

GOLD CUP PREVIEW

The build-up can get a bit tedious and there's little doubt it's become rather too much of a focal point in the jumping calendar, but in horse racing terms there really isn't anything like the Cheltenham Festival. The ante-post markets for the 2004 Gold Cup and Champion Hurdle will open as soon as the runners have crossed the line in this year's renewals, and hordes of Irish will start saving for the following year as soon as they've sunk their last pint of Guinness. It's the meeting where punters and bookmakers alike can make or break an entire season, and it's the meeting where more memories are recalled than any other. It's also a meeting which is apparently on the way to being extended to four days in 2005, with the Gold Cup being moved to the final day on the Friday.

The Festival is also a statistician's delight. Facts and figures will be readily available in any number of publications next week, with the most used statistic sure to be the one that no Gold Cup winner has successfully defended his/her crown since L'Escargot in 1971. For many people, that's the chief reasoning behind **Best Mate** being a poor price to follow up last year's success but, as sensible folk know, it has about as much bearing on the outcome as what Jim Culloty had for breakfast that morning. The reason Best Mate is a poor price is because his form doesn't entitle him to be around 6/4. That's not to say he won't win, because he has proved himself the best staying chaser in training over the last year or so, but he had just a length and three-quarters to spare over Commanche Court last year and slightly less when made to work really hard by Marlborough in the King George over Christmas. Best Mate is genuine, reliable and an extremely sound jumper but he's not yet proved himself head and shoulders above the rest of his generation and, as such, his price isn't a true reflection of his chance in a three-and-a-quarter mile chase over twenty-two fences over the stiffest jumps course in the country. Also, the form of Henrietta Knight's yard is giving slight cause for concern. She had just two winners from thirty-one runners during February and, so far this month, hasn't entered the winner's enclosure, either.

What to take him on with? Next best in the betting is the Irish novice Beef Or Salmon, who's made astounding progress over fences in an extremely short space of time. Campaigned in admirably adventurous fashion by Michael Hourigan, **Beef Or Salmon** won his first race over fences at Clonmel at the end of November, his second at Cork the following month and didn't take long to dish out beatings to the best his country had to offer, winning the Ericsson at Christmas and Hennessy in early February, both at Leopardstown. On each occasion he's jumped soundly under a patient ride before displaying a turn of foot to settle the issue in the closing stages, **Colonel Braxton** being his closest pursuer on his last two starts. There are a couple of unknowns surrounding Beef Or Salmon's claims, however. Firstly, he's encountered smallish fields so far over fences and it remains to be seen whether his jumping will be so assured in the hurly-burly of a Gold Cup. Secondly, he's raced mainly on soft/heavy going over jumps and, whilst Timmy Murphy might be of the opinion that Beef Or Salmon will be at least as effective on better ground, there is as yet no racecourse evidence to support this view. His achievements so far mark him down as an extremely good novice but he'll need to be an exceptional one to win the Gold Cup and still has plenty to prove in our book. For those wishing to support him, he strikes as a likely sort to drift on the day.

Third up in the betting is Hussard Collonges, who was one of last seasons leading novices and this time around has progressed a darned sight better than the likes of Barton, Iznogoud and Frosty Canyon. Hussard Collonges hasn't won in three outings this seasons but he's shown progressively better form and his second to Truckers Tavern (rec. 15 lb) in the Peter Marsh last time looks even better now in the light of Goguenard's emphatic success at Haydock last weekend. His trainer Peter Beaumont has few

peers in the handling of good staying chasers and there won't be a finer jumper in the Gold Cup field than Hussard Collonges. On the negative side, his front-running style does leave him susceptible to rivals with better finishing speed—it was a slog when he won the SunAlliance last year—and a likely scenario is him running his heart out as usual but being passed by a few up the hill.

Commanche Court, **See More Business** and **Marlborough** made the frame last year and are all set to line up this time around, too. Commanche Court ran the race of his life to push Best Mate hard twelve months ago but hasn't approached that form in three outings since, being pulled up in the Irish National and raced over inadequate trips so far this season. He did win a weakly-contested two-and-a-half mile handicap at Navan last month but was mightily unimpressive in accounting for a rival well out of the weights and, for all he's presumably been trained all along with the Gold Cup in mind, it still takes a leap of faith to expect him to run as well as last year. The 1999 winner See More Business will be bidding to become only the second horse (fifteen-year-old Mac Vidi was the first) since World War Two to be placed in the Gold Cup and, judged on his latest display, is no forlorn hope to manage it. See More Business jumped and galloped with the enthusiasm of a much younger horse when successful in a listed event at Wincanton on his most recent start. Admittedly, he was allowed his own way out in front but a nine-length defeat of the much-improved Iris Bleu still represents high-class form, especially in the light of that horse's excellent effort in a valuable handicap at Haydock last weekend. In contrast, Marlborough's latest effort was rather a disappointing one. He was held in third when coming down at the final fence in the Aon Chase at Newbury and, whilst conditions in the Gold Cup are likely to suit him better, there's no good reason why he should be able to turn the tables on Best Mate.

The first three home at Newbury, **Valley Henry**, **Chives** and **Truckers Tavern** are all still in the Gold Cup as well. Of the three, there's little doubt that Valley Henry has the most ability but there's also a sizeable doubt as to whether he's tough enough to show it in a race as competitive as the Gold Cup. He gave Chives 6 lb and a two-and-a-half length beating at Newbury, jumping well throughout, but only two weeks earlier had turned in a lamentable display in the Pillar Chase at Cheltenham, never travelling or jumping well. It's possible very soft ground doesn't suit but it's just as likely he's a horse who doesn't have the stomach for it when the chips are down. That's not an accusation that can be levelled at Chives for all he's getting something of a reputation as a bridesmaid having been placed on his last five outings. During that period, his form has been on an upward curve, his best effort coming when chasing home the well-handicapped Mini Sensation in the Welsh National over Christmas. His limitations around three miles were rather exposed in the Aon, however, as he was found wanting for finishing speed under the prevailing conditions despite being in receipt of weight from Valley Henry. At the time of writing, Chives' participation in the Gold Cup is reportedly ground dependent and, in the unlikely event of it turning testing, he'd certainly make plenty of appeal from an each-way point of view—he's got just the right sort of profile for a big run being a sound jumper on the upgrade. Truckers Tavern is also less exposed than most having had just four outings over three miles over fences, though it should be pointed out he has plenty to find on form (he was receiving 15 lb from Hussard Collonges when defeating that rival by two and a half lengths in the Peter Marsh) and his jumping still isn't totally convincing; he came down at the first when favourite at Ascot on his second start this season and made several minor mistakes when beaten almost ten lengths in the Aon.

