
GOLD CUP

Over the last few weeks, the plot for this year's Cheltenham Gold Cup has taken a couple of unexpected twists worthy of an Agatha Christie novel. First of all, the young Irish pretender Kicking King was killed off well before the end of the book, only to stage a remarkable Lazarus-style recovery. Then, just as we were all coming to terms with that, there was an even bigger shock in store when star player Best Mate disappeared before the final chapter, leaving Poirot, Miss Marple and form students scratching their heads and wondering if there could possibly be another unexpected development.

Best Mate's withdrawal from the race after breaking a blood vessel on the gallops on Thursday morning has certainly taken the shine off this year's Gold Cup. His presence would have raised the profile of the contest beyond the racing pages, and victory would have been front-page news. From a punting point of view, there are a couple of ways of looking at Best Mate's absence from the Gold Cup line-up. Some would argue that, with the long-term ante-post favourite missing the race, the event is suddenly thrown wide open, bringing six or seven contenders, all with similar chances, into the picture. The alternative view is that, even before Best Mate's removal from ante-post lists, some of those other contenders already had a better chance than the reigning champion, who was underpriced and effectively making the market.

The fact is that in three outings in 2004, including when winning a substandard renewal of the Gold Cup, Best Mate hadn't been even close to his best, and while he was quoted at no longer than 5/2 to surpass Cottage Rake and Arkle and win a fourth consecutive Blue Riband, that price had remained virtually unchanged in the twelve months since last March. In last year's Gold Cup, despite travelling well and jumping fluently, as he so often does, Best Mate was all out to beat Sir Rembrandt by half a length with Harbour Pilot close up in third. That's hardly vintage Gold Cup form. After his usual summer break, he reappeared in a race specifically designed for him at Exeter, but despite his only market rival Sir Rembrandt appearing not to handle the track and running dismally, Best Mate still nearly fluffed his lines, scrambling home by a short head from Seebald. Worse was to come in the Lexus Chase at Leopardstown next time, a contest Best Mate had won in scintillating style the previous year. Again sent off odds-on, he was beaten fairly and squarely by seven-length winner Beef Or Salmon. Excuses were made—it was thought Best Mate needed the run at Exeter (although he looked fit and well), and he was apparently unsuited by the heavy ground at Leopardstown (although he'd handled similar conditions perfectly well before)—but if he'd taken his chance we'd still have looked elsewhere for the winner.

In terms of pure form, **Kicking King** undoubtedly tops the list of Gold Cup contenders, but, while he does look the classiest animal in the line-up, he's seemingly had a less-than-ideal preparation. It was announced in early-March that he was suffering from an infection and would have to miss the Festival, and, while he's since reportedly made a full recovery, it's clear that his build-up to the big race hasn't been as smooth as his connections would have liked. Runner-up in last year's Arkle Trophy, Kicking King has shown much improved form since stepped up in trip this season, and put up the best recent performance in a staying chase when winning the King George VI Chase at Kempton on Boxing Day, leaving most of his rivals stone cold when quickening on at the twelfth and some eight lengths up when blundering and all but coming down at the last, eventually holding on by a length and a quarter from Kingscliff. If the Gold Cup was run over a bare three miles on a flat track, he'd definitely get our vote, but Friday's contest, over a two-furlong longer trip on a stiffer track and with Grey Abbey and Ollie Magern likely to ensure a good gallop, will test Kicking King's stamina much more severely than Kempton did. He'll probably win the Gold Cup if he reproduces the King George form, but given his interrupted preparation and the slight stamina doubts we'll look elsewhere for our selection.



Strong Flow leads eventual winner Farmer Jack in the AON Chase

Kempton runner-up **Kingscliff** has come a long way in a short period of time and looks a strong contender. A repeat of the King George form would be good enough to win an average Gold Cup, and Kingscliff's supporters can take further heart from the fact that he could yet be open to further improvement. Unbeaten in points, he won the Christie's Foxhunter at the 2003 Festival in memorable style by two and a half lengths from Bright Approach, jumping fluently, quickening clear between the last two fences and looking likely to win by a wide margin only to tie up on the run-in. Kingscliff maintained his unbeaten record at Cheltenham the following December when thrashing Haut Cercy and Marlborough before pulling muscles when suffering his only defeat in the Peter Marsh Chase at Haydock.

The King George was the best staying chase seen so far this season, and, looking in excellent shape, Kingscliff put up a top-class performance, ridden with more restraint than usual, still some way adrift when making an uncharacteristic mistake at the twelfth, then staying on well from five out without quite getting to the winner. In contrast to Kicking King, conditions in the Gold Cup should suit Kingscliff even better than at Kempton—the longer trip and stiffer track will bring his stamina more into play—and another improved performance is very much on the cards. He looks to have everything in his favour.

Well back in the King George was **Therealbandit**, and, while it would take a leap of faith to see him turning the tables on Kingscliff, he does look one of the more interesting outsiders. There's a good chance Therealbandit didn't handle the track at Kempton, and prior to that he'd won three of his four completed outings over fences at Cheltenham, the other occasion being in last year's Gold Cup when he finished seventh behind Best Mate. A career-best effort from Therealbandit on Friday looks a possibility, but he was put in his place by Grey Abbey in the Pillar Chase at the end of January and third or fourth is probably the best his supporters can hope for.

Therealbandit is likely to carry David Johnson's second colours, with **Celestial Gold** the choice of retained jockey Timmy Murphy. It's impossible to knock the progress Celestial Gold has made in the last twelve months, following a second place in the National Hunt Chase at last year's Festival by completing a hat-trick in a novice chase, the Paddy Power and the Hennessy. Better still was to come from Celestial Gold at Newbury last time when he went down in a driving finish to Farmer Jock and Strong Flow in the AON Chase. With few miles on the clock, Celestial Gold could well maintain his upward curve, but he has another stone to find to match the best form of the likes of Best Mate and Kingscliff. Judged on that alone, he doesn't make much appeal at the current odds. **Strong Flow** has more potential. The 2003 Hennessy winner suffered a well-documented knee injury when winning the Feltham Novices' Chase at

Kempton on Boxing Day that year, and Paul Nicholls has trained him this season solely with the Gold Cup in mind. A comeback over hurdles was perfectly satisfactory, and he shaped well when second to Farmer Jack in the AON, leading five out and responding well to go down by just a length and a quarter. It's hard to see Celestial Gold reversing that form in the Gold Cup, with Strong Flow likely to come on again for the run, but Nicholls' eight-year-old still has a fair bit left to find with the King George principals.

The Irish haven't won the Gold Cup since Imperial Call in 1996. If Kicking King lines up, he'll be their best chance this time around, but Beef Or Salmon and Rule Supreme come into the reckoning too. Their prospects depend a good deal on how they jump—it's rare that either gets through a race over fences without making at least one serious mistake. **Beef Or Salmon** has the stronger form of the pair, and has shown himself better than ever this season in winning the James Nicholson Champion Chase at Down Royal and the Lexus Chase at Leopardstown. Whether his jumping stands up so well in a bigger field and in a race run at a stronger pace remains to be seen, however. In last year's Gold Cup, Beef Or Salmon's jumping wasn't so fluent as that of some of his rivals, and despite staying on at the death he could finish only fourth. He'll have to improve on that form to win this year's renewal.

Rule Supreme won the Royal & SunAlliance Chase at last year's Festival with a more accomplished round of jumping than usual, and he's proved a splendidly tough individual since then, winning the Grande Course de Haies at Auteuil in the summer and the Irish Hennessy at Leopardstown last time, slamming an out-of-sorts Beef Or Salmon by fourteen lengths in the latter. But he was held when falling at the last in the Lexus Chase the time before that, and while he's a likeable sort, the probability is he falls just short of top class. **Pizarro**, only third in the Lexus and a faller in the Irish Hennessy, has a mountain to climb judged on those efforts but could well step up on them at Cheltenham, where he has a very good record. Don't forget that he won the Festival Bumper in 2002 under Jamie Spencer, was second to Hardy Eustace in the Royal & SunAlliance Novices' Hurdle in 2003 and may well have won last year's Royal & SunAlliance Chase but for being brought down two out.

