

# *Cheltenham Festival Guide*

## *2020*

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## Introduction

Here we go again...or at least we hope so,

Barring a government ruling on the threat of coronavirus, we will all be gathered in the foot of the Cotswolds on Tuesday for another chapter in this life-long love affair.

Some fantastic racing in store, with a great mix of epic showdowns and potential champion coronations, all wrapped in the prospect of financial windfall !!

As ever, I am very self-aware that these last few weeks I will have been insufferable both in time spent watching racing, and endless discussions about the minutiae of handicapping. My incredible wife Tanya is unbelievably patient and even bears the disappointment of me discussing the Boodles for 2 hours without referring once to jewellery !! Any windfall will be hers (of course).

Hopefully this Guide will deliver some help – the 2019 edition was probably the best outcome in 16 years – but either way, here's hoping for a lucky – and healthy – week.

Please stay in touch by subscribing, following or liking my blog, Lap of The Odds ([www.lapoftheodds.com](http://www.lapoftheodds.com)), and watch for daily articles during festival week, where non-runners and weather may result in some changes to selections.

Happy punting

Dan

PS – Given the date of distribution: Happy Birthday Dad



Rufus my faithful form-hound uses charades to give us his nap....Might Bite

**Summary of Selections**

Here is a summary for those not wanting to wade through the waffle. Stakes are on a scale of 1 to 10.

Tuesday				
Race 1	Shishkin	6pts	WIN	5-2
Race 2	Fakir D'Oudaries	5pts	WIN	5-1
Race 3	Kildisart	6pts	WIN	10-1
	Big River	1pt	EW (5pl)	25-1
Race 4	Silver Streak	2pts	EW (3)	25-1
	Ballyandy	1pt	EW (3)	20-1
Race 5	Benie Des Dieux	6pts	WIN	4-5
Race 6	Imperial Aura	9pts	WIN	13-2
	Treble: Imperial Aura/Simply The			
	Betts/On The Slopes	1pt	EW (4)	c1000-1
Race 7	Carefully Selected	7pts	WIN	2-1
	Springfield Fox	1pt	EW (3)	14-1

Wednesday				
Race 1	Longhouse Poet	4pts	EW (3)	20-1
Race 2	Minella Indo	8pts	WIN	4-1
Race 3	Birchdale	7pts	WIN	10-1
	Canardier	3pts	WIN	12-1
Race 4	Altior	6pts	WIN	2-1
Race 5	Easysland	5pts	WIN	3-1
Race 6	Repetitio	6pts	WIN	14-1
	Oak Park if NR then Tronador	2pts	WIN	14-1/14-1
Race 7	Appreciate It	6pts	WIN	6-4
	Third Time Lucki	1pt	WIN	16-1

Thursday				
Race 1	Allaho if NR then Itchy Feet	5pts	WIN	3-1/9-2
Race 2	Relegate	6pts	WIN	7-1
	A Great View	1pt	EW (4)	25-1
Race 3	A Plus Tard	8pts	WIN	5-2
Race 4	Summerville Boy w/o Paisley Park	4pts	WIN	9-2
Race 5	Simply The Betts	8pts	WIN	9-1
	Deyrann De Carjac	2pts	WIN	16-1
Race 6	Ard Abhainn	4pts	EW (3)	20-1
Race 7	Singlefarmpayment	2pts	EW (5)	20-1
	Le Breuil	4pts	WIN	8-1

Friday				
Race 1	Solo	7pts	WIN	3-1
Race 2	Janidil	7pts	WIN	12-1
	Mohaayed	3pts	WIN	12-1
Race 3	Harry Senior	5pts	WIN	10-1
	Cobblers Way	2pts	WIN	14-1
Race 4	Santini	6pts	WIN	7-2
Race 5	Billaway	5pts	WIN	7-1
Race 6	On The Slopes	6pts	WIN	16-1
	Lisp	3pts	WIN	10-1
Race 7	Front View	8pts	WIN	8-1

*Disclaimer – “Horses can run slowly as well as fast”*

***TUES: Race 1 - The Supreme Novices Hurdle - 2 miles for all-aged novices,  
Selected Current Odds: 5/2 Shishkin, 7/2 Asterion Forlonge, 6 Abracadabras 8 Fiddlerontheroof***

If at first you don't succeed, it's probably the Supreme Novices Hurdle. The festival curtain raiser (tick that off your Cheltenham Guide cliché bingo card) starts with a full-throated punter roar of expectation and enthusiasm, but it can be devilishly difficult to end the race still in full voice.

History suggests the best place to start any Supreme study is a certain Mr Willie Mullins. The Co Carlow wizard has won this race in 4 of the last 7 runnings and his lead contender is usually as much study as most racegoers need. My good friend Michael, a Galway man, is one of Willie's leading statistical chroniclers and although he has left his research this year until the last moment, the one horse he had heard of (pronounce maybe not) is Asterion Forlonge.