Another whose jumping gives cause for concern at the highest level is **Behrajan**. He's a top-class chaser on his day as he's proved on his last two starts, giving Exit To Wave lumps of weight and a narrow beating in a valuable handicap at Ascot then repeating the successful front-running tactics in the Pillar Chase at Cheltenham, having eighteen lengths to spare over Foly Pleasant. Both those races were small-field affairs, however, in which Behrajan wasn't harried for the lead, and that won't be the case next week. Indeed, he was found out by his jumping technique twelve months ago, making numerous mistakes and reportedly returning with an 'active splint'. A much more dependable jumper is **Cyfor Malta** for all he came a cropper in the Pillar on his most recent outing, Tony McCoy's amazing self preservation

letting him down for once after a minor mistake. Whether or not McCoy takes the mount again on Cyfor Malta will depend on the participation of the novice **It Takes Time**, who at the time of writing is apparently still a possible for the Gold Cup over the SunAlliance Chase. If he does ride Cyfor Malta the price of the ten-year-old is bound to contract and rightly so, too. Cyfor Malta's form in winning the Thomas Pink on his reappearance is only 7 lb or so below the pick of Best Mate's efforts and entitles him to be quite a bit shorter in the ante-post market than the 50/1 in places. It might be a bit difficult to see him actually winning the race, but he's essentially a bold jumper, has a good record fresh and also has the ability to cope with well-run races. His stable-companion It Takes Time has already proved himself one of the better staying novices this season, his jumping technique over fences being a good deal better than it ever was over hurdles, but it really would be asking a lot for him to cope with the demands of the Gold Cup after just two starts over the larger obstacles. Similar comments apply to **Keen Leader**, another novice for whom the lure of the Gold Cup hasn't yet been extinguished at the time of going to press. He's potentially top-class over fences and has looked really good in winning all three completed starts in novices, the latest being a facile victory in the Reynoldstown after his chief market rival Jair du Cochet failed to complete. He's only seven and, hopefully, there will be plenty of time for him to have a crack at the Blue Riband when he's got more experience under his belt.

In conclusion, it almost goes without saying that Best Mate is the one to beat but at around 6/4 makes little appeal as a betting proposition. If the rains were to arrive Chives would look good value at 20/1, whilst Cyfor Malta is a longer price than he should be whatever the conditions.

**Tote Cheltenham Gold Cup Chase (Gr 1)
(Cheltenham 3m2½f)**

1998	173	Cool Dawn	10-12-0: 25/1	R H Alner	A Thornton	17
1999	173	See More Business	9-12-0: 16/1	P F Nicholls	M A Fitzgerald	12
2000	176	Looks Like Trouble	8-12-0: 9/2	N T Chance	R Johnson	12
2001		Abandoned				
2002	173	Best Mate	7-12-0: 7/1	Miss H C Knight	J Culloty	18

CHAMPION HURDLE PREVIEW

'Double handful', 'hard on the steel', 'pulling a bus/train/cart', 'absolutely cantering', 'Norman has yet to move a muscle'. Which one of these phrases, if any, will Simon Holt be screaming about **Rhinestone Cowboy** as the Champion Hurdle field hurtle towards the final flight next Tuesday? It's certainly going to be interesting to see what response there is when Rhinestone Cowboy does eventually come off the bridle. It may be that he won't even need to so impressive was he in making the smart novice Thisthatandtother look like a plater at Wincanton last time out. It's more likely, however, that Rhinestone Cowboy will have to work a whole lot harder than he's had to so far over hurdles given that he'll be meeting a much, much better standard of opposition than previously. There's little doubt in plenty of people's minds that he's got the potential to be a Champion Hurdle winner but, when confronted with a top-price of 9/4 at the time of writing, there has to be next to no doubt and that's not necessarily the case.

In terms of form, it's not so easy to pick holes in the claims of **Intersky Falcon**. Successful on all four outings this season, including in the Fighting Fifth at Newcastle and Christmas Hurdle at Kempton, he's as tough and genuine as they come and simply doesn't know how to run a bad race. He jumps fluently, is ambivalent to the state of the ground and is a straightforward ride in that, while he usually makes the running, he's shown himself just as effective by simply racing up with the pace. Whether Intersky Falcon will prove as effective on the undulations of Prestbury Park is a slight cause for concern. It's not so much that he won't cope with the track, more that the uphill finish might find him out against arguably stronger stayers of similar ability.

That's certainly not an accusation which can be levelled at **Rooster Booster**, the nine-year-old having been successful on his last three visits to the course. Like Intersky Falcon, Rooster Booster is unbeaten in four outings this season, putting up a career-best effort when winning a listed handicap over the Champion Hurdle course and distance in November. He defied a BHB mark of 155 in great style on that occasion, jumping really well throughout and leading on the bridle between the last two before being ridden clear to beat Quazar by nine lengths. The runner-up was receiving 18 lb that day and, in the light of his subsequent performances this season, the form looks even better now than it did at the time, especially as the notably reliable Benbyas was a further four and a half lengths back in fourth. Rooster Booster hasn't matched that form in two efforts since, though he did win more emphatically than the distances suggest when accounting for a smart field in the Bula and it's easy not to be too critical of his narrow defeat of the maiden Self Defense in the Agfa Hurdle at Sandown last time out; the ground was very testing that day, he almost certainly hit the front too soon and idled markedly on the run-in. All in all, his claims are hard to knock given that he's as consistent as they come and the state of the going won't trouble him. The only surprising aspect about him in the build up to the race is that he hasn't proved so strong as either Rhinestone Cowboy or Intersky Falcon in the ante-post market, 6/1 still freely available at the time of writing.

Outside the 'big three' in the betting comes **Like-A-Butterfly** and **Flame Creek**. The former has run just twice since fortunately landing the Supreme Novices' at the Festival last year, reportedly losing her action as well as her unbeaten record at the Punchestown Festival last back-end then returning from a long absence to deny Limestone Lad by a head in a thriller for the AIG Europe Champion Hurdle at Leopardstown at the end of January. Assuming Limestone Lad was about 10 lb below his best that day, which is a reasonable assumption on account of two miles on good to soft ground being inadequate for him nowadays, Like-A-Butterfly ran to a Timeform rating of somewhere in the high 150's at

Leopardstown. Even taking her mares' allowance into account, a simple reproduction of that level of form is unlikely to be good enough on Tuesday given that the 2003 renewal seems sure to take more winning than it did last year. Flame Creek is arguably as unexposed as Rhinestone Cowboy given that he's had only one more outing over hurdles. He has a record of four wins and a second from those five starts and has shown highly progressive form, winning a handicap at Cheltenham from a BHB mark of 130 on his penultimate outing before taking a step up in grade in his stride at Haydock in January. On that occasion, Flame Creek overcame a bad mistake two out to win by thirteen lengths and a neck from October Mist and Inamar. It might seem picky to find fault with that success over useful rivals on just his fifth start over hurdles, but it's true to say the placed horses almost certainly weren't at their best that day and that Flame Creek still has plenty to find before he can be considered likely to be in the shake-up let alone win. On a more positive note, his trainer Noel Chance knows when he has a good horse in his care and has been unusually bullish about Flame Creek's prospects of developing into a Champion Hurdle contender for some time.

