

GRAND NATIONAL PREVIEW

So, Timbera, Rince Ri and Swansea Bay will miss the race, Carberry is going to ride Joss Naylor, McCoy has chosen Jurancon ahead of Akarus (provided the ground doesn't turn testing) and the build up to the National becomes increasingly feverish as the weekend approaches. With the weather apparently set fair for most the week and the Aintree executive refusing to rule out the possibility of watering to ensure 'the ground rides no faster than good', it seems unlikely that conditions will be testing come Saturday. If truth be told, that actually makes the job of sorting out the winner trickier than if it was a slog through the mud. Admittedly, only a couple finished the last time the ground was bad, but those kind of conditions really do occur once in a blue moon and, as a rule, it's often a relatively straightforward task to rule plenty out when conditions place the emphasis firmly on stamina. That's not going to be the case this weekend, however, and for all ability to see out the entire four and a half miles will be essential as usual, the real plodders amongst the field could well find themselves getting too far behind to ever have a hope of getting competitive.

At the time of writing, **Hedgehunter** and **Clan Royal** are vying for favouritism. The former has plenty of the qualities one associates with a horse likely to run well in the National apart from maybe one. Courage. Admittedly, it's impossible to crab his latest effort, when he made virtually all and jumped impeccably to win the Thyestes Chase at Gowran Park by eight lengths from I'vehadit, but on several occasions in the past he's found less than seemed likely off the bridle. One such instance occurred in the Welsh National at Chepstow over Christmas when Hedgehunter got there apparently full of running early in the straight only to falter off the bridle, in the end finishing third behind Bindaree only because others failed to complete. It could be that he benefited from the change in tactics at Gowran, but dominating the National from start to finish is a different kettle of fish altogether and, combined with that doubt as to how much he'll find under pressure, Hedgehunter is passed over at the odds. Also, he doesn't have any experience of the Aintree fences, but the same can't be said about Clan Royal. Jonjo O'Neill's nine-year-old has run twice over the National fences and won both times, landing the Topham last year and the Becher Chase on his reappearance this season. In the Becher (over 27f), he displayed more stamina than previously in denying **Amberleigh House** by a short head, rallying really gamely to lead again near the line, and he promises to stay further still. The fact he hasn't run since is hardly a worry given the facilities at Jackdaws Castle are second to none for readying horses, and Clan Royal has already proved himself one of those horses whose form is better at Aintree than anywhere else. Amberleigh House is another. Ballotted out of the 2002 renewal and third last year, that short-head defeat in the Becher (a race he'd won and finished second in on both previous renewals) represents his best form this time around and a never-dangerous fifth behind Grey Abbey at Doncaster last time out indicated he'll probably be in good heart again on Saturday. He makes little appeal from a handicapping point of view, however. Similar comments apply to the 2003 winner **Monty's Pass**. Admittedly, it's probably best not to read too much into the fact that he's made no impact whatsoever in four starts so far this season—three of those runs have been over hurdles and he didn't fare too badly over a totally inadequate two miles on his most recent one—but he'll be racing from a 14lb higher mark on Saturday than when defeating Supreme Glory by a dozen lengths last year, and the chances are that form doesn't amount to as much as first impressions might suggest. After all, the vast majority of the fancied runners in last year's renewal failed to get round, and it's a little hard to believe that it will be a similar story this weekend as well.

As usual, Martin Pipe has a multiple entry as he bids to win his second National (Miinnehoma in '94 was the first). Shortest in the betting is **Jurancon II**, who's improved into a smart chaser after just seven outings over fences. This season he's won a couple of valuable staying handicaps, the Summer National



Bindaree (near-side) and Davids Lad (far side) take a fence in unison in the 2002 Grand National

at Uttoxeter and Red Square Vodka Gold Cup at Haydock. He was impressive at Haydock, jumping soundly with the front-running **Artic Jack** and mastering that rival towards the end of the back straight, coming home with fifteen lengths to spare over **Bear On Board**. Jurancon II stays extremely well yet isn't short of pace, is just as effective on firmish going as he is when the mud is flying and, aged seven, is less exposed than just about anything else in the field. McCoy is set to take over from the 5-lb claimer Joey Elliott and there's no reason why he shouldn't be involved in the business end of the race provided he has luck on his side. Artic Jack went into many people's notebooks for Aintree after winning a couple of handicaps at Haydock this season, impressing with his jumping on both occasions, but he's shot up the weights as a result and there's a suspicion that he's best when dominating in small-field affairs. Bear On Board is another who's improved this season, winning three times, and he's proved himself one of the stoutest stayers in training, too. However, he was comprehensively turned over by Jurancon II at Haydock and, whilst he clearly acts on firmish ground, there's a suspicion he's ideally suited by more testing conditions.

Nigel Twiston-Davies is on course for his best ever season in terms of winners and looks to have a couple of really good candidates for Saturday in the shape of **Shardam** and the 2002 winner **Bindaree**. Shardam isn't yet proven over extreme distances but he's got plenty going for him otherwise. He's reliable, jumps soundly and put up a career-best effort when chasing home Fork Lightning in the National Hunt Handicap at Cheltenham last time out. That form makes him one of the better handicapped runners in the National and his claims are difficult to ignore. A similar comment applies to Bindaree, amazingly still only ten years old despite having been around for what seems like an age. He's back to his very best this season, winning the Welsh National in December and has been freshened up for Aintree by resting since early-January. Bindaree's Chepstow form looks even better in the light of Sir Rembrandt's cracking effort in the Gold Cup and, though he did come down in the Becher Chase on his reappearance, Bindaree's jumping is usually sound these days. He was sixth last year when not in the best of form (also enjoyed no luck in running) and, provided Carl Llewellyn can keep the leaders in his sights, Bindaree will probably be finishing stronger than most from the third last.

Apart from Clan Royal, Jonjo O'Neill is also set to be represented by **Joss Naylor**. A good novice last season when successful on three of his four outings, he's been restricted to just one start this time around, finishing a highly creditable second to Strong Flow in the Hennessy back in November. That run proved he doesn't need the mud to show his form and also that he's capable of giving of his best without the benefit of a recent run. In other words, the likely good going at the weekend isn't the worry it might have been last year. The booking of Paul Carberry is a positive towards his chance as, although he's failed to complete on Ad Hoc in the last two years, Carberry is generally regarded as one of the best around when it comes to negotiating the Aintree fences. So too is Tony Dobbin, who's booked to ride Gunner Welburn on Saturday. **Gunner Welburn** was fourth last year but did seem to be found wanting for stamina at the business end and, even though conditions this year will probably place the emphasis slightly less on staying power, it seems likely that it will be a similar story with him again.