This year's Royal & SunAlliance Chase was the original target of **Ollie Magern**, but he may now go for the Gold Cup after the withdrawal of Best Mate. Nigel Twiston-Davies' seven-year-old has had an excellent first season over fences, notching five wins including the Feltham at Kempton and a Grade 2 event at Wetherby. He's also shown he handles Cheltenham well, winning there in October and putting up one of his best efforts when fourth to Celestial Gold in the Paddy Power. But for all his toughness and versatility, it's hard to see Ollie Magern being good enough in the Gold Cup—he has upwards of 20 lb to find with the likes of Kicking King and Kingscliff—and the novice race would surely be his best chance of Cheltenham success.

With **Our Vic** and **Tiutchev** not certain to see out a testing three and a quarter miles and likely to be better off in the Daily Telegraph Trophy, **Grey Abbey** is the last one to mention. An admirably genuine front-running grey, he goes into the Gold Cup on a six-timer, having won the Scottish National, Charlie Hall and Pillar Chase (giving weight and a hammering to Therealbandit) on his last three outings. The bare form of those last two wins gives Grey Abbey every chance of making the frame on Friday, and, with the possibility of further improvement, it wouldn't be the biggest surprise were he to come home in front. Much will depend on whether he's taken on for the lead: if he's unharried in front he could easily gallop the majority of his rivals into submission, his fluent fencing sure to put pressure on the suspect jumping techniques of some of his rivals. But if Grey Abbey is taken on for the lead—and Ollie Magern could do just that—he'll find it harder to get into an even rhythm and may end up expending too much energy.

It's a fascinating Gold Cup, even without Best Mate. Kicking King has the best recent form, though under different conditions, while Grey Abbey could surprise a few who still see him as merely a good northern handicapper. But the contender with the fewest doubts about him is Kingscliff, and Robert Alner's progressive, sound-jumping son of Toulon gets our vote to maintain his 100% record at Cheltenham.

CHAMPION HURDLE

Few Cheltenham images have lived longer in the memory than the sight of Dessie Hughes driving home the ultra-game Monksfield to see off old rival Sea Pigeon in the 1979 Champion Hurdle. That iconic race came bang in the middle of what became known as the 'golden era of hurdling', when three of the greatest names in the history of the sport picked up two championships apiece during a six-year period, with Night Nurse preceding Monksfield and Sea Pigeon as title holder. The fact that the only two horses to have retained their crown since 1981 are the triple champions See You Then and Istabraq illustrates that Hughes, now firmly into his second career as a trainer, arguably faces an even harder task as he prepares stable-star **Hardy Eustace** to follow up last year's win in hurdling's blue riband event. The reigning champion probably isn't in the same class as any of the illustrious names mentioned above, but that's not to say he won't buck the statistics with a repeat win on Tuesday. His profile this winter actually mirrors that of Monksfield back in 1978/9, who managed just one win from five starts (albeit often campaigned in handicaps) en route to his second Cheltenham win. Hardy Eustace's record is slightly better, with a tally of one win and three placed efforts since last spring, and his twenty-five length victory in the Red Mills Hurdle at Gowran last month suggested he is coming to the boil at exactly the right time. Indeed, when one considers the impact blinkers had on Hardy Eustace last spring (due to be refitted at Cheltenham), plus the prospect of another uncontested lead, it is understandable why most ante-post markets have him as the one to beat again.

What does seem certain is that the title will be going back to Ireland again, as is reflected by Irish runners filling the first seven places in most ante-post lists. **Harchibald** has headed the betting for much of the season after an impressive hat-trick of wins this winter against plenty of leading contenders from both sides of the Irish Sea. Having effortlessly seen off **Back In Front** (conceding 5 lb) and **Mac's Joy** (receiving 3 lb) at Punchestown back in November, Noel Meade's gelding went on to confirm himself a high-class performer with wins in the Fighting Fifth at Newcastle (beating Inglis Drever) and Christmas Hurdle at Kempton (having reeled in long-time leader Rooster Booster). He's clearly an improved performer since managing only fourth behind Hardy Eustace at Punchestown last spring, but his stable hasn't been firing on all cylinders in recent months and his participation at Cheltenham was reportedly in some doubt for a time after a bad piece of work last weekend. Doubts about his well-being, plus a tame finishing effort up the Cheltenham hill in last year's County Hurdle, must therefore temper enthusiasm about him. There are no such qualms for Back In Front with regard to his effectiveness at Prestbury Park, as he followed his fine third in the 2002 Champion Bumper with a clear-cut success in the Supreme Novices' at the Festival twelve months later. In addition, he bounced back from his Punchestown reverse to land the Bula Hurdle at Cheltenham's bonusprint meeting in December, when he numbered Inglis Drever (receiving 4 lb) and Rooster Booster among his victims. Meanwhile, the booking of Ruby Walsh may be harsh on previous jockey Davy Russell but it's unlikely to be viewed as a negative move by punters. **Brave Inca** had to fight much harder for his win in the Supreme Novices' last year, but this tough seven-year-old will have plenty of supporters come the big day despite having had to settle for the runner-up spot on each of his last four starts. Three of those defeats came at the hands of Mac's Joy, with Brave Inca getting the margin down to the shortest of short heads when just losing out in the three-way finish to the AIG Europe Champion Hurdle at Leopardstown in January. The other horse in the photo that day was Hardy Eustace, who'd also had to settle for third behind this pair (again at level weights) at Leopardstown's Christmas meeting, and clearly Mac's Joy warrants plenty of respect at current odds, particularly as he's the type to be seen to good effect the way the Champion is run.



totesport Trophy Hurdle (Handicap), Newbury—Essex and Barry Geraghty take control at the final flight

Accordion Etoile has also proved a real money-spinner for connections, winning six of his last nine races, and gained a valuable win over the Champion Hurdle course when beating the likes of **Westender** (conceding 11 lb) and **Rooster Booster** (conceding 20 lb) in the Greatwood Handicap Hurdle back in November. Paul Nolan's six-year-old was last seen when well held behind Mac's Joy in the AIG at Leopardstown, but the heavy ground that day was all against him and he's likely to prove a different proposition back on the expected less testing conditions. He still has a bit to find on his bare form, however, something which also applies to the final Irish hope to have emerged this winter **Essex**. This progressive five-year-old will be the mount of Tony McCoy and can boast a record of four wins from just five starts over hurdles, with his two wins this winter coming in the Pierse at Leopardstown and the totesport Trophy at Newbury. Both races have proved decent guides for the Champion in the past, notably due to the fact that these competitive handicaps are usually more truly-run affairs than the conventional trial races. Connections of Rooster Booster will no doubt vouch for the latter fact, as this frustrating veteran has rarely been involved in a truly-run affair since his runaway win in the 2003 Champion. The grey has managed just one win from twelve attempts since that day, filling the runner-up spot no less than eight times during this period, and is clearly a far from straightforward ride nowadays. However, he does at least retain much of his ability despite being eleven now and probably has the best chance on form of a weak home team. **Intersky Falcon** and **Self Defense** both haven't been good enough in previous renewals of the Champion, whilst place prospects are probably the best **Inglis Drever** can hope for over a trip which seems on the sharp side for him.

In conclusion, the selection goes to Hardy Eustace as he bids to win at the Festival for the third year running, with a saver also advised on Mac's Joy at current odds of around 9/1.