Three of the first five home in the 2002 renewal are set to be in the line-up again on Tuesday, namely **Hors La Loi III** (won), **Marble Arch** (second) and **Landing Light** (fifth). That was one of the weakest Champion Hurdles in living memory, however, and none of the trio have done anything since to suggest they are any better this time around. Indeed, in the twelve months since only Landing Light has come anywhere near the form he showed that day, acquitting himself well in first-time blinkers when chasing home Rooster Booster in the Bula. There's no reason why he should turn the tables on that rival, though, or even if the blinkers will have the same sharpening effect on his performance for a second time. Hors La Loi III hasn't disappointed those who claimed he was the worst winner of the Champion in years, getting no closer than third in three outings this time around. Last time out he was readily outpaced in the straight when beaten nearly sixteen lengths by Rhinestone Cowboy in the Kingwell Hurdle at Wincanton (a race he's won twice before) and, though his connections have been making bullish noises in recent days and his Festival record stands the closest inspection, Hors La Loi III really does have a lot to prove on Tuesday—his price of around 16/1 pretty much sums up his chance. Marble Arch is another without a win so far this jumps season, his best effort coming when fourth to Rooster Booster in the Bula. He was especially disappointing in the Christmas Hurdle at Kempton on his latest start, but did at least show himself in good heart when successful in a mile-and-a-half maiden on the all-weather at Lingfield in the middle of last month.

Of the longer-priced ones, the one whose odds hardly represent his chance on form is **Copeland**. His form last season, when successful three times (including in the Tote Gold Trophy), wasn't far below the best of the leading two-milers and, though he's been seen in action just once so far this time around, that shouldn't be held against him. The chances are he's been kept fresh for a spring campaign and he certainly shaped as though retaining his ability when mid-field in the latest renewal of the Tote Gold Trophy, not jumping fluently and eased in the closing stages having managed to get within striking distance of the leaders between the last two. Copeland is apparently not the easiest to get fit nowadays—he certainly came on appreciably for his reappearance last season—and with that behind him it's reasonable to assume he'll be at something like his peak next week. If he is, then he's not a 33/1 chance to get in the shake-up. For the main selection, though, we'll side with Rooster Booster to continue his progression from luckless handicapper to leading two-miler.

**Smurfit Champion Hurdle Challenge Trophy (Gr 1)
(Cheltenham 2m½f)**

1998	172	Istabraq	6-12-0: 3/1	A P O'Brien (Ir)	C F Swan	18
1999	164	Istabraq	7-12-0: 4/9	A P O'Brien (Ir)	C F Swan	14
2000	163	Istabraq	8-12-0: 8/15	A P O'Brien (Ir)	C F Swan	12
2001		Abandoned				
2002	161	Hors La Loi III	7-12-0: 10/1	J R Fanshawe	D Gallagher	15

QUEEN MOTHER CHAMPION CHASE PREVIEW

With eight of the leading contenders rated within half a stone of each other, this year's Queen Mother Champion Chase, the championship two-mile event at the Festival, could be one of the most open in living memory. Last year's winner Flagship Uberalles is re-opposed by the four who chased him home twelve months ago—Native Upmanship, Cenkos, Edredon Bleu and Tiutchev. Latalomne, still to be asked for his full effort when coming down at the second last that day, is again set to be in the line-up, and so are Moscow Flyer, who won the Arkle at last year's Festival, and Lady Cricket, runner-up in the 2002 Mildmay of Fleet. Kadarann, who beat both Cenkos and Lady Cricket in the Game Spirit at Newbury on his most recent outing, and Seebald, runner-up to Moscow Flyer in the Arkle, add further spice to a mouth-watering 'Queen Mum'.

In unravelling the form, the best place to start is probably last year's race. **Flagship Uberalles** was many people's banker of the meeting in 2002 and ultimately won in clear-cut style by three lengths from Native Upmanship. But his jumping lacked fluency that day, his rider Richard Johnson was hard at work from a long way out just to stay in touch, and his form was some 10 lb below the pick of his efforts. There's a chance such a hard race has left a permanent mark on Flagship Uberalles, too, and in three subsequent outings he's seemed a shadow of his former self. At around the 8/1 mark, he looks the worst value of the principals. **Native Upmanship** is a reliable performer who's been out of the first two only once in his last eleven starts and should again give his running. He patently failed to stay in the King George two outings ago and had a perfectly satisfactory tune-up for Cheltenham when accomplishing a simple task with ease at Thurles. The nagging doubt about him concerns lack of pace over two miles on good ground. He stays two and a half miles well and could be found wanting for a change of gear against the best specialist two-milers around. If it comes up soft, however, he'll make plenty of appeal each-way.

Cenkos should be thereabouts. Last year he looked the likeliest winner when nearest pursuer Latalomne fell two out, only to come to the end of his tether on the run-in and be caught first by Flagship Uberalles and then late on by Native Upmanship. He was better than ever when slamming Edredon Bleu in this season's Tingle Creek at Sandown, and, though he rather blotted his copybook with a defeat to stablemate **Kadarann** at Newbury, he still appeals more of the Nicholls-trained duo. There would be no more popular winner of the Champion Chase than **Edredon Bleu**, who lifted the prize in memorable style in 2000 after a thrilling duel with Direct Route. If the ground rides good or firmer he'll have an advantage over a number of his rivals who seem suited by the mud, and if it comes to a battle after the last there'll be no horse digging deeper than Edredon. His current price of 9/1 could look big if ground conditions come right for him, but his limitations on soft going have been there for all to see in recent times.

Martin Pipe's **Tiutchev** is something of an enigma. Top class on his day, but prone to the occasional bad run, he showed himself better than ever when winning the Grade 1 Ritz Club Ascot Chase last time by twelve lengths from Geos. That form suggests he has little to find with the best two-milers, and it's worth remembering that he was strongly fancied for the Queen Mother at the abandoned Festival of 2001 when trained by Nicky Henderson. Last year's fifth place came on the back of a troubled preparation, and Tiutchev is probably capable of a much better showing this time around. As for **Latalomne**, some felt he'd have gone close last year had he stayed on his feet, but he's been very disappointing since both over hurdles and fences, and it would be a surprise were he able to figure prominently this year.