With First Gold set to run in the Martell Chase, the weights are set to be headed by **Le Coudray**. He's progressed into a top-class chaser this season, chasing home Best Mate and Florida Pearl in Grade 1 events at Leopardstown on his last two starts. Strictly from a handicapping point of view it's possible to make a good case out for him despite his welter burden but, although now aged ten, he's very little experience of large-field affairs (never run in a handicap before) and his stamina over extreme distances has never been tested, either. Lack of stamina isn't a worry for **What's Up Boys**, a gallant second to Bindaree in the 2002 renewal but seen out only twice since due to injury. He was faced with an inadequate test of stamina when fourth at Wincanton on his return in February but, whilst likely to be sharper for that effort and more at home back over a marathon trip, it's up in the air as to how much ability he actually retains. One who's proven as being in good recent form is **Southern Star**, now the mount of Joe Tizzard after Jim Cullotty chose to ride the unfortunate Timbera. Southern Star should, in theory, be at home in the Grand National given that he possesses bottomless stamina, jumps soundly and also possesses a touch of class. There's certainly nothing wrong with the form of his latest win, a three-and-a-half length defeat of Jurancon II in an extremely valuable handicap at Warwick in January, but he had similar claims coming into the race last year and didn't appear to take to it, ridden in rear as early as the ninth before completing a tailed-off last of fourteen finishers.

One who didn't get a chance to show what he could do last year was **Dauids Lad**, controversially banned from taking part after catching the eye of the stewards on his previous outing. Successful in the Irish Grand National in 2001/2 and without a win since that season, Davids Lad has undoubtedly been trained with Aintree in mind this time around and, if experience is anything to go by, his trainer Tony Martin will have him ready to give of his best on Saturday. Davids Lad's one previous appearance in the National resulted in a failure to complete, but that doesn't tell the whole story as he was still close up full of running when he fell four out in the 2002 renewal. He's been considerably handled on most outings this season and yet to race beyond two-and-three-quarter miles, either, but it's reasonable to assume we'll see a different Davids Lad at the weekend.

There are bound to be punters attracted to **Maximise** on account of him being a recent winner at the Festival who's available to back at 40/1 and upwards. However, he hasn't covered himself in glory in two previous attempts over the National fences, seeming to resent the whole experience in the Becher Chase earlier in the season. His stable-companions **Akarus** and **Iznogoud** make more appeal, though there are stamina doubts about the latter whilst Akarus seems to reserve his best for testing conditions and is unlikely to get them at the weekend. Richard Guest, successful on Red Marauder in 2001, is set to be represented by **Red Striker** and **Tyneandthyneagain**, though he's been denied the chance to take the mount on the former due to a new Jockey Club ruling which prevents trainers riding against another of their own horses. Larry McGrath now rides Red Striker, who hasn't run since unseating in the 2003 renewal, whilst Henry Oliver has the unenviable task of trying to negotiate the course on the error-prone Tyneandthyneagain.



*Iznogoud, seen here in action at Kempton, is an improved jumper this season
but has he got the stamina for the National?*

Of those at big odds, it's possible to make a case of sorts out for **Ardent Scout** to figure prominently, though his dismal effort in the Eider last time out would have to be overlooked, whilst the Edward O'Grady-trained **Takagi** bounced back to form when blinkered and making all in a Grade 3 event at Fairyhouse (from **Alexander Banquet**) on his most recent outing but will find this a whole lot tougher. To conclude, in a field of forty it seems reasonable to take three against the rest, and that trio is, in order of preference, Bindaree, Jurancon II and Davids Lad.

AINTREE HURDLE PREVIEW

With Dessie Hughes preferring to keep Hardy Eustace at home for the Punchestown Festival, the Martell Hurdle has lost some appeal with **Rooster Booster** now unable to try and exact revenge for his defeat at Cheltenham. On the face of it, Rooster Booster shouldn't have much difficulty going one better than in the Champion Hurdle with Hardy Eustace out of the way, but it's unlikely to be so simple as that. Firstly, the lack of an obvious front runner suggests he's unlikely to get the race run to bring out the very best in him and, secondly, he managed to find one to beat him last year after running away with the Champion on his previous outing. Everyone knows and accepts that a strong gallop is essential for Rooster Booster to be seen at his very best, and that's probably why Hardy Eustace was able to pull clear again on the run-in at Cheltenham—Rooster Booster had to make ground running down the hill whilst the pace was quickening so, although it seemed effortless, the chances are that he was having to expend vital energy and couldn't sustain his effort when it mattered as a result. The best performance this season by Rooster Booster, and indeed by any hurdler, remains his narrow defeat by Geos in the Tote Gold Trophy at Newbury, but that was run at a furious gallop throughout and it seems unlikely that a similar scenario will unfold on Saturday.

Intersky Falcon inadvertently aided Rooster Booster in the 2003 Champion by forcing such a strong pace, but he's since shown that he doesn't need to make the running to show his form, beaten nine lengths in the latest renewal having been patiently ridden. A change of tactics first paid dividends at Kempton on Boxing Day when Intersky Falcon took a second successive Christmas Hurdle by defeating both Rooster Booster and Sporazene. On his only previous visit to Aintree, Intersky Falcon routed a good field of handicappers by fifteen lengths and there's little doubt such a flat track should bring out the best in him. Whether he'll be as effective over two and a half miles, however, is another question. Admittedly, he doesn't take such a strong hold as used to be the case, but there's still got to be a strong chance that his turn of foot will be blunted over a longer distance.

Rhinestone Cowboy was rather surprisingly asked to take in the Coral Hurdle rather than the Champion at the Festival and, in failing by just over two lengths to give more than a stone to the winner

Rhinestone Cowboy (third right) chases home Monkerhostin and Court Shareef under top weight in the Coral Cup



(Monkerhostin) and nearly two stone to the second, he put up an effort in terms of form which was on a par with that of Hardy Eustace in the Champion itself. Rhinestone Cowboy has always given the impression that he'd be suited by further than two miles and may well have won that race with professional handling, J. P. Magnier delaying his effort longer than ideal after his mount had still seemed to be full of running into the straight. He won't be able to claim this weekend, which is hardly a help, but the field won't be so large as at Cheltenham and it wouldn't be a surprise if he's under instructions not to hold on to him as long this time.

