably sound jumper still makes plenty of appeal as a betting proposition. *H. Daly*

● **Hidden Bounty** (Timeform Rating h122p) won't be one that those who favour following statistical trends will want to back. He does hold a realistic chance of ending Mary Reveley's Festival drought, however, and makes plenty of appeal at odds of around 14/1 at the time of writing. Hidden Bounty has a

*Haut Cercy bids to go one better than he did last year
in the William Hill National Hunt Chase*



really progressive profile and has always given the impression that a real test of stamina such as that which will be provided by the Pertemps Final would see him to best advantage. Hidden Bounty has been successful on three of his last four starts and would probably have shown even better form but for falling four out in a qualifier for this series at Haydock on his penultimate outing. Racing from 25 lb out of the handicap, Hidden Bounty was still to be asked for his effort when coming down and may well have been involved in the shake up. He will meet the winner Tardar on almost two stone better terms, a fact that seems to have been totally ignored by the market makers. Hidden Bounty is a versatile sort who has already proven his effectiveness on good to firm going as well as soft and he looks one of the best treated runners even on the bare form he has achieved thus far, his latest win at Newcastle already having been boosted by a ready next-time-out success from the runner-up Undeniable.
Mrs M. R. Reveley

● **Never** (Timeform Rating h146) would be very difficult to make a case for in a race as competitive as the County Hurdle judged on either of his efforts this season, but he's selected in the firm belief that he's in considerably better heart than a cursory glance at his form figures would suggest. Never looked in need of the outing when a well-beaten tenth to Overstrand in the William Hill Handicap Hurdle at Sandown on his reappearance and, having his first outing for his current yard, he was again well held in the Tote Gold Trophy behind Geos and Rooster Booster last time. Never again failed to trouble the leaders at Newbury but shouldn't be written off, keeping on late having been held up and taken wide under an inexperienced claimer. A fully-fledged jockey is likely to be on board in the County, a race in which he shaped better than the bare result in 2003 when trained by Francois Doumen. Racing from a mark of 142 on that occasion (7 lb higher than his current rating), Never's rider possibly overdid things in sending him to the front two out in a well-run race, the horse seemingly full of running at the time but having nothing left as the complexion of the race changed on the run-in. Proven on heavy ground, but more effective under less testing conditions, Never is well enough handicapped to be worth persevering with in a race which looks sure to be run to suit those ridden with restraint. *Jonjo O'Neill*

● **Wagner** (Timeform Rating c126) holds a much better chance of landing the spoils in the Kim Muir on the Tuesday than his current odds of 25/1 would suggest. A progressive hurdler, Wagner impressed with his jumping when winning his first two outings over fences in the summer and has already shown that he has the ability to make an impact in handicap company, producing his best effort when second to Mighty Strong at Newbury on his most recent start in November. Wagner shaped as if unsuited by the drop back to two and a half miles but still pulled clear of the remainder in chasing home a very well-handicapped rival, the winner going on to score on both his next two outings. The fact that Wagner will come to Cheltenham a fresh horse should be viewed as a positive rather than detracting from his chance. Back around three miles and, with his shrewd trainer almost sure to find a capable pilot, Wagner is one of the more interesting contenders in what is likely to prove a typically competitive renewal. *Jonjo O'Neill*

Review

Of those selected to follow in the previous issue, only **Towns Ender** has contested a handicap since. He hinted at temperament (gave trouble at start), but still ran an encouraging race in finishing fifth to Thalys at Hereford, giving the impression he'd have been seen to better effect had he raced closer to the pace. He isn't one to lose faith in just yet. Both **Bobsleigh** and **Just The Jobe** remain worthy of interest returned to handicaps having raced in novice company since their inclusion. Bobsleigh performed creditably upped in trip when fourth to Dangerously Good in a well-contested event at Fontwell last time, while Just The Jobe was still going comfortably when falling at the sixth at Market Rasen on Sunday. Of those selected to avoid, Turgeonev ran well enough when second to Isio in a highly competitive event at Newbury to suggest that he's right back to his best and no longer one to oppose.