And so to the ante-post favourite **Moscow Flyer**. Jessica Harrington's nine-year-old is the horse in the race with the fewest doubts about him and has the outstanding record of being unbeaten on all eight of

his completed outings over fences. His most high-profile success came in last year's Arkle when he jumped immaculately and forged four lengths clear of Seebald on the run-in, but his twenty-length demolition of Kadarann (who was receiving 8 lb) at Down Royal in November doesn't look bad form either and he hacked up at Leopardstown and Punchestown on his two most recent outings. Moscow Flyer is probably still improving, is equally effective on good ground and soft, and is also blessed with both reliability and courage. In short, he's the one to beat.

If there is to be a surprise winner, and that hasn't happened for quite a while, **Lady Cricket** could be the provider. Her last five races at Cheltenham have resulted in two wins and three second places, and she turned in arguably her career-best effort when conceding lumps of weight and beating a competitive field in the Ladbroke Trophy on the course in January. A reliable mare receiving a handy 5-lb allowance, she's a bigger price than her form merits, and, like Native Upmanship, would be a solid each-way bet if the ground turns soft. But her inadequacies at two miles on a sound surface were exposed in the Game Spirit, when she was well held behind Kadarann, and her potential supporters are advised to hold fire until ground conditions are known.

In summary, then, a superb race should be in store. Edredon Bleu would be of some interest on good ground or firmer, while Native Upmanship and Lady Cricket should go well if the rains come. But **Moscow Flyer** is the classiest animal in the line-up and the likeliest winner. Indifferent to the state of the ground, and as reliable as queues at the bar in the Tented Village, he looks to have an excellent chance of giving the Irish their first win in the Queen Mother since Klairon Davis in 1996.

Queen Mother Champion Chase (Gr 1) (Cheltenham 2m)

1998	163	One Man	10-12-0: 7/2	G Richards	B Harding	8
1999	164	Call Equiname	9-12-0: 7/2	P F Nicholls	M A Fitzgerald	13
2000	167	Edredon Bleu	8-12-0: 7/2	Miss H C Knight	A P McCoy	9
2001		Abandoned				
2002	166	Flagship Uberalles	8-12-0: 7/4	P J Hobbs	R Johnson	12

FOXHUNTER PREVIEW

Ante-post betting on the Cheltenham Festival is bigger business than ever nowadays, with prices available on the majority of races from the New Year. However, one contest that still fails to capture the betting public's imagination, or bookmakers' at least, is the Christie's Foxhunter Chase. Indeed, at the time of writing, Coral is the only major firm prepared to run a book on this race despite a decent entry of forty-one. This reluctance to offer prices is puzzling when one considers that the last two renewals have proved very good betting heats, with winners Cavalero and Last Option returning at odds of 16/1 and 20/1 respectively in fields that were similar in size to the Festival's two staying handicap chases. As usual this year's Foxhunter promises to be a clash between established favourites and up-and-coming performers. Heading the ante-post market is **Kingscliff**, who definitely falls into the latter category as he will be having only his fifth career start should he line up next Thursday. The Alner family certainly knows a thing or two about unearthing talent from the point-to-point ranks—1998 Cheltenham Gold Cup winner Cool Dawn being a prime example—and this six-year-old was extremely impressive on his hunter chase debut at Wincanton last month. His thirty-length victory over the David Pipe-trained **Family Business** (a point winner since) marked him out as a future star and, having qualified for Cheltenham with a point win since, connections have taken the bold decision to go for hunter chasing's top prize. However, the 5/2 currently on offer looks poor value for a horse of his limited experience, particularly as his jumping wasn't foot perfect at Wincanton and will be put under even greater scrutiny at Cheltenham. It is worth remembering that twelve months ago the hot favourite Horus, who had a similar profile to Kingscliff, was found out by his jumping in the Foxhunter and was eventually pulled up behind **Last Option**.

Last year's winner is back to defend his crown and could be reopposed by **Torduff Express** (third), **County Derry** (fifth) and **Sheltering** (unseated rider) amongst others. Last Option hasn't tasted success in seven starts since that hard-fought victory and even had to suffer the ignominy of having to qualify for this year's contest—a below-par second to Coole Abbey at Musselburgh finally booked his place in the field. Although his form this year isn't anything to write home about, Last Option's last two runs were over inadequate trips and he has shown enough to suggest he retains all his ability. Indeed, he can boast a very good record at Cheltenham (also third in the 1999 Foxhunter) and could come into the reckoning again at long odds if the ground is good or firmer. Another former winner due to take his chance is the 1998 victor **Earthmover**, who enjoyed a far smoother route to qualification thanks to two hunter chase wins within four days early last month. He comfortably beat Last Option into third place in a small-field affair at Wetherby (runner-up Master Wood has franked the form), before following up on very testing ground at Chepstow by a distance from the remounted County Derry. Earthmover didn't need to reproduce fully the smart handicap form he has shown in recent seasons on either occasion and definitely has the best chance on the book, particularly as he is proven on all types of ground. A tendency to make mistakes (jumping has let him down at the Festival before) wasn't evident at Wetherby or Chepstow, which must also bode well.

Torduff Express is another who will not be inconvenienced by firmish ground and, although probably his stable's second string behind Earthmover, will warrant plenty of respect if making the line-up (has reportedly met with slight set-back and isn't a certain runner). The twelve-year-old has struck up a fine partnership with Polly Gundry since being switched to hunters and followed up his close third at Cheltenham last year with an impressive victory over Gunner Welburn in the Martell Fox Hunters' at Aintree. That represented the best hunter chase form of last season and he looks as good as ever this time around, as in 2002 rounding off his Cheltenham preparations with victory over 2000 Foxhunter runner-up **Real Value** at Fontwell.

It could be argued that County Derry represents better value than Earthmover as he would have finished only a couple of lengths behind that rival but for falling at the last at Chepstow (when conceding 3 lb) and is currently trading at four times the price. Unfortunately, this smart stayer is consistently let down by his jumping, and will probably need testing ground in order to improve on last year's fifth place. The lightly-raced **Quetal** also has proven form in testing conditions after a convincing win over the useful yardstick **Mr Dow Jones** at Newbury on his reappearance. He is still unbeaten in hunters (his victories last season included one over subsequent Great Yorkshire Chase winner Barryscourt Lad), but is another with question marks about his jumping.

Ireland has been responsible for only four Foxhunter winners during the race's lengthy history, yet there is traditionally a strong Irish challenge and the 2003 renewal is no exception. Although the promising **Joe Blake** (a close fourth last year) reportedly misses the race, that still leaves nine Irish-trained entries which are headed by Sheltering and the popular veteran **Dorans Pride**. The Edward O'Grady-trained Sheltering shouldn't be dismissed on account of advancing years as, having undergone a breathing operation after his 2002 campaign, he looked better than ever when winning at Leopardstown last month by ten lengths from Dorans Pride. Although Sheltering has failed to complete even a circuit on both previous visits to Prestbury Park, his jumping isn't a major concern and he again appeals as the best Irish hope. Fourteen-year-old Dorans Pride is due to make his seventh Festival appearance and, although bound to run his usual honest race, it is surely asking too much of him to add to his 1995 Stayers' Hurdle success.