QUEEN MOTHER

As spectacles in horse racing go, a top-class two-mile chase takes a lot of beating, so this year's Queen Mother should be a real treat, certainly if December's Tingle Creek Chase at Sandown is anything to go by, **Moscow Flyer**, **Azertyuiop** and **Well Chief** providing a race that will live long in the memory, all three producing performances which would have been good enough to win the Queen Mother in any normal year.

As he has on all seventeen completed starts over fences, Moscow Flyer came out on top that day, if anything leaving the impression he'd have found more if required. Jessica Harrington's eleven-year-old was no more than workmanlike when beating vastly inferior opposition at Punchestown on his only start since, but that in no way detracts from his chance at Cheltenham as that's the way he is, and he remains the one to beat as he bids to atone for unseating four out in last year's race.

Azertyuiop was the chief beneficiary of that departure and will be bidding to win at the Festival for third year running. He showed himself right back to his very best when defeating Well Chief in the Game Spirit at Newbury last time but, outstanding chaser though he is, it's hard to get away from the fact that Moscow Flyer has defeated him on the two occasions they've completed together. The only thing that could make a difference is a change of tactics. Azertyuiop has sat behind Moscow Flyer in their previous clashes, but the way he was ridden at Newbury suggests connections may adopt more positive tactics this time round, a move which would certainly make full use of his excellent jumping.

Last year's Arkle winner Well Chief has progressed remarkably this season and, in some ways, is unfortunate in that he happens to be around at the same time as two of the best chasers of recent times. He failed by only a short head to pip Azertyuiop for second in the Tingle Creek and confirmed that effort was no fluke by defying a BHB mark of 176 in the Victor Chandler, run this year at Cheltenham. He's already the best horse trained by Martin Pipe in his long and outstanding career, but a defeat by Azertyuiop in the Game Spirit, where his jumping was a bit ragged, shows there are still a few better around. That said, Well Chief is such a tough sort that there is a suspicion Cheltenham plays to his strengths rather better than the flat track at Newbury, and he won't go down without a fight.

Of the others, it's hard to believe any will be good enough to trouble the above trio, though **Oneway**, who reportedly takes his chance here rather than in the Grand Annual, has been most progressive this season, winning all five starts in handicaps, the latest from a mark 36 lb higher than when the sequence began, and it would be no surprise to see him come out best of the rest. **Mister McGoldrick** is a really likeable type and took advantage of Well Chief's departure to win the Castleford at Wetherby in January, but his fourth in the Game Spirit shows he's still some way behind the best and he's likely to be up against it again, particularly if he's asked to help force the pace. **Cenkos** has made the frame in the last three runnings of this race but is eleven now and hasn't looked the force of old so far this season. **Rathgar Beau** has been in excellent form of late, winning four of his last six starts, but is more likely to take his chance in the Daily Telegraph Chase.

In conclusion, if forced to pick one we'd have to go for Moscow Flyer, particularly as Azertyuiop is favourite in some lists, but this is a race to savour as much as anything and here's hoping the 'big three' are all in contention as they come thundering down the hill towards the second last.

ARKLE TROPHY

There are a total of twenty-three five-day entries for the Arkle Trophy on Tuesday, the most notable of the nine defections from the previous entry stage being Foreman (after suffering a bout of colic). Favourite in the ante-post market for several weeks now has been **War of Attrition**. The 2003/4 Supreme Novices' runner-up has won both his outings over fences, namely a maiden at Thurles and a novice at Naas, in the latter overcoming a tendency to jump left through the early stages when easily defeating Healy's Pub. We know from his ability over hurdles that War of Attrition has the potential to be leading player over fences and it will hardly be a surprise if he wins, but equally this will represent by far his stiffest test of the season and, at the odds, it probably makes more sense to look elsewhere.

Next up in the betting are **Contraband** and **Watson Lake**. The former hasn't taken long to prove himself as good over fences as he was over hurdles despite winning just one of his four starts as a chaser, the Grade 2 Henry VII Novice (by seven lengths from The Last Cast) at Sandown in December. Normally a free-going front runner, Contraband was ridden more patiently when third to My Will on bad ground at Uttoxeter last time out and will presumably have forcing tactics readopted at Cheltenham. Watson Lake is another who seems to go well ridden from the front. He made the running when successful on all three outings over fences, easily pulling clear of Ulaan Baatar when winning a Grade 2 novice at Navan on his most recent outing, and there's no reason to believe we've seen the very best of him yet. A similar thing can be said about **River City**. He's unbeaten in five starts over fences, showing his best form when beating Contraband by a couple of lengths at Aintree back in October. He hasn't been seen since, but that's almost certainly by design and, whilst further improvement will be required for River City to in the shake up, his trainer isn't known for tilting at windmills just for the sake of it. It's possible to make a case out for **Ned Kelly** given that he was once high class over hurdles and has come back well from a spell on the sidelines this season. He still seemed to be carrying plenty of condition when finishing eleven lengths behind Ulaan Baatar in a Grade 1 at Leopardstown on his previous outing and, as such, is probably better than that suggests. Whether Ned Kelly's fragile legs will stand up to the undulations of Cheltenham remains to be seen, however, especially if the ground isn't testing. **Ulaan Baatar's** winning effort at Leopardstown is, by *Timeform's* reckoning at least, the best performance by a novice chaser either side of the Irish Sea this season. He jumped soundly that day and was roused clear from the last to defeat Foreman by nine lengths, but three weeks later he didn't look anything like the same horse when slammed twenty lengths by Watson Lake at Navan, finishing extremely tired after a blunder three out had put paid to his chance. No explanation has been forthcoming for that laboured display, but there's a possibility it simply came too soon after Ulaan Baatar's Leopardstown win and, at a top price of 14/1 at the time of writing, he makes more appeal than most—he's sure to be thereabouts if back at the top of his game on Tuesday.

Of the rest, **My Will** has enjoyed a good first season over fences, winning four times, but there's a case for suggesting he's ideally suited by a thorough test at the minimum trip and his form as it stands is at least 10 lb short of that normally required to win the Arkle; **Mariah Rollins** would be unbeaten in three starts over fences had she not made a bad mistake at the last in the Grade 2 won by **Sir Oj** at Punchestown in November, though she was fortunate at Leopardstown on Boxing Day, left clear when the same horse came down at the final fence. Both have place prospects if they put everything together, though Sir OJ also has a couple of entries in handicaps at the meeting (see *Handicappers' Corner*); **Ashley Brook** is a very likeable type but will probably find the emphasis insufficiently on stamina, **Kadount** will find things much tougher than when winning a two-finisher event at Wincanton last time out, and **Made In Japan** hasn't progressed since a promising start over fences but will at least be fresh having been given a couple of months off since his latest run.

CHAMPION BUMPER

The Cheltenham Festival may have an extra day this year and a handful of new races which could have an impact on some of the established ones, but there's one race which is likely to be just as strongly contested as it's always been: the Champion Bumper is sure to feature a near-maximum field of twenty-odd of the most promising young horses in training, providing a fascinating test for future champions. Finding the winner is unlikely to be any easier than it has been in the past, either, and a short-list of plausible contenders from this year's record entry would run to double figures.

Unusually for this particular contest one of them is a previous runner in the race, the 2004 runner-up **Refinement**. She was five lengths clear of the rest when second to Total Enjoyment twelve months ago and has won her three other starts, including in a small field at Aintree in November on her only outing this season, so has to be given serious consideration. At this stage the 2005 running looks a stronger race than last year's and she's likely to find one or two too good.