RACE TO WATCH

4004 Tote Bookmakers Hcap Hdle (D) 0-125(118)

3m (12)

(4yo+) £5,194

3670 ³	GLEN WARRIOR	JSSmith	8-11-4 ¹¹⁰	WMarston	.....	11/2	6/1	1
3670	WILL OF THE PEOPLE (IRE)	MCPipe	9-11-7 ¹¹³	TScudamore..	.....	10	12/1	nk 2
3745 ⁵	BISON KING (IRE)	CREgerton	7-11-0 ¹⁰⁶	JAMcCarthy	.....	6/1	1	3
3833 ⁵	Almnadia (IRE)	SGollings	5-10-13 ¹⁰⁵	RJohnson	.....	8/1	1/2	4
3574 ⁶	Classic Native (IRE)	JonjoO'Neill	6-11-6 ¹¹²	LCooper	.....	11/4	3/1f	1 5
3635 ⁶	Macnance (IRE)	RLee	8-11-5 ¹¹¹	RThornton	.....	11/1	5	6
3510 ³	Weston Rock	TDWalford	5-10-8 ¹⁰³	RWalford ³	.....	12	14/1	sh 7
3374	Uncle Max (IRE)	NATwiston-Davies	4-10-8 ¹¹⁰	CLlewellyn	.....	14/1	14	8
3408 ³	Finzi (IRE)	MScudamore	6-10-11 ¹⁰⁰	MNicolls ⁷	.....	20/1	5	9
3905 ^{pu}	Young American (IRE)	JonjoO'Neill	8-11-6 ¹¹⁷	TJPhelan ⁵	.....	20/1	2	10
3625 ^f	Atlantic Crossing (IRE)	PBeaumont	7-11-9 ¹¹⁸	DO'Meara ³	.....	40/1	15	11
3594 [*]	Dealer's Choice (IRE)	MissVCRoberts	10-11-5 ¹¹¹	TJMurphy	.....	10	12/1	dist 12
2977 ^{pu}	No Forecast (IRE)	AMHales	10-10-12 ¹⁰⁴	BFenton	.....	14	16/1	pu

4.35race Mr Donald Smith 13ran 5m47.36

The Tote Bookmakers Handicap Hurdle at Bangor earlier this week was, on the face of it, a slightly messy affair in that it wasn't truly run and plenty still had chances approaching the second last. That said, it was a keenly-contested event for the grade and the chances are that several of the runners will be interesting in similar company next time out. The winner **Glen Warrior** is a likeable type who rarely runs a bad race and, although eight, still has a generally progressive profile. He typically found plenty for pressure at Bangor having been patiently ridden as usual, getting up on the run-in, and remains relatively unexposed at three miles plus. He can't go up much in the weights for this narrow success and should continue to give a good account in staying handicaps. Longer term, there's no reason to believe he won't be at least as good over fences. **Will of The People** looked well handicapped on the form he showed behind subsequent winner Fundamental at Leicester on his reappearance and, whilst another small rise in the weights is likely after this display, he'll still be of interest in similar company. He was touched off only after the last and clearly stays three miles well for all his Leicester effort was achieved over two and a half. **Bison King** ran at least as well as previously on his handicap debut, dictating things for the most part and run out of things only from the last. There might not be much better to come from him over hurdles but physically he does look the type to do even better over fences. Chasing is unlikely to be on the agenda for **Almnadia** given that she lacks scope, but she does stay better than might have been expected and, if she ever gets a bit of respite from the handicapper, she's reliable enough to take advantage in an ordinary affair. On the face of **Classic Native** didn't have any excuses on his handicap debut, unable to quicken after briefly coming back on the bridle after three out, but he's essentially a strong-galloping sort who may benefit from more positive riding tactics and it shouldn't be taken this is necessarily the best he can do at around three miles. Of the rest, **Macnance** didn't seem beaten by lack of stamina on her first attempt at the trip but does seem to be finding it tough from her current handicap mark, whilst **Weston Rock** isn't obviously well treated, either, but is at least unexposed granted a test of stamina and shaped as though there could be better to come granted even more of a test.