In conclusion, it is best to take on Kingscliff at current prices despite his undoubted potential, particularly as the likes of Torduff Express, Sheltering and Earthmover hold more solid chances on form. The selection goes to the last-named of that trio, currently available at around 4/1, who will hopefully become the first horse since former stable-companion Fantus to regain the Foxhunter crown.

Christie's Foxhunter Chase Challenge Cup (Cheltenham 2m2½f)

1998	140	Earthmover	7-12-0: 3/1	R Barber	Mr J Tizzard	11
1999	148	Castle Mane	7-12-0: 9/2	Mrs C Bailey	Mr B Pollock	24
2000	135	Cavalero	11-12-0: 16/1	H J Manners	Mr A Charles-Jones	24
2001		Abandoned				
2002	126	Last Option	10-12-0: 20/1	R Tate	Mrs F Needham	20

CHAMPION BUMPER PREVIEW

Since its introduction in 1992, the Champion Bumper has been an Irish benefit, with eight of the ten runnings going to the raiders. Just Dato Star and Monsignor have scored for the home team but judged by the entries for the latest renewal British-trained runners for once hold the upper hand. Cornish Rebel, Liberman, Widemouth Bay, He's The Boss and Be Fair have all shown better form than their Irish-trained counterparts and when added to very promising sorts like Back To Ben Alder and Bourbon Manhattan make for a formidable defence. There are quite a few promising sorts among the likely Irish contenders but their form isn't at the same level and most of them have been racing on very soft going, and such conditions are looking unlikely at this stage for the Festival.

Paul Nicholls' **Cornish Rebel** is entitled to be favourite on the form of his most impressive Newbury win. In just about the most competitive bumper of the season, Best Mate's brother sauntered home with seven previous winners, notably Cloudy Grey and Sixo, forlornly chasing in his wake. He won by eleven lengths, powering away after looking inexperienced and showing form good enough to go close in just about every previous running of this race. With improvement on the cards and the Newbury race run at a good pace on good ground (conditions likely to be replicated here), Cornish Rebel has a lot going for him. He didn't appear particularly fancied at Newbury—he started 12/1—and the fact that Ruby Walsh has chosen to ride Royal Alphabet for Willie Mullins instead might be taken as a negative, but only a minor one. Be Fair and He's The Boss (who'd previously shown better form when second in a Grade 2 run on very testing ground at Chepstow) were fourth and sixth at Newbury, and while the former could run well at a big price neither seem likely to trouble Cornish Rebel.

Liberman, last seen when failing by a length to give 3 lb to Rhinestone Cowboy at the Open meeting in November, isn't far behind Cornish Rebel on form. Making his debut for the Martin Pipe team that day, Liberman was always handy in a steadily-run race and made a decent fist of his battle with the Champion Hurdle favourite. Other subsequently promising hurdlers, like Inca Trail, Beyond The Pale and Nil Desperandum were just behind and Liberman has been saved for this by a yard that doesn't let opportunities go begging.

Compared to Cornish Rebel and Liberman, **Widemouth Bay** has a very low profile yet his form is of a similar standard. He created a very favourable impression when making a winning debut at Wincanton, then did really well to get up and share the spoils with the front-running Ashley Brook at Ludlow; nothing else got near the leader that day, yet several of those behind have been out since to confirm the high view taken of the form.

Like Cornish Rebel, Widemouth Bay has an excellent jumping pedigree, the type that usually come to the fore in the Champion Bumper. The pair cost 110,000 and 70,000 punts respectively, and **Back To Ben Alder** is another expensive store, having made 88,000 Irish guineas as a three-year-old. By Bob Back, he impressed in appearance before his easy wide-margin debut success at Kempton. There's little doubt he's a good prospect and his stable, who always have a strong bumper team, have been close in this race before (the ill-fated Inca was second in 2000) but the form of his win is very ordinary and he needs to improve a good deal. The last British-trained runner to mention is **Bourbon Manhattan**, who entered the picture when winning his second bumper, at Newbury early in the month. He won impressively but that wasn't a good race by Newbury standards and he'll need to improve a fair bit further to make the frame.

So to the Irish. Willie Mullins' team is usually the place to start, with four previous winners to his name, and **Royal Alphabet** appears to be the favoured of four entries this time round, though in terms of form and pedigree he'd be the last pick. He won his only previous start at Galway in August, showing a good turn of foot but only fair form, and is Flat bred, out of the Nell Gwyn winner A-to-Z and half-brother to a winning miler. Joe Cullen won for the stable in 2000 after victory much earlier in the season, but on what has been seen **Davenport Democrat** and **Mr Babbage** (jumping-bred winners on soft ground last month) are more likely types for this contest.

Noel Meade is also set to be multiply represented, with Leopardstown winner **Dizzy's Dream**, the four-year-old **Zum See** and **Watson Lake**, a recent acquisition from Eddie Hales' yard all likely runners. Riding plans have yet to be finalised and there isn't much between the first and last named on form, though Dizzy's Dream has the greatest potential to improve and could prove the pick. There could well be plenty of other Irish runners, but few of them look to have the potential to trouble the judge, the dual winner **McGruders Cross** a possible exception. However, if there is a really dark horse coming across the Irish Sea it could be Flexible Action. His form in winning on firm ground at Listowel in the autumn is nothing out of the ordinary but he showed an impressive turn of foot and has a decent pedigree: if conditions were on the firm side of good, he could be the sort to put up a bold showing at long odds.

There's not a lot to choose between the leading Irish contenders but Dizzy's Dream may prove the best of them; however, he will have his work cut out to get among a really strong home team. Widemouth Bay is much too big a price for the chance he has and is well worth an each-way bet. Liberman clearly has a leading chance, but Cornish Rebel ought to be favourite and has to be backed to win outright at around 6/1 at the time of writing.

Weatherbys Champion Bumper (Standard Open NH Flat) (Gr 1) (Cheltenham 2m½f)

1998	126	Alexander Banquet	5-11-6: 9/1	W P Mullins (Ir)	Mr R Walsh	25
1999	122	Monsignor	5-11-6: 50/1	M Pitman	B Powell	25
2000	122	Joe Cullen	5-11-6: 14/1	W P Mullins (Ir)	C F Swan	17
2001		Abandoned				
2002	123	Pizarro	5-11-6: 14/1	E J O'Grady (Ir)	J P Spencer	23

N.H. REVIEW

As is the norm, a fair proportion of the scheduled meetings for February were lost due to poor weather, but extra ones catering largely for novices have taken place on each of the last two Sundays with more promised, and most horses have been able to complete their Cheltenham preparations pretty much as their trainers would have wished.