Irish-trained runners have, of course, dominated the race over the years, with just three British contenders successful in twelve runnings. No stable has been as successful as that of Willie Mullins and he supplies this year's almost certain favourite in **Missed That**. A son of Overbury, he has won the last two of his three starts in bumpers and put up a smart effort when beating Miss Toulon at Naas last month. The stronger gallop in that race seemed to suit him well, so the likely good pace at Cheltenham should be right up his street, but his reputation has gone before him in all his races to date and there's unlikely to be any value in him on Wednesday tea-time.

All told, there are sixteen Irish-trained entries, but it's fair to say they don't look to have the usual strength in depth expected and, apart from Missed That, the one to make easily the most appeal is **Firth of Forth**. He's won both his starts in bumpers, not hard pressed to score at either Gowran in February or Navan this month, in the latter putting up a performance which *Timeform* reckons wasn't that far below the level Missed That achieved at Naas. Whether Firth of Forth will be as effective on the likely going at Cheltenham, his previous races having been on soft/heavy, is the main question mark against his chance.

One of the reasons last year's Champion Bumper wasn't the strongest was the absence of the first two from the Grade 2 bumper at Newbury's February fixture. That won't be the case this year, with Karanja and Be Be King, as well as the third De Soto, holding entries next week, and the form of the Newbury race looks every bit as strong as it did twelve months ago. Only two horses have run out of the race to date, the fifth Oscardeal finishing an excellent second at Doncaster and one of the also-rans Cappanrush taking a close third at Kempton. **Karanja**, from Victor Dartnall's excellent yard, has won all three of his starts in bumpers and put up the best performance in this sphere this season when winning at Newbury. The race was run in a similar fashion to how the Champion Bumper is likely to be run and he must hold a leading chance. He'll be ridden by amateur Nina Carberry, but she's excellent value for her claim and rode him at Newbury, so certainly shouldn't put anyone off.

Be Be King, from the Paul Nicholls' stable, had landed the Christmas expenses when gambled on at Wincanton on Boxing day on his debut and was again a strong fancy when beaten at Newbury. That was a smart effort but he'll be 3 lb worse off for a three-and-a-half length beating with Karranja and there's no strong reason to think he should reverse placings. **De Soto** was making his debut at Newbury but he'll be worse off with the first two if he gets a run at Cheltenham and, as they looked stouter stayers, it's hard to see him getting the better of them on this stiffer track.

Another race which looks strong form is the Sandown race won impressively by **Mendo**. This race has quite a pedigree for being won by good horses, with Chives, Lord Sam, Patrick's nineteenth and Royal Paradise all successful in recent years. Chives and Royal Paradise (fourth to Total Enjoyment) both ran with credit in the Champion Bumper and there's every chance that Mendo will do the same if he takes his chance. Several others from the Sandown race hold entries, including the third **There Is No Doubt**, who would meet the winner on much better terms. There Is No Doubt has caused quite a stir already this season, having landed a sizeable gamble for his small yard at Exeter on his debut after a name change and a switch from Martin Pipe's stable. He could be given a chance on form but against him are his style of racing—he's made the running on all three starts so far and those may well be difficult tactics for his amateur rider to employ to advantage here—and the fact he was worked up beforehand at Sandown.

One dark horse still in the care of Pipe is the obscurely-bred **Itsmboy**. He made an impressive debut when winning at Fontwell at the end of last season and hasn't been out since. That form wouldn't normally be considered good enough, but the second and third have shown themselves useful performers since and it would certainly be worth noting any money for him. Another not seen for some time is the Jonjo O'Neill-trained **Black Jack Ketchum**. He's won both his starts to date, putting up a useful performance when impressive at Worcester in July, but that wasn't a race with much strength in depth and he'll need to improve to figure here.

The north gained its only success in the Champion Bumper with Dato Star in 1995 and its chance of success this time round looks to rest with **Lennon** and the Scottish-trained **Rasharrow**. Rasharrow beat Lennon by five lengths when both made their debut at Wetherby back in November. He hasn't been seen since, but Lennon has won two of his three subsequent starts, beaten only by the sidelined Oscar Park in a listed event at Warwick. Lennon's greater experience may prove a decisive factor if the pair meet again.

One runner with a Cheltenham win to his name already is **The Mick Weston**. He looked a good prospect when winning at the October meeting here and put up a really smart performance when winning on heavy ground at Chepstow after Christmas. However, he was essentially not good enough when a short price for the listed bumper at the Open meeting and others in the line-up have a fair bit more potential to improve. In short, it will be a bit disappointing if he's good enough to win.

There are a few less obvious candidates worth a mention. There'll be few better-looking runners in the line-up than the Old Vic gelding **Glasker Mill** and he surely did well to win a test of speed at Kempton on his first start in this sphere. That doesn't give him a great chance on form but there's plenty of potential for improvement. **Mister Quasimodo** is another grand type who won by a wide margin on bad ground at Exeter last time out. He probably needs it to rain but if the going was unexpectedly soft he'd certainly enter calculations. One runner likely to be a massive price if he's in the field is **Dunsfold Duke**. He was second to Mendo at Sandown and shouldn't really reverse placings but he travelled strongly for a long way before lack of experience told.

That's the shortlist. A win for most of those mentioned wouldn't come as a surprise by any means, but in saying finding the winner looked as hard as ever we were perhaps trying to build up suspense: Karanja is a confident selection and makes considerable appeal at the odds available at the time of writing, whilst Firth of Forth looks best of the rest.

FOXHUNTER CHASE

Exciting bunch finishes at the Cheltenham Festival aren't solely the preserve of the meeting's big handicap hurdles, as was illustrated by Cavaleiro's dramatic burst past six horses from the last to land the 2000 Christie's Foxhunter Chase. This year's renewal promises to be the most open since then, which could make for essential viewing should there be another mass group of amateur jockeys in full flight on the famous uphill run-in. One horse who may ruin any prospect of a tight finish is likely favourite **Sleeping Night**, who competed with distinction against the likes of Baracouda and Florida Pearl a couple of years back and has proved in a league of his own on both completed starts since being dropped into hunters this year. His low-style of jumping caught him out when unseating at Wincanton last month, however, and tempers enthusiasm about his prospects in what promises to be a truly-run affair over Cheltenham's demanding fences. His current odds also don't look great value when one considers he hasn't always looked the stoutest of stayers in the past. Stamina certainly isn't an issue with Paul Nicholls' two other likely runners **Torduff Express** and **Earthmover**, with the latter making most appeal as he bids for a record-breaking third win in the contest after his victories in 1998 and 2004. Although now fourteen, Earthmover shaped as if retaining much of his ability when beating **Mrs Be** and the error-prone **County Derry** at Fontwell last month and seems to go particularly well for his now regular partner Rilly Goschen (seven wins from nine completed starts). **Never Compromise** chased home Earthmover at Cheltenham twelve months ago but has been rather let down by his jumping since then and, as a result, hasn't been in the same kind of form this time around. Instead, Ireland's best chance of ending its nine-year drought in this contest could rest with **Lord of The Turf**, who completed a hat-trick in points prior to beating Never Compromise and last year's Punchestown winner **Just Cassandra** when scoring at Leopardstown last month.

For much of the winter it looked as if **Free Gift** would go to Cheltenham as favourite, as this stable-companion of 2003 winner Kingscliff had run up an impressive unbeaten sequence of eight in points and hunter chases prior to his shock defeat by **Paddy For Paddy** at Folkestone last month. A notably sound jumper, Free Gift certainly shouldn't be written off despite that reverse though he has still got a bit to find on bare form with some of the other market principals. These include **Lord Atterbury**, who flopped badly when favourite for last year's renewal but went on to post a career-best effort with his gallant third in the Grand National. He's clearly a formidable force in this sphere when on song, but he also flopped when favourite for the Champion Hunter at Stratford when last seen in May and possibly isn't the easiest horse to train (has required oxygen after his last two good efforts under Rules). Now back with Martin Pipe, Lord Atterbury had spent most of the winter (without running) under the care of Olivia Jackson, who numbers **Ballysicyos** amongst her three Foxhunter entries. This former Pipe-trained gelding has proved most prolific in points of late (including two wins this year), but he had major jumping problems when tried in novice chases and it's probably no coincidence that's he yet to be tried in hunter company. **Kingston Venture** is one of the few horses to have beaten Ballysicyos in points and this one-time fairly useful hurdler (when with Bill Turner) could be an interesting runner at big odds, though his lack of experience in hunter company dampens enthusiasm. The same applies to **Kerstino Two**, who has shown a useful level of form in points this year (including a defeat of Moor Lane) but got no further than the third on his recent hunter chase debut at Taunton.