Foreman's victory in the AIG Europe Champion Hurdle at Leopardstown now looks much better form than it did at the time following his and Fota Island's respective runs in the Champion. Foreman's fourth in that race marked a career-best effort and, although he's still an entire and likely to be sent to stud some time soon, he could once again be overlooked here over a trip that should suit. **Sporazene** is another unlikely to be plying his trade over hurdles next winter, as being a fine, big sort and trained by Paul Nicholls, his future looks set to be over the larger obstacles. He also recorded a career-best effort at Cheltenham, driven out up the hill to hang on in the County Hurdle, but a straight reproduction of that form is unlikely to be good enough back up in grade. **Quazar** has been one of the toughest horses on the jumps scene over the past few seasons and has shown his liking for this course in two previous visits. He excelled himself when finishing fourth in this race last year and had taken a Grade 2 novices' hurdle at this meeting in 2002. He's thrown in the odd poor effort this season but it still wouldn't be surprising if he squeezed into a place at long odds.

Another likely runner is **Westender**, who has run with credit in the Champion Hurdle for the last two years but who isn't certain to benefit from the step up to two and a half miles and, rather like Rooster Booster, is probably best with an end-to-end gallop.

In summary, it looks as though Rhinestone Cowboy could finally land the big prize that his talent deserves. Admittedly, professional handling would increase confidence, but J P Magnier didn't do a lot wrong in small fields earlier in the season and, provided he doesn't ride him to quicken ahead after the last, Rhinestone Cowboy's ability coupled with his proven staying power at the trip will make him hard to beat.

AINTREE CHAMPION BUMPER

Despite the grand title Aintree's bumper isn't usually so strong a race as the Champion Bumper at Cheltenham, though finding the winner has sometimes proved more of a problem with Quadco at 33/1 and Classic Native last year at 25/1 among the recent winners. The other four to succeed in the last six runnings have started at much shorter odds, all four sent off at 7/2 or shorter despite an average field size of near eighteen. Twenty-seven were entered at the five-day stage and, on paper, their form is in general some way short of the standard normally required. There are potential improvers entered, notably **Manners**, one of four Jonjo O'Neill entries. He was himself prominent in the ante-post market for Cheltenham after winning very easily at Haydock on his debut and is sure to be among the favourites if taking his chance on Saturday. He's undeniably promising but beat little and is likely to represent poor value. The O'Neill yard have another interesting contender in **Thyne For Intersky**, whose form in winning at Market Rasen and Carlisle in the autumn stands much closer inspection: he could start a bigger price than he should if the focus is on Manners.

In contrast to the Champion Bumper, this isn't a great race for Irish stables, and there are just three entries from Ireland this year, all mares and all trained by Willie Mullins. His team at Cheltenham didn't really come up to expectations and, although Total Enjoyment and Refinement led home a distaff one-two that day, his threesome here have their work cut out to make an impact judged on balance of form. Just two of the Cheltenham field are entered at Aintree, **Lord Gale** and **Brassie** who finished out of the first ten. Brassie, who split Demarco and River Trapper under a penalty at Ludlow on his previous start, is the more interesting of the pair, with conditions likely to suit him better than Lord Gale.

Another two with solid chances on form are recent wide-margin winners **Flying Falcon** and **Rebel Rhythm**. Flying Falcon has had four runs, winning the last twice and putting up a smart effort at Hereford last time. The key to his progress seems to be less emphasis on stamina (the Hereford race was over a mile and three quarters) and he may just be vulnerable if taken on for the lead and forcing too strong a pace. The Flat-bred Rebel Rhythm didn't make his debut until the Monday after Cheltenham but looked an exciting prospect in winning at Wetherby. The race he won didn't look to have a lot of strength in depth to it and this could come a bit quick, but he still makes more appeal than most in the likely line-up.

A couple who could profit from the increased mares allowance here are **Candello** and **Golden Odyssey**. Candello looked a decent prospect when landing the odds in a mares race at Ludlow on her debut. The form is nothing out of the ordinary but she looked sure to improve and provided her stable, that of Nicky Henderson, shows signs of well-being after a recent slump she's worth considering. Golden Odyssey has the additional benefit of being a four-year-old and has every chance on form, having gained her second success from three starts at Market Rasen just last Sunday. Provided she's over that she must be a leading contender. Four-year-olds have a decent record in this race and a couple of the others of that age are worth a second look. **Young Scotton** has won both his starts and, though he needs to improve, there's a good chance the race will be run to suit him. **Historic Place** wouldn't be good enough on the form he showed to win at Ascot last time but that was under testing conditions and his earlier efforts over shorter on better ground in junior bumpers are much more encouraging—he won't need to improve much on those to take a hand. What Ascot did demonstrate was his battling qualities which are likely to be an asset here.

This looks an open race on paper and clearly the relative odds will determine which of those mentioned as possibles are the best value on the day. Those with the best chance on form are Flying Falcon and Golden Odyssey, with slight preference for the latter. Brassie and Thyne For Intersky seem the most likely to start at bigger odds than they are entitled to, but the least exposed horse with a decent form chance is Rebel Rhythm.

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL REVIEW

When quizzed by journalists about the seemingly interminable length of modern-day general election campaigns, Alastair Campbell was quoted as saying that the successful re-election campaign of 2001 had begun the day after Labour's landslide return to power in May 1997. The Cheltenham Festival is becoming victim to a similar level of seemingly endless media hype. No sooner has one Festival been completed than thoughts seem to turn towards the next. It is a testament to the wonder of the event that, despite the crass nature of the build-up, it rarely succumbs to a sense of anti-climax.