The two-day Racing Post Chase fixture at Kempton almost always has a bearing on events at the Festival. There's been no more progressive chaser this season than the mare **La Landiere** and she improved still further to extend her winning run to six in the feature race of the meeting, runner-up **Gunther McBride** fighting a losing battle from the second last but running a fine Grand National trial all the same. At the time of writing it's still possible La Landiere will be supplemented for the Gold Cup, but she'd need to run a good deal better again to get into the shake-up and wouldn't be sure to stay a testing three and a quarter miles. The Cathcart Chase, on the other hand, will be right up her street and she'll take all the beating if still at the top of her game.

Both Katarino and Snow Drop took the Adonis Hurdle before going on to land the Triumph Hurdle at Cheltenham, but this year's Grade 2 event for juveniles at Kempton bore no relation to how the Triumph will be run and is likely to prove misleading form, **Well Chief** showing much the best turn of foot in a slowly-run race and in no danger after quickening clear into the straight. The Victor Ludorum Hurdle at Haydock was also full of Triumph entrants, but provided no more of a test of stamina than the Adonis, unbeaten hurdler **Far Pavilions** suited by the emphasis on speed and just getting the better of the ex-French-trained **Crystal D'Ainay** having been up there throughout. Arguably, the most significant performance from a Triumph Hurdle point of view in Britain in the last couple of weeks came from November Handicap winner **Red Wine**, who jumped fluently and came right away from a reasonable field at Newbury. He'd clearly come on a lot from his initial run over hurdles and if he improves as much again at Cheltenham won't be far away. The form pick in the Triumph is the Irish-trained **Golden Cross**, who landed his second Grade 3 juvenile at Fairyhouse when quickening clear of habitual runner-up Statim, the one worry with him being he's raced only on soft/heavy going over hurdles so far and is unlikely to get that at Cheltenham.

Back at Kempton, **Hand Inn Hand** was impressive in stretching his winning run over fences to four in the Pendil Novices' Chase, jumping well and making most, and while the Arkle or even the Cathcart might be beyond him at Cheltenham, there are more races to be won with him and he's likely to win a good one when he goes into handicaps. **Double Honour** was a short price to maintain his unbeaten record over jumps in the novice hurdle but couldn't stay on as well as might have been expected after leading into the straight, and it was **Foreman** who came clear to give Thierry Doumen his first winner as a trainer in Britain. Subsequent SunAlliance Hurdle winner Galileo made a successful start in this country in this race last year but, smart novice though he is, it's unlikely Foreman will be quite good enough in whichever of the novice events he contests at Cheltenham. The bumper at Kempton is usually a decent one and, though a few may prove to be flattered due to a combination of the firmish ground and steady pace, winner **Chelsea Bridge** looked a useful prospect in overcoming his inexperience.

The Friday card at Kempton was nothing like so competitive as Saturday's, small fields the order of the day, and none of Martin Pipe and Tony McCoy's three winners, **Puntal**, **Deano's Beeno** and **Stormez**, had to be at their best. All will have much more on their plate if taking their chance at Cheltenham, though Stormez will be popular if lining up for the National Hunt Chase having already proved himself at the trip when winning at Uttoxeter early in the season.

The Red Square Vodka Gold Cup at Haydock was a first-rate Grand National trial, attracting a field fully worthy of the £60,000 first prize. **Shotgun Willy** hadn't run since finishing second in last year's Scottish National, but overcame his absence and top weight in snatching the spoils from **You're Agoodun** near the line. The extra mile at Aintree will suit him and understandably he now disputes favouritism in the Grand National. Better value lies with the third **Iris Bleu**, however. He's a most reliable individual and, though beaten only three quarters of a length at Haydock, is available at twice the price of Shotgun Willy. **Mini Sensation** didn't have his ground but shouldn't be forgotten about for the Midlands National if conditions are as testing as they normally are at Uttoxeter.

Tees Components clearly didn't give his running in the Prestige Novices' Hurdle at Haydock, but **Iris's Gift** again impressed as a strong-galloping staying novice out of the top drawer. His connections have a few options open to them at Cheltenham, and, while he'd have an excellent chance in the Pertemps Final even under top weight, he'd hold definite place prospects if they aim higher and go for the Stayers' Hurdle. Trainer Jonjo O'Neill has any number he could run in the Pertemps Final, not least **Inching Closer**, who made a winning debut for the stable on his recent reappearance at Haydock seemingly with plenty in hand. **Chopneyev** is another for the Pertemps short list, though he's also in the Coral Cup, where he'll likely clash again with **Korelo**, the two having fought out the finish of a valuable handicap at Ascot last month. The pair remain open to improvement, and Korelo could bid first for the Imperial Cup at Sandown and put himself in line for a considerable bonus on offer for winning that race and at Cheltenham.

Finally, let's not forget **Impek**, who hasn't run for three months but whose clash with **Azertyuiop** in the Arkle Chase has been keenly anticipated in these quarters all season long. There was nothing between them over hurdles, both are unbeaten over fences, yet Impek can be backed at nearly four times the price of his rival.

HANDICAPPERS' CORNER

● **Fadoudal du Cochet** (Timeform Rating c140) came right back to his useful best when second to Arctic Copper in a Grade 2 chase at Naas on his latest outing and looks to hold a sound chance of following up last year's success in the Grand Annual Chase despite being on a 6lb higher mark than when getting the better of Exit Swinger and subsequent Aintree winner Dark 'N Sharp. Fadoudal du Cochet hadn't taken the eye or jumped as fluently as usual when making little impact behind Young Devereux and Seebald at Kempton five weeks earlier, and it has to be encouraging that he came on for that run to such an extent, showing form far in advance of any of his previous outings this season. A possible stumbling block for Arthur Moore's ten-year-old would be firmish ground, as he has raced only on good going or softer, though he certainly doesn't need conditions to be really testing in order to be seen at his best. Should Fadoudal du Cochet miss Cheltenham, he will be well worth looking out for in two-mile handicaps in his native country. *A. L. T Moore, Ireland.*

● **Misbehaviour** (Timeform Rating h88+) is the only one of the horses selected in this issue not to be engaged at the Festival as Cheltenham fever really kicks in, but winners at the lesser tracks are just as rewarding for the bank balance and there are strong grounds for believing that Misbehaviour will be doing her supporters a good turn in the near future. The juvenile handicap hurdle at Hereford in February was well contested and early signs are that the form is particularly strong for the grade. The winner Do L'enfant d'Eau took a step up in class in his stride by winning in good style at Newbury from a 7lb higher mark and the fourth Lord Fernando got off the mark over hurdles at Huntingdon on his next outing. Misbehaviour finished just behind Lord Fernando, and there are grounds for thinking there is even better to come when the emphasis is more on speed. A winner at Taunton earlier in the season, Misbehaviour paid the price for helping set a sound gallop under conditions that probably stretch her stamina, having most of her rivals in trouble three out but tiring in the latter stages. Unproven beyond a mile on the level, there is every chance that firmer ground will help her take advantage of a handicap mark of just 90. *J. G. Portman.*