In conclusion, there are plausible reasons for taking on several of the favourites in an open year and it could well pay to side with Earthmover again despite his advanced years.

N.H. REVIEW

The first four-day Cheltenham Festival is upon us; that means four new races, including a cross-country chase, a revamped Cathcart and a new running order which is sure to take a bit of getting used to, the Gold Cup now the major race on the Friday. With the extra day, there's bound to be an increase in the number of horses running twice at the meeting, something the Irish have never been averse to doing, anyway, though rule changes are set to prevent Rooster Booster from running in the County Hurdle if he contests the Champion on Tuesday.

Even more so than in days gone by, the most significant action leading up to Cheltenham takes place on a weekend. totesport Trophy day at Newbury, Red Square Vodka Gold Cup day at Haydock and Racing Post Chase day at Kempton have always provided plenty of pointers to events at the major Spring Festivals, and these days even the good February meetings at Ascot (staged this year at Lingfield) and Wincanton take place on a Saturday rather than mid-week. As ever, the season's most valuable handicap hurdle, the totesport Trophy, looked a highly competitive affair, for all it lacked a really good horse at the top of the weights, which was borne out by the fact that only around eight lengths covered the next fourteen home behind the winner, **Essex**, who in the circumstances probably did very well to pull three lengths clear on the run-in. In following up his win in the Pierse at Leopardstown—he was the first to complete that particular double—despite racing from a mark 21 lb higher, he showed he's still going very much the right way after just five starts over hurdles and now bids to emulate Make A Stand, who won the Tote Gold Trophy (as it was known then) in 1997 on his final start before landing the Champion Hurdle. Essex will need to improve as much again as he did from Leopardstown to Newbury to give himself a good chance, though that can't be ruled out, and he's due to have Tony McCoy to help him. Fellow Irish challengers **Al Eile** and **Power Elite** did best of those held up in the totesport Trophy, in which the early pace wasn't so furious as expected, the former doing extremely well to match his third in the Pierse after again being left with an impossible amount of ground to make up. He mustn't be left off the shortlist for the County Hurdle.

At the time, the Aon Chase seemed to throw up more negative Gold Cup clues than positive ones, with **Strong Flow** and **Celestial Gold** being upstaged by **Farmer Jack**, who displayed more stamina than previously suspected stepping up to three miles for the first time. In light of Farmer Jack's subsequent victory under top weight in the Racing Post Chase at Kempton, it seems likely that Strong Flow and Celestial Gold did show further improvement at Newbury after all, though both will have to find a fair bit more at Cheltenham if they are to trouble the likes of Kicking King and Kingscliff. Farmer Jack produced another solid round of jumping and stout finishing effort at Kempton and is having the sort of run that was expected of him after his novice campaign now his breathing and fencing problems seem to have been ironed out. He'll have a sound chance on form if taking his place in the new Daily Telegraph Trophy at Cheltenham, but that will mean him dropping back in trip and the betfair Bowl (formerly the Martell Cup) at Aintree could be the ideal race for him.

For the second time this season, **Azertyuiop** finished ahead of **Well Chief** in the Game Spirit, even though he was giving him weight on this occasion, Azertyuiop always going that bit better and not making the mistakes his rival did. Last year's Champion Chase winner will clearly go back to Cheltenham at the top of his game, though he has still to beat Moscow Flyer when that one has completed (no horse has over fences in seventeen starts) and there have been no indications yet to suggest Moscow Flyer's advancing years are beginning to catch up with him.



Crystal d'Ainay is about to take the measure of Royal Rosa at Kempton, but he'll have more on his plate with Baracouda at Cheltenham

The card at Newbury began with **Distant Thunder** belatedly getting off the mark over fences, and he's since followed up in equally good style in what was admittedly a below-average Reynoldstown Chase, run at Lingfield this year. **Sixto** was no match for Distant Thunder at Newbury, conceding him 6 lb, but ran up to the pick of his hurdles form on just his second start over fences, and, with more improvement to come granted a thorough test of stamina, he'll be one to note when stepped up to distances in excess of three and a half miles.

The afternoon ended at Newbury with decisive wins for **Over The Creek** and **Karanja**. The former, bar his blip at Haydock, has progressed in leaps and bounds this season as he's been stepped up in trip, and, with the likelihood of better to come yet, will be one to side with if he takes his chance in the new Spa Hurdle at Cheltenham. If he does win, look out for Martin Pipe waving to the Jockey Club in the same smug manner Jose Mourinho did to the Liverpool fans at the conclusion of the Carling Cup Final, for it was those in high places who banned the same connections' Celtic Son from running at Cheltenham due to previous alleged misdemeanours. In defeating the highly-regarded Wincanton winner Be Be King in the Grade 2 bumper, Karanja put up the best display in that discipline so far in 2004/5 whilst stretching his unbeaten run to three in the process, Paul Carberry's sister Nina seen to excellent advantage. A rangy, useful-looking sort, not dissimilar in appearance to stable-companion Mount Clerigo, second to Secret Ploy in the same Newbury race last year, Karanja, too, looks to have a bright future as a jumper no matter how he fares in the Champion Bumper.

It's possible events at Kempton on Racing Post Chase day won't have quite the bearing on Cheltenham that they often do. The Rendlesham was carried over from the previous day's card, which was lost to bad weather, but it could be the race didn't take a great deal of winning, with Royal Rosa going lame (he's out for the rest of the season) and Patriarch Express running poorly, and there's nothing in **Crystal d'Ainay's** record to suggest he can beat **Baracouda** in the former Stayers' Hurdle if that rival is near his best. In receipt of 7 lb from the runner-up, **Limerick Boy** landed the Pendil Novices' Chase for the race's sponsors, the third time in five seasons Venetia Williams has won the event for them, and last

season's Lanzarote Hurdle winner clearly goes very well at Kempton, though whether he has the potential to go on and compete successfully at a higher level must be doubted. The Adonis Hurdle is often the most significant of the Triumph Hurdle trials, but it lost some of its interest this year with the withdrawal of **Etendard Indien**, a smart performer on the Flat for Andre Fabre who won impressively at Kempton on his hurdling debut but has since been beaten at Newbury, and while **Penzance** wasn't hard pressed to maintain his unbeaten record over hurdles it's hard to see why he was promoted to favourite in some books for the Triumph ahead of **Akilak**, who has better form on the Flat and over hurdles. Akilak's performance in landing the odds in the Victor Ludorum at Haydock wasn't as striking as his at Cheltenham on his hurdling debut, but that was due in no small part to the way the race was run, and he again jumped fluently and also showed a willing attitude to get the better of **Karelian**, himself a useful prospect.