The 2004 Festival got off to a rousing start, with what turned out to be the closest finish of the entire week. The Letheby & Christopher Supreme Novices' Hurdle was fought out by two Irish-trained horses, with Colm Murphy's **Brave Inca** just getting the better of the aptly-named **War of Attrition** after a titanic duel from two out, in doing so providing the Irish with their fifth win from the last six renewals of the meeting's opener. In terms of form, it would be wrong to suggest that either achieved anything special in terms of what it normally takes to win this race, but both look to have a really good future when the time comes to go over fences. The beaten jockey, Conor O'Dwyer, didn't have long to wait for compensation, as last year's Royal & SunAlliance Hurdle winner **Hardy Eustace** landed the Champion Hurdle at 33/1 in tremendously game fashion. Reigning Champion **Rooster Booster** had made smooth progress from the rear and looked set for a repeat success when seemingly travelling much the stronger off the home turn. However, the front-running Hardy Eustace, who'd been sharpened up by first-time blinkers, found plenty for pressure and quickly proved too strong for the grey up the hill, scoring by five lengths in the end.

Whilst the latest Champion gave further proof that the current crop of two-mile hurdlers are a good deal inferior to those great names of yesteryear such as Night Nurse, Monksfield and Sea Pigeon, it bears repeating that the staying division is enjoying something of a golden era. For the third year running it could be argued that The Stayers' Hurdle was the best-quality race over the three days, with the latest renewal developing into a re-match between the 2003 first and second, **Baracouda** and **Iris's Gift**. However, any sense of *deja vu* (enhanced by the fact that front-running **Solerina** sported practically identical silks to last year's trail-blazer, stablemate Limestone Lad) was quickly dispersed as Jonjo O'Neill's grey proved the stronger this time around, inflicting only the second defeat on Baracouda in his last sixteen starts. A combination of Iris's Gift being one year stronger and coming into the race as a relatively fresh horse (connections had been restricted to just one previous outing this season as opposed to five in 2002/3) proved enough to turn the tables on the popular French champion. Iris's Gift's next assignment is reported to be a trip to Punchestown but, whatever happens there, connections will once again be faced with the temptation to go chasing with him next year—a game for which he looks tailor-made.

By contrast, the German-bred **Well Chief** isn't such an obvious chasing type on looks but has made an excellent start over fences and took a sub-standard renewal of the Arkle Chase, becoming the third winner for his connections from the last seven runnings of this race. Having only his second outing over fences, Martin Pipe's five-year-old scored in the style of a horse who is improving fast in this sphere, although he will need to continue to do so if he is going to compete at the very highest level next year. The runner-up, **Kicking King**, whilst not possessing the basic speed of the winner, proved what a prospect he will be when he finally gets the chance to step up in trip. Time may show that Kicking King did exceptionally well to be placed in an Arkle and it wouldn't be a surprise if this cracking type achieves top rank in staying chases in the not too distant future. Indeed, recent Gold Cup runner-ups, Commanche



Azertyuiop in full flight on his way to winning the Champion Chase

Court and Truckers Tavern, are just two examples of horses who contested the Arkle before going on to show significantly better form over further.

Thisthatandtother's uncharacteristic second-fence fall in the Arkle summed up a frustrating opening day for Paul Nicholls and Ruby Walsh, who also endured high-profile flops with the well-fancied pair Albuhera and Rigmorole. As a result, the duo had extra reason to celebrate when stable star **Azertyuiop** got them on the scoresheet in the Queen Mother Champion Chase. Unfortunately, this race proved to be an anticlimax for racegoers and the millions watching at home on television, as they were denied what was widely expected to be the big head-to-head confrontation of the week when Azertyuiop's market rival, the reigning champion **Moscow Flyer**, crashed out at the final open ditch. The score now reads one-all between the pair and, whilst it's impossible to say whether Moscow Flyer was travelling like a winner or not, it seems safe to assume that Azertyuiop would have offered sterner opposition than on their previous meeting at Sandown back in December. Meanwhile, the winner's stable-companion **Venn Ottery** confirmed his status as the most improved horse in training by travelling strongly under restraint until weakening markedly before the last, finishing fifth in the end. The nine-year-old was the subject of a public falling-out between trainer and owner over riding plans during Cheltenham week, leading to him mistakenly being declared without a tongue strap for the Champion Chase, but there could yet be further improvement in him provided he remains under Nicholls' care.

A refreshing aspect of 2003/4 has been the sight of top-class jumpers for once being campaigned in handicaps, evoking memories of great weight-carrying performances by famous names from previous eras. Baracouda and Iris's Gift both warmed up for the Stayers in handicap company (claiming a win and close second respectively), whilst Azertyuiop and Rooster Booster put up terrific performances when going down narrowly in the Victor Chandler Chase and Tote Gold Trophy

respectively conceding lumps of weight all round. The Jonjo O'Neill-trained **Rhinestone Cowboy** can now be added to that list after his bold show in the Coral Cup, the race connections somewhat surprisingly opted for instead of another tilt at the Champion Hurdle. The gelding travelled strongly throughout but, unfortunately, his amateur rider appeared to allow the front two, eventual winner **Monkerhostin** and 200/1-shot **Court Shareef**, to get first run on him turning in before finally asking his mount for an effort after the last. Rhinestone Cowboy's third place nevertheless represents top-class form and it's surely only a matter of time before he claims a major prize—he has now been placed in three consecutive Cheltenham Festivals.

In recent seasons we have become accustomed to the sight of precocious French-bred imports playing prominent roles in the leading novice chase events. Surprisingly, this year's renewal of the Royal & SunAlliance Chase consisted entirely of Irish-breds, and, even more against the trend, the finish was fought out by a pair of eight-year-olds. Many of the leading contenders were found out by jumping errors. **Mossy Green** and **Calling Brave** were still travelling well when departing in the latter stages, while **Pizarro** was staying on strongly when brought down at the second last. Meanwhile, the favourite **Our Vic** jumped far from fluently and also failed to settle, exertions which clearly took their toll up the famous Cheltenham hill. As a result, plenty of judges will be keen to crab the performance of the winner, **Rule Supreme**, especially as the runner-up, the admirably consistent **Royal Emperor**, made a serious error four out. To compound matters, Royal Emperor's jockey dropped his whip on the run to the next and, as the grey is the type to keep pulling out more for a few cracks, Sue Smith's charge can probably be classed an unlucky loser.