IRISH REVIEW

Since the Coral Cup was added to the Cheltenham Festival schedule in 1993, Irish-trained horses have never won fewer than three races at the meeting. In the ten Festivals between 1993 and 2003, forty-six of the two hundred races have gone to the raiding team, an average of over four and a half races per year. So it's surprising the bookmakers are quite so sniffy about the chances of Irish successes this time round. At the time of writing, the favourite for the number of Irish-trained winners with the Tote is just three winners and even Ireland's own Paddy Power bookmakers only narrowly favours four over three winners. The last two Festivals have seen five and six respectively and, while the tally of seven in 1996 will be hard to match, the current odds for five and six winners look generous.

The prospects of a second Champion Chase win for **Moscow Flyer** and the substantial challenge from Ireland in the Champion Bumper are discussed elsewhere in this issue but they look two definite possibilities for wins. A victory in at least one of the opening novice hurdle races has to be as likely than not: in the last ten years Irish stables have managed six wins in the Supreme, including four of the last five, and four in the Royal & SunAlliance Novices' Hurdle. The exact shape of the Irish teams for those two races this time round isn't yet clear but **Mariah Rollins**, **Brave Inca**, **Sadlers Wings** and **Watson Lake** all merit close consideration in whichever of the races they turn up in. There is a chance all four could run in the Supreme, which would be a pity for those buying the number of Irish-trained winners, but that looks the weaker event so far as the home team is concerned, and Mariah Rollins would surely be favourite were she with a more fashionable stable. Her form in the top novice events in Ireland stands

Moscow Flyer (left) will be many people's idea of their banker in the Champion Chase



the closest inspection and the increased mares allowance will be to her advantage. Sadlers Wings hasn't quite shown her level of ability so far over hurdles, but he was useful on the Flat and could hardly have been any more impressive than he has in two wins this winter. He trounced the subsequent easy Naas winner Zum See at Navan last time and his turn of foot and solid jumping suggest he'll step up a good deal when faced with stronger opposition. Brave Inca has quickly made up into a useful hurdler this season and won what may well be the key trial, the Deloitte at Leopardstown, last time. Mariah Rollins was third that day but will be better off at the weights and the more likely to benefit from the shorter trip in the Supreme. Brave Inca holds entries in both the Coral Cup and County Hurdle as well as the two novices and is the pick of the weights in the first of those. Watson Lake was well held in the Deloitte but he was a short-priced favourite that day and had been an impressive winner at Leopardstown the time before. He makes more appeal as a SunAlliance than a Supreme candidate and, while he has a fair bit to find with Inglis Drever, he shouldn't be dismissed out of hand.

The opening race on the third day, the Triumph, has also seen an Irish victor more than once in the last decade, and it's 1995 since an Irish runner failed to make the first three. This year's challenge isn't likely to be that strong numerically but it's arguable that in **Power Elite** it has the form pick. He was useful on the Flat in France and has won graded races at Leopardstown and Fairyhouse, the form of his Fairyhouse win subsequently franked by a couple of the also-rans. His stable-companion **Wild Passion** was clear of the remainder in chasing him home on his hurdling bow that day and is a useful jumper in the making, but he'll be 9 lb worse off at Cheltenham and the Triumph may well come too soon.

In the handicaps, the Irish challenge looks stronger in the hurdles than chases. There are cases to be made on form for the novices **Satco Express** and **Colca Canyon** in the Kim Muir and Grand Annual respectively but neither may be the right type for the races and, in any case, both have alternative engagements (Colca Canyon may well run in the Arkle instead). The Coral Cup has been a good race for the Irish since its inception and the Pierse winner **Dromlease Express** heads the likely team this time round. He'll be 6 lb out of the weights now that Rhinestone Cowboy has been confirmed a definite runner, but the Pierse form is so strong that Dromlease Express will still be one of the better handicapped runners. His Leopardstown victim **Macs Joy** is another whose connections will be hoping for a weights rise, this time in the County Hurdle, but that seems unlikely as, with the 48-hour declaration stage, Paul Nicholls is likely to keep top-weight Rigmarole in the race as a precaution should anything go wrong in the Champion Hurdle. **Harchibald** was made ante-post favourite for the County Hurdle after his impressive win at Leopardstown the day after the weights were calculated but he's been set a much stiffer task than expected, off a BHB mark based on juvenile form at Aintree rather than the Turf Club mark he won off at Leopardstown, still getting a penalty to rub salt into the wound. Harchibald won so easily that he still might defy the imposition but his task has been made that much harder. In the Pertemps, the Leopardstown qualifier is the obvious race for clues. **GVA Ireland**, **Keepatem**, **Takagi** and **Billy Bonnie** all shaped encouragingly that day and a case could be made for each of the quartet, though Keepatem, who missed the cut a year ago, was making his reappearance and will be sure to benefit from the greatest test of stamina he's yet faced. This is likely to be a weaker race than the one he was third in at Aintree last spring and he merits serious consideration.