Another Howard Johnson-trained novice to win at Haydock was **Mephisto**, the Ebor winner who confirmed the highly promising start he'd made over hurdles behind Ambobo and Brewster when barely having to come off the bridle to beat Moulin Riche in the Prestige Novices' Hurdle, a race won by Iris's Gift and Royal Rosa (from Fundamentalist) in the previous two seasons. Mephisto has since followed up at Kelso when dropped back over half a mile in trip in another Grade 2 novice, just pipping the hitherto unbeaten hurdler **Faasel** after the pair had been locked in battle the length of the long run-in, and he's sure to take a lot of stopping in the Mersey Hurdle at Aintree, with connections preferring not to go to Cheltenham with him and presumably to rely on No Refuge in the Royal & SunAlliance. In finishing a long way clear of the rest at Kelso, Faasel put up the best performance seen from a juvenile so far this season (see *Handicappers' Corner*).

The Red Square Vodka Gold Cup wasn't as strong a race as might have been anticipated considering the huge amount of money on offer, particularly with the two market leaders running well below expectations, but any race over fences which has **Forest Gunner** blazing the trail is not to be missed and he again provided a thrilling spectacle, jumping with all his usual boldness and looking in control for

Forest Gunner leads eventual runner-up Double Honour at Haydock, and he's bound to provide plenty of excitement for those who side with him in the Grand National



much of the straight before digging deep on the run-in as Double Honour threatened to go past. He's still had only eight races over fences but has already won twice over the National fences and the Press are going to have a field day if, as has been suggested, the trainer's wife Carrie comes out of retirement to partner him again at Aintree on April 9.

The Kingwell Hurdle fixture at Wincanton always used to be held the day before Kempton's Racing Post Chase meeting but has a Saturday slot itself now. It was boosted by the transfer of the Kingmaker Novices' Chase from the abandoned Warwick card the previous week, but it's unlikely its winner **Kadout** will be good enough in the Arkle even in a substandard year. **Inglis Drever** won his second Champion Hurdle trial but is unlikely to have the speed to trouble the principals in the big race itself, the former Stayers' Hurdle surely the better option for him, while **Heros Collonges** could be Grand National bound after showing he retains all his ability despite a lengthy spell on the sidelines, but he's lacking in experience for that sort of test. If one horse at Wincanton did strengthen his claims for success at Cheltenham it was **Cerium**, whose form isn't far behind that of some of the leading Triumph Hurdle candidates and the stiffer test of stamina that race provides is likely to be to his advantage.

Long-time favourites for the Supreme Novices' Hurdle and SunAlliance Novices' Hurdle completed their Cheltenham preparations in contrasting fashions. Having won nine of his last ten starts over hurdles, **Marcel** was 2/1-on to dispose of five rivals in a new listed novice event at Exeter but he couldn't handle the very testing ground anywhere near so well as **My Way de Solzen**, who comprehensively reversed Tolworth Hurdle placings and could well improve further when stepped up to two and a half miles plus. Marcel's Cheltenham chances are obviously better judged on his overall record and it wouldn't be a surprise if he at least matched his stable-companion Westender's second in the 2002 Supreme, that horse also a prolific winner as a novice. In giving 4 lb and a half-length beating to fellow smart Flat stayer **Pole Star** in the Sidney Banks at Huntingdon, **Gold Medallist** stretched his unbeaten record over hurdles to three and cemented his position at the head of the SunAlliance Novices' Hurdle betting. He might not have shown his form in quite such good races as some of his potential opponents but he's sure to give a good account of himself.

In each of its first two years, the Vodafone Gold Cup at Newbury has drawn a good-class and competitive field, despite its proximity to Cheltenham, and this time round less than eight lengths covered the first ten home. The first two, **Supreme Prince** and **Horus**, had both contested the Great Yorkshire Chase at Doncaster at the end of January, the latter running a lot better than he had there but finding the winner pulling out extra when challenged, the drop back to two and a half miles suiting Supreme Prince ideally. Supreme Prince could take his chance in the Mildmay of Flete at Cheltenham, but doesn't look any more than averagely handicapped under a penalty. **It Takes Time** wasn't beaten far in the Vodafone but the fact he could finish only seventh off a mark of 153 merely confirms what a substandard Grade 1 the Ascot Chase (run at Lingfield) was this year, though in finishing second **Ollie Magern** once more advertised his claims for the SunAlliance Chase—he's already run nine times this season but continues to take his races extremely well and the stable's one previous winner of the race Young Hustler was campaigned even more vigorously prior to his success. Favourite for the Ascot Chase was **Iris's Gift**, despite the fact he was running over fences for the first time and his stable had been shut down for two months. Last season's Stayers' Hurdle winner also hadn't been out since last spring due to a hairline fracture of a cannonbone and, though well held, he did jump soundly and a lot better can be expected from him over fences in time.

The Vodafone Handicap Hurdle was extremely well contested considering first prize was less than £10,000, but that wasn't obvious from the style in which **Stance** completed a four-timer over hurdles and the Imperial Cup at Sandown is one of the options open to him next. **Lunar Crystal** and **Idaho d'Ox** both shaped well behind Stance at Newbury but neither is among the fifteen horses that Martin Pipe has entered for the Imperial Cup, dual novice hurdle winner **Medison** catching the eye down at the bottom of the weights—he's just the sort to progress again when given the chance to tackle handicaps.

HANDICAPPERS' CORNER

● **Distant Prospect** (Timeform Rating h136p) should be on any shortlist for the Coral Cup, given his ability on the Flat and the clear aptitude he has shown since switched to the jumping game. Distant Prospect showed comfortably his best form over timber when making a successful reappearance in a competitive renewal of the Gerry Feilden at Newbury, holding off Albuhera by half a length, the pair pulling six lengths clear of the pack, which included smart subsequent winners Lough Derg and Self Defense. That form alone gives him an excellent chance from his revised BHB mark of 129, but there are strong grounds for believing that Distant Prospect will step up on it when given an increased test of stamina. Andrew Balding's eight-year-old has excelled at long distances on the Flat, winning the Cesarewitch in 2001 and acquitting himself well in races like the Ascot Stakes and Chester Cup, though his second in the most recent renewal of the November Handicap confirms him to be no sluggard. Distant Prospect's ability to show his form in large fields is sure to stand him in good stead, whilst his fluent jumping technique makes lack of hurdling experience less of a worry than might otherwise be the case for a horse with only five runs under his belt in this sphere. Although towards the head of the betting at around 10/1, he represents an excellent bet, well worth backing each-way given his reliability and toughness. *A M Balding*

● **Faasel** (Timeform Rating h142) produced the best performance by a juvenile hurdler this season when narrowly denied by leading novice Mephisto at Kelso recently, the duo finishing twenty-five lengths clear of Habitual Dancer, himself a fairly useful juvenile with winning form over the course and distance. Whilst there is obviously a strong chance that he will test his credentials in the Triumph Hurdle, Faasel would look a handicap snip if taking up his engagement in the new Fred Winter Handicap for juveniles on the Tuesday, where he is set to carry 11-1. With the non-runner no-bet rule coming into play, odds of around 10/1 look well worth taking as he is likely to start a fair bit shorter if Nicky Richards plumps for the handicap option. There is always a slight concern when a relatively-inexperienced horse is turned out quickly after running on heavy ground, but Faasel's claim at the weights looks sufficiently strong to take that risk. *N G Richards*

● **Fondmort** (Timeform Rating c161?) holds entries in both the new Daily Telegraph Festival Trophy Chase, a Grade Two contest over two miles and five furlongs, and the Mildmay of Flete Handicap over the same trip. If the bang-in-form Nicky Henderson team choose the latter option, the hint could be well worth taking as Fondmort has quickly tumbled in the weights this season and has slipped to a mark of 149, 10 lb lower than when third to Tikram and Iznogoud in the 2004 renewal of the race. Whilst his performances this season have been disappointing to an extent, he has contested three really competitive affairs and it is certainly too soon to be writing him off. Fondmort travelled well for a long way when finishing seventh in the Bonusprint Gold Cup over the same course and distance as the Mildmay, whilst his subesequent failure in a very strong renewal of the King George is not too difficult to forgive. Whilst conceding that there are one or two doubts about Fondmort being in the same form this year as last, it is well worth taking the chance at around the 25/1 mark, particularly given that Fondmort has shown himself to go well fresh in the past. *N J Henderson*