Of all the novice events at the Festival, the latest renewal of the Royal & SunAlliance Hurdle promises to be the race filled with the most potential stars, as has generally been the case in recent years. **Fundamentalist**, an imposing son of Supreme Leader, appeared as not streetwise enough to cope in a tight battle with the smart Royal Rosa when the duo met at Haydock recently, but had obviously learned enough from that to outpoint another one of Graham Wylie's expensive purchases in **Inglis Drever** here. It almost goes without saying that Fundamentalist is a cracking chasing prospect for next season, having already won three Irish point-to-points, particularly as he still has a tendency to race green (his last-flight mistake was caused by looking around). Hot favourite Inglis Drever ran respectably but didn't seem to be quite himself, hanging off the bridle and never racing with his usual zest, and it transpired after the race that he'd ripped off an off-fore shoe. Meanwhile, **Grey Report**, **Comply or Die** and **Tighten Your Belt** weren't beaten all that far and appeal as good prospects who will win plenty more races, particularly when sent chasing.

Once again the Champion Bumper went to an Irish-trained runner, this time to Thomas Cooper's **Total Enjoyment**, who became the first mare to win the event since Mucklemeg in 1994. Coincidentally, both of those winning mares were followed home by mares, in this case Jonjo O'Neill's **Refinement** filling the runner-up spot. Neither the winner nor the runner-up are particularly scopey individuals, and if there is to be a future star coming from the race it could be third-placed **Master Albert**, the clear paddock pick beforehand, who ran a race full of promise, keeping on well to be nearest at the finish whilst looking in need of stronger handling. Incidentally, Master Albert's dam, Mullaun, is a half-sister to the aforementioned Mucklemeg.

The third day of the meeting dawned with **Best Mate** standing at the gates of greatness. To pass through them, he would be required to achieve what no horse had done since the legendary Arkle in the mid-sixties, and win a third successive Cheltenham Gold Cup. He was not to be found wanting and, although in simple terms this success was far less impressive than his previous two, it showed that Best Mate has what it takes to succeed in a battle. Despite the absences of Kingscliff, Florida Pearl and the ill-fated Jair du Cochet, Best Mate was pushed all the way this year and didn't have much to spare in the end over a staying-on **Sir Rembrandt**, who typically wasn't helped by a couple of jumping errors at vital stages. Jim Cullotly has rightly been praised for his handling of Best Mate over the years, but there's



totesport Cheltenham Gold Cup — Best Mate (second left) is in the clear and on his way to history

little doubt that the jockey of the race was Paul Carberry on **Harbour Pilot**, who jumped far more fluently than usual under a dashing ride up with the pace and managed to keep Best Mate hemmed in on the inner after three out in a fine tactical move. Despite those efforts, the pair had to settle for third place for the second year running. Best Mate's historic win attracted blanket media coverage both before and after the race, though whether he'll be taken to the public's heart as Desert Orchid was, for example, remains a doubt. Nostalgia plays tricks on the memory, but it feels like 'Dessie' was asked to hump huge weights around the likes of Kempton, Ascot and Sandown every couple of weeks, sometimes over two miles, sometimes over three-and-a-half. By contrast, Best Mate has very light campaigns, with little change predicted for 2004/5, so doesn't command the same kind of affection as a result. This ought not colour our picture of his racing performances, however. An exceptional jumper of fences, he has proved himself to clearly be the best of his era and, with the exception of Iris's Gift, there isn't much sign of his dominance coming to an end just yet.

At the 1995 Festival, the admirable hurdler Pragada failed by a short-head to claim a race that he had been successful in seven years previously. **Earthmover** went one better when taking the latest renewal of the Foxhunter Chase six years after he had originally done so. Earthmover's win initiated a treble on the day for trainer Paul Nicholls, with Ruby Walsh also banishing those opening day blues by partnering **St Pirran** and **Sporazene** for the final two legs, wins which helped them claim the respective trainer's and jockey's awards at the meeting. Sporazene is reportedly due for a crack at the Scottish Champoin Hurdle before switching to fences next season and, given his stable's particularly fine record with chasers, he could well be back at Prestbury Park next March as a leading contender for the Arkle.

HANDICAPPERS' CORNER

● **Blue Americo** (Timeform Rating h116) is progressing well in his first season over hurdles and it shouldn't be long before he's placed to advantage again, either in handicap company or under a penalty against fellow novices. A smooth winner of a competitive novice in soft going at Taunton in February, he showed himself at least as effective on good to firm ground when chasing home the very well-handicapped Hot Shots at Wincanton five weeks later. The poor display of the winner in the Imperial Cup shouldn't be taken as detracting from Blue Americo's performance, as Hot Shots probably found that race coming too quickly and Blue Americo still looks well treated having been raised just 2 lb for his effort. The duo pulled well clear of third-placed Forever Dream at Wincanton, that horse boosting the form with a victory at the same track next time. Blue Americo is a useful-looking sort who goes freely and is likely to prove best kept around the minimum trip for the time being. *P. F. Nicholls*

● **Early Edition** (Timeform Rating h94+, c94p) has followed in the footsteps of his higher-profile stablemate Venn Ottery by moving from the small yard of owner Oliver Carter to join Paul Nicholls, and he also looks a multiple winner waiting to happen. A winner of a novice hurdle at Newton Abbot back in July, Early Edition has suffered from serious jumping problems over the larger obstacles but gave the impression he's going to get better with experience in that department when a well-backed winner at Wincanton on his first outing since changing stables. Ridden by Ruby Walsh for the first time, Early Edition would have won easily but for blundering both three out and two out having travelled like a horse possessing considerably more ability than a new handicap mark of just 92 would suggest. Unlikely to be raised much, having beaten Even More by just a neck, it will come as a real shock if he doesn't prove up to winning again, though he still has a lot to prove to justify his entry in the Betfred Gold Cup Chase at Sandown later this month, a race in which his dam Ottery News was placed in 1981 and 1982. *P. F. Nicholls*

● **Polyphon** (Timeform Rating h74+, C87+) will make considerable appeal in his forthcoming engagements in handicap chases, as he's unexposed and appeals as the type to do better over fences. A winning pointer who has shown promise over hurdles, Polyphon was unfortunate not to make a winning debut in handicap company at Ayr last time in the race won by Superior Weapon (close second since), looking sure to prevail when cruising into the lead at the third last before his jumping went to pieces in the closing stages. Polyphon has already shown himself fully effective at two and a half miles, but the way he travelled at Ayr suggests that the minimum trip may well suit him best of all. *P. Monteith*