Moscow Flyer apart, the best chances of Irish success clearly lie in the bumper and over hurdles, though they have one major contender in both the Arkle and the SunAlliance Chase. **Kicking King**, in the Arkle, has got things together on his last two starts and his form looks better than any of his British rivals at this stage, though the leaders of the home team have shown plenty of potential and won't be easy to beat. **Pizarro**'s form is a little behind the best of the British in the stayers novice but, barring his blip at Fairyhouse, is hard to fault over fences, his defeat of Rosslea and Hi Cloy over three miles at Leopardstown at Christmas a particularly taking effort. Pizarro has won a Champion Bumper and finished a close third (disqualified) in a good SunAlliance Hurdle in two previous Festival visits and, if his jumping holds up, he probably won't be far away at the third attempt.

A-W BULLETIN

The Festival takes up the majority of this issue, and rightly so, but us all-weather aficionados also have plenty to look forward to. Admittedly, 'Lingfield fever' isn't so overpowering nor widespread as its Cheltenham equivalent, but the prospect of the action on Winter Derby day (March 20th) has resulted in mild symptoms amongst a few in this particular office. There are useful handicaps and minor events, as well as the first two-year-old contest, and then there's the Winter Derby, the pinnacle of the all-weather season. This will be the sixth renewal of a listed event which is growing in stature and quality, and whoever wins this year is going to have to produce a similarly smart performance as Parasol put up in 2003. So who will it be?

With the likely make up of the field unclear at this stage, it's worth pointing out that some smart turf performers could make their seasonal reappearance in the race and make an impact, as Bourgainville and Norton did when finishing fourth and sixth last year. However, it's probably best to concentrate on the horses who have run already this all-weather season, and the obvious race to focus on is the trial which took place over the same course and distance last month. That contest contained most of the season's leading all-weather performers, and in fact is probably going to be very similar to the Winter Derby itself, in terms of both the field and tactics, so there's every reason to believe that the winner, **Grand Passion**, can become the fourth horse in the past five years to complete the double. Geoff Wragg's four-year-old went one better than on his two previous starts when beating **Eastern Breeze** by a neck, but he certainly did it with more in hand than the narrow margin of victory suggests. He has a fine turn of foot, which stands him in good stead on polytrack, and it was again in evidence as he quickened to lead inside the last under Kieren Fallon. Genuine, and boasting a progressive profile, he's going to take plenty of beating. Eastern Breeze has also improved this winter, and he's obviously closely matched on form with Grand Passion, so he's unlikely to be too far away, especially given his consistency, but he will have to find further improvement to reverse the placings. Two who finished further down the field, and possibly have the potential to do better, are the fourth and fifth home **Bonecrusher** and **Blue Sky Thinking**. The former represents the David Loder stable, responsible for last year's winner, and he made an encouraging British reappearance, one which suggests he's still smart and capable of winning at listed level. Travelling strongly held up, he had to come from further back than the principals and just lacked a bit of speed in the finish. Blue Sky Thinking was just too far back through the race to get competitive, but the way he kept on suggested he's still in top form, and the smart performance he produced to win a well-contested handicap at the course in January was not far off the level of form Grand Passion has been showing—he could go off at a price which underestimates his chance. **Lygeton Lad**'s best form entitles him to be in the shake up, and he's run on well from a poor position over ten furlongs previously this winter, but he has questions to answer following a laboured effort on his most recent outing. **Bourgainville** did shape as though needing the race on his reappearance, but the smart level he has seemed to run to on occasions possibly flatters him to some degree. **Compton Bolter**, who beat Grand Passion in a polytrack listed race back in November, would be a leading contender if turning up, but that's doubtful as he's currently based in Dubai, and all the evidence points to the steadily improving Grand Passion confirming himself as this season's leading all-weather performer with success on March 20th.

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