● **Ravenswood** (Timeform Rating h133) made an encouraging return to action when finishing fifth to The Bajan Bandit in a Pertemps Hurdle qualifier at Haydock in February and is likely to go well in the Final of that event at the Festival. Well backed when fourth in the 2003 renewal, Ravenswood gave the impression his stamina was stretched on that occasion but his subsequent near two-year absence from the track suggests that there were other reasons for his weakening in the straight and he is worth

another chance to confirm himself effective at this near three-and-a-quarter-mile trip. Ravenswood is probably best on good going or firmer, which makes his Haydock effort, on soft ground, still more promising, travelling smoothly under a patient ride and not given anything like a hard time in the closing stages. 7 lb out of the handicap at present, Ravenswood is likely to be able to race from his proper mark as his stablemate Korelo heads the weights, and that individual is likely to line-up in the World (Stayers) Hurdle instead. *M C Pipe*

● **Sir OJ** (Timeform Rating c138) has been mixing it with some of the leading Irish novice chasers this season and will be an interesting runner from a potentially lenient mark of 131 if taking up his engagement in either the Grand Annual or the Jewson Novices' Handicap Chase. Successful on his first three starts over the larger obstacles, Sir OJ has shown even better form in defeat on his two most recent runs, holding Arkle contender Mariah Rollins when unseating at the last in the Grade One Durkan New Homes Novice Chase at Leopardstown, then finishing fifth to Ulaan Baatar in the Irish Arkle at the same course. An uncomplicated sort who ought to give a good account in either race, Sir OJ has done all his winning around the minimum trip but showed his best form over timber over two and three quarter miles and there should be no worries about him staying the two miles and five furlongs if the novice option is taken. He is worth backing for both contests on a non-runner no-bet basis. *N Meade*

Review

Only two of the five horses selected to follow in Issue Six were seen out, **Schuh Shine** landing odds of 4/6 at Haydock and **Robbie On Tour** running poorly in a first-time visor at Exeter. The former should continue to be of interest and the latter is worth another chance to confirm his Fontwell run. Torkinking continues to reward his supporters, going in at odds of 9/4 at Haydock, though it will get tougher for him from now on.

All five horses selected to oppose in the last issue have been beaten, with Ice Crystal, Noisetine and The Leader each tasting defeat on two occasions.

IRISH REVIEW

Good luck to those who have supported **Publican** into 8/1 for the Supreme Novices' Hurdle at Cheltenham but, judged on what he has done on the racecourse, it's hard to find any reason why he should be quite so short in the betting. He was undeniably impressive in winning a maiden at Naas in February confined to those who had run not more than twice over hurdles, picking up well before the last to beat Lepidus by seven lengths, but the proximity of Early Hours, only a length and a half further back in third, raises serious doubts as to what Publican achieved that day. Early Hours was barely modest in bumpers, and had been soundly beaten on her first couple of starts over hurdles, and even a positive view of the form leaves Publican with around 20 lb of improvement to find. Admittedly, the time compares favourably with that of the handicap over the same distance an hour later, but the latter was run at a slow gallop and on deteriorating ground. Indeed, it's unlikely that the Naas form is any better than that of Publican's hurdling debut, where he finished third behind Royal & SunAlliance Hurdle entry Satoha in a maiden at Leopardstown, a race in which fourth-placed **French Accordion** looked unlucky not to win.

It's far easier to make a case for the current favourite, **Justified**, who put up the best performance by a novice in Ireland this season when slamming a field containing some near-useful novices in a Grade 2 at Punchestown in January. At bigger odds, **Rocket Ship** is worth considering, too, as he finished in front of Justified when runner-up in the Royal Bond back in November, after travelling best of all through the race. Rocket Ship hasn't been seen since running poorly just after Christmas, when his trainer was struggling badly for form.

The Irish also have a big shout with **Maralan** in the juvenile handicap, the final race of the opening day. When the weights first came out, Maralan had shown no better than modest form in four starts, but he was fairly useful on the Flat in 2004 and looked a different horse in a maiden at Navan last weekend, leading on the bridle two out and beating Kazan Lady easily by eight lengths. A 4-lb penalty means Maralan will race off a BHB mark of just 108 at Cheltenham should he make the cut.

Last season's Champion Bumper fourth, **Royal Paradise**, would appear to be Ireland's main hope of success in the Royal & SunAlliance Novices' Hurdle, and, though not much on looks, he hasn't done anything wrong over hurdles so far, winning four of his five starts, including the Grade 1 Deloitte Novice hurdle over eighteen furlongs, and the extra distance at Cheltenham promises to suit him well. **Queen Astrid** is also among the market leaders for this particular race, and she has been in action already in March, winning a minor event for mares at Limerick by twenty lengths from Cake It Easy. It's not easy to assess the form of that race, as Queen Astrid's main market rival, Shuilan, almost certainly went off too fast, and nothing else was able to raise much of a gallop by the time Queen Astrid took up the running approaching two out. Queen Astrid's debut run in a maiden at Leopardstown looks far more solid, as she beat a field containing subsequent Grade 3 winner **Washington Lad** as well as **Pom Flyer**, who pulled twenty-five lengths clear of the remainder when beaten a length by **Macs Flamingo** in a minor event at Leopardstown on Sunday.

There aren't any Irish-trained contenders with an obvious chance in the Royal & SunAlliance Novices' Chase, but **Point Barrow** heads the market for the National Hunt Chase. Point Barrow completed a hat-trick when beating Mullacash by three quarters of a length in a Grade 3 novice over three miles at Navan in February, and is likely to benefit from the step up to four miles, particularly as conditions are unlikely to be so testing as those he has encountered of late. However, there are a few British-trained runners

among the entries with form at least as good as Point Barrow, and he represents no value at odds of around 7/2.

The form of the Pierse Hurdle is working out very well, four next-time-out winners having already come from the race, and the next appearance of runner-up **Mansony** is eagerly anticipated. Mansony's effort looks much better now than it did at the time, as the pair he split (Essex and Al Eile) went on to fill the same positions in the totesport Trophy at Newbury, and if he can match their improvement, he must have a good chance in the Coral Cup or the County Hurdle from a BHB mark of 133. An outsider who is well worth considering for the County Hurdle is the veteran **Adamant Approach**, who fell at the last when looking poised to win the Supreme Novices' Hurdle three years ago. Adamant Approach finished twelve and a half lengths behind Mansony in the Pierse, but is set to meet that rival on either 16 or 21 lb better terms (depending on whether top weight Rooster Booster runs). It's probably safe to ignore Adamant Approach's effort in a handicap at Leopardstown on Sunday, as that race was steadily-run and he wasn't well placed when the tempo finally picked up.

That Leopardstown card was better than most of the fare that has been on offer in Ireland lately, and also included a useful handicap chase over twenty-one furlongs, in which **Jim** returned to his best in making all to beat Lord Who comfortably by four and a half lengths. Down the field were **Takagi** and **Le Coudray**, and both shaped as if the run would bring them on, particularly the latter, who was having his first outing since falling at Becher's on the second circuit in last year's Grand National, and is being aimed at that race again.

The two-and-a-half-mile handicap at Navan on Saturday went to **Jasmin d'Oudaries**, who was well treated on the pick of his fairly useful chasing form, and stayed on far too strongly for One Four Shannon and Waterlily. Further back in the field were several who hold big-race entries, including Irish National hopefuls **Alexander Banquet** and **Marcus du Berlais**. The former had finished last on his comeback run the previous month, but showed he retains ability this time, just behind the leaders turning in and not knocked about as he weakened. Marcus du Berlais wasn't given an unduly hard time either on his first start since producing a career-best effort to win over fences at Leopardstown in early-January, and is likely to be among the market leaders for the Irish National, which this year takes place before the Aintree version.