● **Supreme Serenade** (Timeform Rating h111) clearly has her quirks and is always going to need riding with plenty of patience, but is nonetheless a mare with a great deal of ability who should have little trouble defying a mark of 113 in ordinary handicap company when things drop right for her. A full sister to the same connections' useful hurdler/chaser Supreme Prince, Supreme Serenade has yet to finish out of the first three in six career runs, winning a bumper at Exeter on her debut and a novice hurdle at Folkestone in December. Her best performances over hurdles however have come in defeat, chasing home Copsale Lad and the useful Alexanderthegreat at Exeter before her handicap debut at Newbury, a race in which she displayed both her ability and temperament. Dropped out travelling strongly in a well-contested mares event, she did well to recover from being hampered at the seventh and quickened impressively into a share of the lead two out only to hang left off the bridle and fail to go through with her effort. Exaggerated waiting tactics and a well-run race should prove a winning combination. *P. J. Hobbs*

● **Tyndarius** (Timeform Rating c114) proved the only blot on the horses to oppose section of this feature this season when winning at Doncaster in December and recent events suggest he may be ready

to strike again, so we have turned full circle and included him as one to follow in his next couple of races. The hardy veteran was most unfortunate not to win at Ayr on his penultimate outing, undone by a combination of being badly hampered by the faller at the fourteenth and a canny ride by Tony Dobbin on the winner Just In Debt. Tyndarius' next port of call was the Borders National over four miles at Kelso and the marathon trip proved beyond him, but not before he had shown himself still very much in good form, fading in the closing stages, having made good headway to threaten the winner Topsy Mouse four out. Probably ideally suited by distances around three miles nowadays, Tyndarius could well be placed to advantage in ordinary company before the end of the season. *J. Hetherton*

Now for a look at some who are worth opposing:-

Cool Roxy is a tough, genuine and versatile sort but is going to be hard to place from a mark of 122, having won at Fakenham on his last couple of outings. He has gained all five wins at that track and will have to tackle better company from now on.

Edmo Heights would appear to have taken well to fences judged on a casual glance at his form, as he has been successful twice and third twice from five outings. However, the bare statistics hide the fact that the actual form he has achieved is considerably inferior to his hurdling form, yet he has been handed the same mark (124) that he has to tackle over timber. He is also not the most convincing of jumpers and will do well to win again even in novice company, now that he has a double penalty to bear.

Just Sal has been a long-standing poor performer over hurdles and it seems likely that the race she won by a wide margin at Hexham on her latest outing will prove weak form rather than Just Sal having improved significantly. Therefore, she looks likely to struggle having been raised 18 lb to a mark of 92.

Lorgnette has been in excellent form this season, but has risen 17 lb to a mark of 120 for her last two efforts and isn't going to prove easy to place now. There is a suspicion that the form of her latest Ascot win isn't all that strong, and she's a sparely-made sort who didn't really take to fences in four runs last season.

Merryvale Man very much had the run of the race from the front when opening his account over hurdles in novice company at Newcastle and will surely find winning off a mark of 110 beyond him, having been beaten from a rating 10 lb lower at Warwick on the second of his two tries in handicap company the time before.

Transit pulled off a major shock when overturning Venn Ottery at Market Rasen in early March, but that form shouldn't be taken at face value as the runner-up failed to get home on ground softer than ideal. Transit's jumping problems returned when turned out under a penalty at Sedgefield nine days later and none of his form (including over hurdles) suggests he will be up to defying a mark of 109.

REVIEW

Whilst this column's Cheltenham selections in the last issue sank without trace, there was much to celebrate for those who kept faith in those racing at a lowlier level, **Barton Nic** (11/10), **Noble Baron** (4/1) and **Just The Jobe** (10/1) getting their heads in front in recent weeks. Of those three, Barton Nic is unlikely to go up much for making a winning return to fences and will still look ahead of the handicapper next time. **Simply Supreme** has yet to run since highlighted two issues ago and is still one to be interested in if turned out in handicap company, as is **Towns Ender**.

VIEW FROM THE COURSE

– BY JAMIE LYNCH

Doncaster 25/03/04

Lochbuie 3 b.c. *Definite Article* – *Uncertain Affair* (Darshaan)

The stable of Geoff Wragg signalled that it was on schedule with Autumn Glory's impressive win in the Spring Mile on Friday, and on the previous day Lochbuie shaped as if there are handicaps to be won with him this season. He's a fine, big colt who looked to have done well over the winter and, in finishing fourth to Mutafanen in the ten-furlong handicap, he improved on the form he showed in two-year-old maidens while leaving the impression there's more to come as he gains experience, doing his best work late on under hands and heels. A half-brother to the useful two-mile winner Direct Bearing amongst others, he'll stay at least a mile and a half himself and is one to look out for. *G. Wragg*

Doncaster 26/03/04

Mission Man 3 b.c. *Revoque* – *Opopmil* (Pips Pride)

In the seven-furlong maiden on the second day of the Lincoln meeting, Zonus landed the odds in good style, but behind him in fourth was Mission Man, who shaped a good deal better than the bare result, and he should be able to win a similar event with this behind him. Richard Hannon's colt was taken to race alone against the far rail but was at least upsides the stand-side leaders for over five furlongs, and it was no surprise that he tired late on as he'd looked as if the run would put an edge on him. As a two-year-old, Mission Man showed fairly useful form to make the frame in a couple of above-average maidens, and his powerful physique suggests he could be even better this season. *R. Hannon*

Cape Royal 4 b.g. *Prince Sabo* – *Indigo* (Primo Dominie)

Indigo has had a successful time as a broodmare, producing smart sprinters such as Astonished and Bishops Court, and another of her offspring, Cape Royal, shaped with plenty of promise on his reappearance, leaving the impression he's going to be winning useful handicaps at five furlongs this season. He has the build of a sprinter and, looking well if not fully wound up after seven months off, he travelled strongly for a long way behind the leaders on the far side, but that group were behind those on the other side of the course and, once that was clear, Cape Royal's jockey wasn't at all hard on him. He's lightly raced and could still improve, but he's well enough handicapped to win races as it is, and he's going to prove best with the emphasis firmly on speed. *Mrs J. R. Ramsden*

Doncaster 27/03/04

Persian Rock 2 b.c. *Namid* – *Cairo Lady* (Persian Bold)