● **Spectrometer** (Timeform Rating h141+) is a really tough and consistent individual who gives the strong impression that he will be well suited by the way that the handicap hurdles at the Cheltenham Festival are contested and is one for the short list if lining up in either of his engagements at the meeting, the Coral Cup and County Hurdle. His latest win over two miles at Cheltenham suggested that the former engagement would suit better, staying on resolutely in a strongly-run affair to collar Telimar Prince in the dying strides having been under pressure some way out. The runner-up has boosted the form since with an improved effort in defeat against Classified at Fontwell and the overall form of the race looks solid. Previously, Spectrometer had recorded an even better effort against Covent Garden at Aintree, the pair pulling well clear of the other thirteen finishers over two and a half miles. Covent Garden's subsequent victories include a Grade 2 novice at Kelso and it's hard to knock the achievement of Spectrometer in running him so close. Spectrometer is effective on any going, though two miles could fail to bring his stamina into play sufficiently on ground firmer than good. He has already shown himself fully effective after a break, and has almost certainly been intentionally kept fresh for the Festival. *P. J. Hobbs.*

● **Spinofski** (Timeform Rating c129) has done nothing but improve this season and looks sure to give a good account of himself in the Fulke Walwyn Kim Muir Challenge Cup on Tuesday. Spinofski was travelling well when all but brought down at the twelfth in last year's renewal, and granted better fortune shouldn't be far away this time round, particularly as his stable is now in good form. A genuine and consistent sort and a notably sound jumper, Spinofski has been unfortunate not to win this season,

producing his best effort when second to another progressive chaser, Ibis Rochelais, at Sandown on his latest start, keeping on strongly and pulling well clear of the remainder. Given the competitiveness of the race and the merit of his run, the handicapper has taken a chance allowing Spinofski to remain on a mark of 120 and he can renew rivalry with the winner on 6 lb better terms at Cheltenham. Effective on good to firm and heavy going, and already a winner for likely rider Matthew Baldock, Spinofski can reward each-way support. *P. R. Webber.*

● **Xenophon** (Timeform Rating h136p) is one of the most progressive hurdlers in training and looks very much one to keep on the right side in handicaps, his win in the ultra-competitive Pierse Hurdle at Leopardstown being a particularly taking display. Leading on the bridle two out, he had only to be shaken up to beat Colourful Life by two lengths. The form of the race stands the closest inspection, with the third home Camden Tanner producing an excellent effort in defeat against Chopneyev soon after and three of those behind winning next time out, including Tote Gold Trophy heroine Spirit Leader. Xenophon had very much caught the eye when keeping on to finish second to Cloone River at Punchestown on his reappearance, on that occasion shaping as if a longer trip would be in his favour, though he has sufficient pace to suggest he would still hold strong claims if the County Hurdle was chosen instead of the Coral Cup. It is to be hoped that Xenophon and Spectrometer do not clash at the Festival, but whether or not he lines up at Cheltenham Xenophon is one to follow. *A. J. Martin, Ireland.*

REVIEW

No winners from those horses selected in the last issue, but **Covent Garden** continued his progression by winning a Grade 2 novice at Kelso at odds of 5/2 and remains of interest at least until his colours are lowered. **Avalanche** also confirmed himself well treated by winning a handicap chase at Kempton in February at odds of 4/1 and should continue to do well. Of the most recent bunch, Ever Present was very disappointing in novice company, whilst Hakim seems held in the weights on the evidence of his last couple of runs. **Needwood Lion** (unable to dominate) and **Cosmocrat** (very testing ground) had viable excuses last time and remain of interest in the right circumstances, whilst **Glen Warrior** ran well when third to subsequent winner Darina's Boy at Exeter and is one to keep in mind when sent over fences.

VIEW FROM THE COURSE – BY DAVID CLEARY

WINCANTON 06/02/03

Blue Ride 6 b.m. King's Ride – Charmere's Beauty (Phardante)

A much-improved effort stepped up to two and three quarter miles gave Blue Ride a third win from four starts, and pleasingly she showed rather less sign of waywardness than had been the case on her previous appearances. There's no doubt she has her quirks, as anyone who backed her at odds on when she won by a short head here over two miles the time before would testify, but on this occasion she stayed on strongly after going less well than the dependable runner-up Madam Flora into the straight and won in a style which suggests there's a good deal more to come. This win qualified her for the Final of the mares series at Newbury later this month and, while the BHB handicapper isn't going to let her in lightly, the race is likely to be run ideally for her and it will need to be a pretty punitive mark to prevent her being a leading contender. *P. Nicholls.*

SANDOWN 14/02/03

Ei Ei 8 b.g. North Briton – Branitska (Mummy's Pet)

A horse that's already run sixteen times this season might not seem an obvious horse to follow next time but Ei Ei's latest effort, in a two-mile handicap chase at Sandown was a performance right up with the best efforts of his career. Given that he was unable to dominate in the style that suits him ideally, he deserves all the more credit for holding on to third, five and a half lengths behind Harvis. The second and fourth, Abalvino and Clan Royal, came out and won at Newbury recently and Ei Ei is likely to take plenty of pegging back in a race where he gets an uncontested lead. Ei Ei had won over hurdles on his two starts prior to Sandown, taking advantage of a much lower handicap mark in that sphere each time, and could also be of interest if switched back to timber. *M. Chapman.*

NEWBURY 28/02/03

Dungarvans Choice 8 ch.g. Orchestra – Marys Gift (Monksfield)

After turning in a couple of temperamental efforts in novice chases before the turn of the year, Dungarvans Choice returned to hurdling to win convincingly from a couple of unexposed rivals, Master Billyboy and His Nibs, all three stepping up in trip. Dungarvans Choice had won twice from four starts over hurdles last season, both wins coming at around two miles, before finishing down the field when a 25/1-chance for the Supreme Novices' at Cheltenham. He didn't appear sufficiently experienced that day and has no Cheltenham entries this time round, but another handicap at this level around two and a half miles, or possibly further on an easy track, looks well within his compass. He's yet to race on ground firmer than good and it's possible he's ideally suited by testing conditions. *N. Henderson.*