Both **David's Lad** and former winner **Monty's Pass** are engaged in the Aintree showpiece again, and have been in action recently, but couldn't possibly be recommended on what they have shown this season. David's Lad was never much nearer than the thirty-eight lengths he was beaten behind Barrow Drive over hurdles at Thurles in late-February, while Monty's Pass has also had the majority of his Aintree preparation over hurdles, finishing midfield in a modest handicap on his latest start.

A-W BULLETIN

Jumping, or more specifically the Cheltenham Festival, may take up most of this issue, but all-weather fans have their own reasons for looking forward to mid-March, namely Winter Derby day at Lingfield (Saturday March 19th). It's the most valuable days racing of the winter on the sand, featuring the first juvenile race of the year and some useful minor events and handicaps, not to mention a listed race for three-year-olds, and, of course, the eighth renewal of the Winter Derby itself, the highlight of the all-weather season. A ten-furlong listed event which is growing in stature each year, the Winter Derby looks like being a very competitive race of its type judged on the current entries, and a smart performance is likely to be required from the winner.

One of the likely favourites will be the Andrew Reid-trained **Eccentric**, who's improved out of all recognition this winter, successful on three of his last four starts, including when smoothly accounting for Gig Harbor in the trial over course and distance last month, albeit in a race that panned out perfectly for him. He's smart now and clearly thriving, so obviously warrants plenty of respect, though it's unlikely that things will go so much his way on the day itself, and he's unlikely to prove much in the way of value.

The trial was a muddling race, steadily run, and there's reason to believe that two who weren't seen to best effect in that race could do better in the big one. The third, Marcus Tregoning's filly **Tahtheeb**, seemed rusty on her first start for four months, and she can be expected to come on for that run, niggled a fair way out and not at all discredited in the end. Lightly raced, that just her fourth career start, she'll be less exposed than most, though she may just find a few to speedy for her over ten furlongs on a sharp track, with her pedigree suggesting she'll stay twelve furlongs and more in due course. **Compton Bolter** could finish only fourth that day, but he had little chance to get competitive as the race went, having been ridden with more restraint than is often the case, and he's already shown himself as smart as ever this winter. Gerard Butler's gelding seems well suited by racing on polytrack, successful three times over the Winter Derby course and distance in the listed Churchill Stakes, and he ought to be thereabouts at the finish.

Grand Passion is another with a good record at the course, his turn of foot an asset the way most races develop on polytrack, and he ended 2004 by defeating Compton Bolter in the Churchill Stakes in November. His chance at the weights is diminished by the penalty he accrues for that success, though he looked to do it readily enough, and he did have excuses when finishing down the field as favourite in last year's renewal.

With good prize money on offer, a few smart ones are reportedly to start off their 2005 campaigns in the race, and two that catch our eye amongst the entries are **Ecomium** and **African Dream**. African Dream made tremendous strides last year after winning a Lingfield claimer in February, winning his next four starts for Peter Chapple-Hyam, including Group 3's at Sandown and Chester. Proven on the track/surface, he would have a leading a chance on that sort of form, though does have to prove his well-being after an absence of seven months. As does Ecomium, whose injury problems restricted his three-year-old campaign to just two starts, though both marked him down as a colt full of potential. Following an impressive success in a Newmarket maiden in April, his only subsequent appearance came when runner-up to Mikado in a above-average listed race at the Curragh in October, giving best only inside the last as a lack of peak fitness probably told. With further improvement likely, there are good races to be won with him this year, and this son of Sadler's Wells would be by far the most unexposed member of the field if lining up.

Of the others, last year's winner, the Italian-trained **Caluki**, will have a lot more on his plate in what's shaping up to be a stronger renewal this time around, and he did receive a good ride in what turned into a tactical affair last year. **Hurricane Alan** has gone well fresh in the past, but he'll have to prove his stamina on what will be his first run since October. Phillip Mitchell's **Corriolanus** has been in fine form all winter, both in this country and Dubai, though he'll need luck in-running, with him typically held up nowadays.

In summary, cases can be made for plenty in what's likely to a very competitive renewal, but we'll take a chance that Ecomium is cherry ripe for his reappearance and can overcome his relative lack of experience to make a successful start to his four-year-old campaign.

INDEX TO HORSES

Horse	Pag No		
Accordion Etoile 5		Harchibald 4	Ned Kelly 7
Adamant Approach 18		Hardy Eustace 4	Never Compromise 10
African Dream 19		Heros Collonges 14	Ollie Magern 3, 14
Akilak 13		Horus 14	Oneway 6
Al Eile 11		Hurricane Alan 20	Our Vic 3
Alexander Banquet 18		Idaho d'Ox 14	Over The Creek 12
Ashley Brook 7		Inglis Drever 5, 14	Paddy For Paddy 10
Azertyuiop 6, 11		Intersky Falcon 5	Penzance 13
Back In Front 4		Iris's Gift 14	Pizarro 3
Ballysicyos 10		It Takes Time 14	Point Barrow 17
Baracouda 12		Itsmyboy 9	Pole Star 14
Be Be King 8		Jasmin d'Oudaries 18	Pom Flyer 17
Beef Or Salmon 3		Jim 18	Power Elite 11
Best Mate 1		Just Cassandra 10	Publican 17
Black Jack Ketchum 9		Justified 17	Queen Astrid 17
Brave Inca 4		Kadout 7, 14	Rasharrow 9
Caluki 20		Karanja 8, 12	Rathgar Beau 6
Celestial Gold 2, 11		Kareljan 13	Ravenswood 15
Cenkos 6		Kerstino Two 10	Refinement 8
Cerium 14		Kicking King 1	River City 7
Compton Bolter 19		Kingscliff 2	Robbie On Tour 16
Contraband 7		Kingston Venture 10	Rocket Ship 17
Corriolanus 20		Le Coudray 18	Rooster Booster 5
County Derry 10		Lennon 9	Royal Paradise 17
Crystal d'Ainay 12		Limerick Boy 12	Rule Supreme 3
David's Lad 18		Lord Atterbury 10	Schuh Shine 16
De Soto 8		Lord of The Turf 10	Self Defense 5
Distant Prospect 15		Lunar Crystal 14	Sir OJ 16
Distant Thunder 12		Mac's Joy 4	Sixo 12
Dunfolds Duke 9		Macs Flamingo 17	Sleeping Night 10
Earthmover 10		Made In Japan 7	Stance 14
Eccentric 19		Mansony 18	Strong Flow 2, 11
Ecomium 19		Maralan 17	Supreme Prince 14
Essex 5, 11		Marcel 14	Tahtheeb 19
Etandard Indien 13		Marcus du Berlais 18	Takagi 18
Faasel 13, 15		Mariah Rollins 7	The Mick Weston 9
Farmer Jack 11		Medison 14	There Is No Doubt 9
Firth of Forth 8		Mendo 9	Therealbandit 2
Fondmort 15		Mephisto 13	Tiutchev 3
Forest Gunner 13		Missed That 8	Torduff Express 10
Free Gift 10		Mister McGoldrick 6	Ulaan Baatar 7
French Accordion 17		Mister Quasimodo 9	War of Attrition 7
Glasker Mill 9		Monty's Pass 18	Washington Lad 17
Gold Medallist 14		Moscow Flyer 6	Watson Lake 7
Grand Passion 19		Mrs Be 10	Well Chief 6, 11
Grey Abbey 3		My Way de Solzen 14	Westender 5
		My Will 7	