First-season sire Namid had an early winner with Next Time Around in the Brocklesby, and he won't have to wait long for another given Persian Rock's promise in the two-year-old maiden on Lincoln Day. He was fit enough but looked green in the preliminaries, fly-leaping his way to post, and he seemed in need of the experience in the race, too, outpaced at halfway before running on well at the finish to chase home the impressive Dario Gee Gee. He will be well suited by six furlongs in due course, but he's certainly good enough to win a race or two at the minimum in the coming weeks. *J. A. Osborne*

IRISH SPOTLIGHT

The focus of recent Irish action has obviously been on the Cheltenham Festival, with most of the big names in Irish jumping taking their chance. A return of four wins, with none on the final day, was in the end just slightly below expectations, with the eclipse of **Moscow Flyer** the chief disappointment. He'll be out to gain compensation over two and a half miles at Aintree on Friday, though overall the Irish team is nowhere near so strong as that sent over for Cheltenham, primarily due to the proximity of Aintree to the Irish Grand National meeting at Fairyhouse. As a result, this column is focusing on some of those that have been running in Ireland recently and could make an impact at either Fairyhouse or Punchestown.

One candidate for the Irish Grand National to catch the eye in recent weeks has been **Winning Dream**. He was stepping up considerably in trip when a good third to Timbera in last year's running and has clearly been trained with this year's race in mind. He didn't reappear until early-March when he finished an eye-catching fourth over hurdles behind Zum See in quite a competitive novice at Naas (also the race Monty's Pass had his Aintree prep in). He showed the benefit of that run back over fences at Navan last weekend and there must be a good chance he will step up on last year's effort on Easter Monday.

An interesting contender for the other big chase at Fairyhouse, the Power Gold Cup, the Grade 1 novice over two and a half miles, is an old friend of this column **Hi Cloy**. He ran his best race when a close third to Pizarro and Mossy Green in the Grade 1 Dr P J Moriarty at Leopardstown back at the start of February. The value of that form was being franked when calamity struck two out in the SunAlliance Chase at Cheltenham, Pizarro closing when brought down and Mossy Green still going well in the lead when falling. Since then Hi Cloy, who'd started to look slightly difficult to win with, has landed a couple of lesser prizes in some style, winning back at Leopardstown at the end of February and then a listed event at Limerick on St Patrick's Day when all eyes were on Cheltenham. Those will have done his confidence good and the Power Gold Cup looks the ideal race for him, in terms of distance and track.

Aside from Moscow Flyer, one of the main disappointments of Cheltenham from an Irish angle was the lack of impact the Willie Mullins' battalion made in the bumper. It had looked a strong team beforehand, but of the five that lined up, only one made the first ten, **Knocknabooly** finishing sixth. Mullins will be hoping for better in the Grade 1 Champion INH Flat at Punchestown and has a likely leading contender in **Green Peach**. He might well have been in the Cheltenham team had his intended debut outing not been scuppered by the weather. As a result, he made his first appearance too late to qualify for the trip over, but he looked a star of the future in landing the odds in a large-field maiden at Naas early in March. Given a confident ride, held up in rear, he made breathtaking progress past the field in the straight, coming from near last to lead a furlong out and win with plenty to spare. The form isn't easy to interpret, with eight of the first ten newcomers, but the runner-up had been a promising fourth on his debut and the other to have run had shown fairly useful form when runner-up on the second of two starts.

A novice hurdler to keep an eye on is **Ulaan Baatar**. Never mind the name or an obscure pedigree, this is a horse with a good future over jumps. He's already made a promising beginning, making up for lost time (he's already seven) by showing useful form in bumpers and getting off the mark over hurdles in ready fashion at Cork in March. Perhaps his most notable performance came when second to Sweet Kiln, conceding lumps of weight, at Naas in February. There are more races to be won with him this spring.

TRAINER FORM

Mercifully, the sharp sense of deflation that every year begins when the last horse has passed the post in the County hurdle lasts just a day (sorry, Fakenham), before a deep-rooted, primaeval tingling begins in the loins of racing fans everywhere. Yes, spring is in the air, the sap is rising and the Grand National meeting is almost upon us.

Indeed, the ever-growing jump-race bias of Sandown's April meeting combines with top-class action from the likes of Ayr and Punchestown to make April anything but an 'after-the-Lord Mayor's show' month for National Hunt fans.

As always, with profitable punting in mind, it pays to follow those yards in tip-top form of late. As one might expect from a trainer desperately attempting to capture his first trainers championship, **Paul Nicholls** has his string firing on all cylinders at the moment. In March, nearly 50% of the Ditcheat handlers' runners finished in the first three, with just over 30% of those being winners. After taking the award for top trainer at the Cheltenham Festival, Nicholls' team head north to Aintree in fine heart.

Gold Cup winning trainer **Henrietta Knight** is usually one to favour quality over quantity, but nine of her thirty-seven runners were winners in March and the Wantage handler is well worth following during the month ahead. The Minehead yard of **Philip Hobbs** also continue to quietly amass the winners. 43% of all Hobbs' runners reached at least the frame during March, a further 47% of those being winners. Traditionally, the yard is in especially good heart during the spring months and will be looking to add to their already outstanding Aintree record.

Nigel Twiston-Davies has enjoyed his best season for a long while. Of fifty-three runners sent out from his Naunton yard in March, twenty hit at least a place, eight of them winning. The handler has been quoted in the racing press as saying that his Bindaree is in the form of his life ahead of his bid for a second Grand National.

*Sporazene completes a treble for Paul Nicholls
on the final day at the Cheltenham Festival in the County Hurdle*





The Philip Hobbs-trained Made In Japan (left) puts up a much-improved effort to win the Triumph Hurdle

Sue Smith has been a trainer to have on your side for some time now, saddling four winners in three days at the beginning of March and ten during the whole month, whilst Royal Emperor's unlucky defeat in the Royal & SunAlliance Chase at Cheltenham was amongst numerous near-misses for the team.

Kinnersley trainer **John Spearing** sent out three winners from just six runners in the second week in March, and had two more winners later in the month. Another small yard in good form is Peter Monteith's. Half of his eighteen runners in March reached at least a place, with three of those being winners.

Meanwhile, the seven days following the Festival saw the Slad yard of **Tom George** in cracking form. During this period he saddled three winners and three placed horses from just nine runners.

A yard going through a purple patch under both codes is that of veteran handler **Mick Easterby**. Five winners and thirteen more in the frame at the end of March show his Sherriff Hutton yard to be in great heart.