RACE TO WATCH

3469	08000 722 421 Freephone Betting From Sky	2m110y (8)
	Bet Hcap Hdle (C) 0-130(126) (4yo+) £12,273	
3346 *	DO L'ENFANT D'EAU (FR) <i>PJHobbs</i> 4-10-7 ¹¹⁵ RJohnson	5 11/2 1
3122 ³	REVIEWER (IRE) <i>HMorrison</i> 5-11-6 ¹²⁰ AThornton	7 10/1 7 2
3261 ⁴	DETONATEUR (FR) <i>IanWilliams</i> 5-10-2 ¹⁰⁷ WHutchinson ⁵	8 7/1 3 3
2900 ³	Miss Cool <i>MCPipe</i> 7-11-3 ¹²⁴ (v) MrJEMoore ⁷	8 9/1 8 4
3169	Haditovski <i>JMackie</i> 7-11-6 ¹²³ (v) CRafter ³	12 14/1 11 5
3264 ⁴	Sonevafushi (FR) <i>MissVenetiaWilliams</i> 5-11-3 ¹²² MrAO'Keeffe ⁵ ..	12 7/1 10 6
2653	Open Ground (IRE) <i>IanWilliams</i> 6-9-13 ¹⁰⁶ (b) WAWorthington ⁷	25/1 6 7
3312 ⁵	Chief Cashier <i>GBBalding</i> 8-10-6 ¹¹³ TBest ⁷	10/1 dist 8
2978 *	Keltic Bard <i>CJMann</i> 6-11-8 ¹²² NFehily.....	7/2 10/3f f
3169	Bernardon (GER) <i>MCPipe</i> 7-11-12 ¹²⁶ GSupple	10 14/1 pu
2815 *	River City (IRE) <i>NoelTChance</i> 6-10-5 ¹¹⁰ TJPhelan ⁵	6 7/1 pu
3.00race Mr Terry Warner 11ran 4m02.48		

Six ground-related withdrawals meant this handicap at Newbury last weekend was a good deal less competitive than it might have been. It was also further weakened when the favourite departed at the first but, even so, whilst it might have been lacking strength in depth, there are definite reasons for believing the first three will all be interesting in similar company again next time. The clear early leader (Open Ground) was ignored but the overall pace was still sound and made for a good test under the conditions.

The juvenile **Do L'Enfant d'Eau** is improving and defied a 7-lb penalty for his win in a handicap at Hereford the previous weekend (form which is already working out well) with something to spare, going on after four out and asserting in emphatic fashion when pushed along after two out, eased around three lengths close home. Another rise in the weights beckons but Do L'Enfant d'Eau is progressing sufficiently to keep defying the handicapper in the short term. So far, he's shown he stays two and a half miles and has raced solely on ground softer than good. **Reviewer** has taken time to come to himself this season but has shown more than enough on his last two starts to suggest his turn isn't far away. On his previous outing he'd finished third to the hugely impressive Our Vic at Wincanton (solid form) and here came up against another progressive type, sticking to his guns well having been unable to quicken when first shaken up after a mistake three out. Reviewer has raced solely on good to soft/soft ground to date and, though yet to tackle beyond the minimum trip, his Flat profile certainly suggests he shouldn't have any trouble staying two and a half. Finally, **Detonateur** will be interesting granted less of an emphasis on stamina around two miles. He's yet to win over hurdles and, whilst a return to maiden company should ensure he puts that right, there's little doubt he has the ability to win a handicap off his current mark, too. Detonateur travelled comfortably for a long way, as he had on his previous start, and there's every reason to believe he can do a bit better again with the emphasis more on speed.

TRAINER FORM

Ante-post markets for the Cheltenham Festival are becoming ever more diverse, with prices available this year not only for the ever-popular leading jockeys' prize but also for who will be top owner and trainer over the three days. Although Martin Pipe is well on his way to yet another trainers' championship, it isn't his name topping the list for the last-named of those ante-post markets. Instead, that honour goes to **Jonjo O'Neill**, who will be sending his strongest-ever team to Prestbury Park next week and is currently available at just 11/8. Regular readers of this feature will know that inmates of Jackdaws Castle have been in rude health this winter, with a strong strike rate of 21% since the beginning of February suggesting that this good run of form is set to continue for a good while yet. Although O'Neill had to settle for just one Festival winner twelve months ago with Rith Dubh in the four-mile National Hunt Chase, that doesn't tell the whole story as virtually all of the stable's runners at the meeting ran really well. Indeed, both Keen Leader and Rhinestone Cowboy were arguably unlucky not to win their races, whilst the likes of Carbury Cross, Native Emperor, Joss Naylor and Master Tern all went close in handicaps. Therefore it would be a surprise if the stable doesn't improve on that 2002 haul as O'Neill holds an embarrassment of riches in several races over the three days—on Tuesday alone he is responsible for the first two in the Champion Hurdle betting and has several live candidates for the Pertemps Hurdle Final.

Pipe, of course, also holds multiple entries in the vast majority of races over the three days and seems certain to emerge with at least one more Festival winner. The death of Valiramix and a succession of near-misses for champion jockey Tony McCoy are two of the abiding images from last year's meeting, but it shouldn't be forgotten that the champion trainer's back-up team landed two big handicaps thanks to Ilnamar (Rodi Greene) and Blowing Wind (Ruby Walsh) before McCoy finally made it into the winner's enclosure on Royal Auclair in the penultimate race. That left him leading trainer at the 2002 Festival, a position which was held by **Nicky Henderson** in 2000 following a record-equalling haul of four wins. Seven Barrows continues to house one of the best-quality National Hunt strings in the country and Henderson is a past master of timing his Cheltenham preparations to perfection. Even though the stable had a disappointing Festival by its own high standards twelve months ago, it still managed a one-two in the Fulke Walwyn Kim Muir Chase and also saddled runners that made the frame in both the Champion Hurdle and Gold Cup. This ultra-consistent yard does have one weak area, however, as its bias towards Cheltenham seems to have had a detrimental effect at the following month's Grand National meeting at Aintree (no Henderson-trained winner in seven years).

The powerful West Country yards of Philip Hobbs and Paul Nicholls will both be well represented at Cheltenham. It is worth noting that the latter holds a strong hand with Earthmover and Torduff Express in the Christies' Foxhunter Chase, a race in which none of his rivals for the leading trainer prize will have a runner. However, for those punters wishing to play in this market then the best value could be **Henrietta Knight** at 20/1. The Wantage handler has saddled at least one winner at four of the last five Festivals and, unlike some of her rivals, won't be sending any runners there next week just to give the owners a day out. In addition to the reigning Gold Cup winner Best Mate, the stable's Arkle hopeful Impek also has a leading chance. If that duo are successful, then only one more win could be required to land the top trainers' prize and Knight has other possibles such as Inca Trail (Supreme Novices'), Foly Pleasant (William Hill Chase), Edredon Bleu (Queen Mother Champion) and Over The Storm (National Hunt Chase).