One man who can give even 'Spittin' Mick' a few years' start is **Reg Hollinshead**, who has held a licence longer than any other current trainer. The sprightly octogenarian showed he was still no back number when he sent out a phenomenal 1,393/1 double from his Upper Longdon yard on Lincoln day in the shape of Royal Cavalier and his half-sister Goldeva. One hopes that this signals an upturn in fortunes for the ever-popular trainer who has been through a particularly barren spell during the last two years.

On the all-weather surfaces it could pay to have an eye for the ladies as both **Gay Kelleway** and **Brooke Sanders** have their horses in rude health at the minute.

READY FOR THE FLAT

Jumps racing rightly takes centre stage this weekend with The Grand National, but from next week the Flat-racers will be firmly back in the spotlight. Easter week is followed by the Craven Meeting at Newmarket and the Greenham Meeting at Newbury, both likely to throw up classic clues, and May sees the bandwagon move back to Newmarket for the Guineas before rolling on to York, Chester, Goodwood and Epsom. So which names are likely to be hitting the headlines over the next few months?

Well, if the first few months of the year are anything to go by, **Peter Chapple-Hyam** is likely to make an impact as he embarks on his second spell of training in Britain after a stint in Hong Kong. Some thought Chapple-Hyam, who made his name with the likes of Rodrigo de Triano, White Muzzle and Spectrum, would find it difficult to re-establish himself in the top grade, but the early signs are certainly positive. His first runner back in Britain was Toronto Heights, who found only Mount Vettore too good in a maiden at Wolverhampton, and since then Chapple-Hyam has had five winners from just seven runners. The latest of those was African Dream, whom Chapple-Hyam claimed for £20,000 after the son of Mark of Esteem had won a claimer at Lingfield in February for Paul Cole. On his first start for his new stable, African Dream showed a good deal of improvement to win a minor event at Kempton last Saturday by nine lengths. If Chapple-Hyam can bring out the same amount of progress in the rest of his string, he's in for an excellent season.

We're also confident that **Hughie Morrison** will have a year to remember. One of Britain's most promising young trainers, Morrison starts the season with a number of unexposed types in his care, and he looks all set to improve again on a set of statistics in 2003 that outranked those recorded the previous year in almost every respect. It doesn't matter whether Morrison is dealing with juvenile sprinters or staying chasers—every one of his horses is guaranteed to be campaigned with intelligence and precision. And he has a canny knack of rehabilitating horses with problems, too, perfectly exemplified by Alcazar, who suffered a broken pelvis and injured a tendon and was off for two and half years before Morrison produced him to win a rated stakes at Newmarket in 2001, then landed the Sagaro Stakes last year after missing the whole of 2002. Morrison had a Royal Ascot winner last year in Waverley, and there's likely to be an increasing number of high-profile winners sent out from his East Ilsley yard in the coming months.

Incidentally, Morrison is responsible for four of the fifty horses selected for Timeform's recently published *Horses To Follow*. In seven of the last eight years, the 'fifty' have shown a profit to level-stake support, and a tenner placed on all the runs of the 2003 team would have made over £700. Among this year's 'fifty' are **Alkaadhem**, who looked unlucky in the Lincoln at Doncaster on Saturday, finishing first on the far side, and **Zonus**, who looked a colt of considerable promise when taking the seven-furlong maiden on the same course the day before, giving Barry Hills a fourth consecutive success in the race. Alkaadhem ought to be winning pattern races by the second half of 2004, but would be a very interesting runner next time if kept to handicap company for a race like the Victoria Cup at Ascot, while Zonus looks a useful prospect and can progress sufficiently to make a mark in Group company himself.

Returning to the training ranks, other stables on the up include that of **John Best**, whose win prize money and number of wins were down slightly in 2003 on the previous year but whose career profile continues on an skyward curve. Like Morrison, Best is adept with all types of horses, and in the last month he has sent out the winner of the Grand Military Gold Cup over three miles at Sandown (Mercato) as well as scoring with his first two-year-old runner of the new Flat season (King After). With twelve



Namid (right) beats Superstar Leo by a length and a half in the 2000 Prix de l'Abbaye

winners to his name already this year (Flat and jumps combined), the affable Best looks set for a personal best in 2004.

Alkaadhem and Zonus weren't the only horses to catch the eye at Doncaster last week. While much of the post-race analysis of the Spring Mile on Friday revolved around the likely draw advantage in the following day's Lincoln, the performance of the highly impressive winner **Autumn Glory** was all but overlooked. Geoff Wragg's colt was having only his fourth outing in the Spring Mile, and, looking in excellent shape, put up a useful effort to beat St Petersburg by a length and a half. Autumn Glory's pedigree suggests further than a mile will suit him ideally, and on this showing he'll be up to winning in better company. His performance, and that of **Lochbuie** in the mile-and-a-quarter handicap at the same meeting (see *View From The Course*), suggest that Wragg's horses are in good health at the moment. The master of Abington Place had a relatively poor 2003, sending out only sixteen winners at a strike rate of just 10%. So far this year the stable has had three winners from just eight runners, and, with a number of unexposed three-year-olds likely to be reappearing over the next month or so, the yard could be about to experience a resurgence.

Finally, mention should be made of a couple of first-season sires who've already been among the winners. We'll start with Namid, who was trained by John Oxx and made into a high-class sprinter in 2000, winning his last four races including the Flying Five at Leopardstown and the Prix de l'Abbaye de Longchamp. His first runner in this country, Linda Stubbs's Next Time Around, appeared in the Brocklesby Stakes at Doncaster on Thursday, looked one of the better types beforehand, and landed some good bets to score by a neck from Bryan McMahon's Dance Night. Namid's other two runners so far have shaped with some promise, too, Docklands Dude too green to do himself justice in the seller at Doncaster on Friday and Jamie Osborne's Persian Blue rallying well to take second behind Dario Gee in the maiden on Lincoln Day. Dario Gee's sire Bold Fact, a full brother to the Nunthorpe winner So Factual, was a smart performer in his own right over six and seven furlongs for Henry Cecil, and he too has made a promising start. Dario Gee was Bold Fact's first runner, and his second one, Bold Marc, also showed plenty of ability on his debut, travelling strongly up with the pace in a maiden at Newcastle before fading into fourth behind Tara Tara.

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