The Mullins contender has come under the radar. His was not the early season stellar gallop gossip – indeed he was only scraping home in a Thurles bumper in November, and even once he started over hurdles in January at Naas he was faced with a more fancied Elliott runner. That proved no issue though as he stormed to a 10l win. He followed that up with a clear win upped to Grade 1 company at the Dublin racing festival. That seemed to surprise Willie who had been thinking longer trips but now had a Supreme contender in his ranks. That was heavily watered ground there but it's likely to be soft enough on opening day so he should be at home. If the race pans out for his strong galloping style then he is clearly going to be a tough nut to crack.

Watch your colours as the only horse more fancied than Asterion Forlonges is Shishkin, trained by Nicky Henderson but sporting the same colours of owner Mrs Donnelly. He is an almost complete opposite of the long striding Mullins horse having much more obvious speed. He was set to waltz home at Newbury until a late fall, but made easy amends there in superb fashion before an equally stunning Huntingdon win. Blessed with a high cruising speed he also has a potent turn of foot, and seems ideally equipped for this race. His trainer has had his share of disappointments in this event despite three wins on the CV, but he did win recently with Altior, and whilst it's clearly jumping the gun to put Shishkin in that class, he looks a real cut above the usual contender.

It is still feasible that wonder horse Envoi Allen could take up an entry here. Everything seems to point to a run in the Ballymore on Wednesday, but if he turned up here it would certainly shake up the market. He is unbeaten including the bumper here last year and clearly brings the best form to the party. I think he could be done for speed by Shishkin, but an entry here would probably be a function of very soft ground, which would blunt Shishkin and leave this at Envoi Allen's mercy with Asterion then the biggest threat.

The more likely contender is the classy Abracadabras. He travelled well in last year's bumper before finishing 4<sup>th</sup> and has run very well in all his hurdles runs. Characterised by a good turn of foot he is 3 from 4 over hurdles with a 1.5l defeat to Envoi Allen his only loss. Given that Envoi would be a warm favourite here, then finishing that close must make you a big contender to the best-of-the-rest title. If there is an issue it could be the track as he did fade late on last year. Impossible to see him anything but

cruising coming down the hill, but not as obvious that he will come up the hill in equal fashion, and he looks vulnerable to tougher types.

Fiddlerontheroof won the best UK trial, the Tolworth, at Sandown in January. That is invariably run on heavy ground as it was this time, and Tolworth winners often end up in longer races. But those to run in a Supreme in the last 15 years finished. 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup>. That's compelling statistically and fortunately the horse looks up to the task too. A fine strong galloper he looks well suited by soft ground and that Sandown win was very impressive. He promises to go very well, but whilst a solid challenger he lacks the potential stardust of some of his opponents here. Mud can consume stardust though, and on very soft ground he could be the leading home challenger.

Owner JP McManus has two quality entries but it remains to be seen if either run here. Chantry House is unbeaten and looks a quality type after hurdles wins here and at Newbury. He looks to have plenty of speed, but trainer Henderson looked to be angling for a Ballymore bid, presumably to keep him away from Shishkin. That may still happen, but JP has options in that event and less so here. Whichever event he runs in he is an obvious contender but the distinct impression from the Henderson yard is that he is firmly second string to Shishkin.

JP also owns the exciting Sporting John. I have like this one since his Exeter debut, and he moved up in class with an impressive Ascot win last time. That was at a longer trip and the Ballymore looks the more likely target, but if the ground were very soft, he could also be an interesting challenger here. He travels well and look strong at a finish and he will be getting some of my hard-earned wherever he appears.

Captain Guinness is an interesting sort having run like a wild horse at Punchestown and yet still digging deep late on to challenge Andy Dufresne. The shine of that effort has dimmed slightly by the winner's subsequent defeat, but Captain Guinness still looks a horse of rare ability if able to relax early on. He has the ideal jockey in Rachael Blackmore and would be an each way shout, but there are plenty of strong contenders here and this guy looks a bit short in price in that context.

Edwardstone is useful and could outrun his odds, but if there is one at longer odds it could be the lightly raced Beacon Edge. A fine-looking chaser in the making he advanced from a scrambled debut hurdles win to go close 6 months later at Naas where a late jumping error robbed him of victory. That form still leaves him plenty to find with Asterion Forlonges in the Irish hierarchy, but he is entitled to improve again and is at least a fair each way price.

The ground will be key here both in determining the field and in the way the race is run. On very deep ground Asterion Forlonges should get the better of Fiddlerontheroof, but I suspect the ground will be good enough to allow speed to play a part and that means **SHISHKIN**. At his odds there is no merit in a second string, but both Beacon Edge and Sporting John are particular favourites who I will probably have a few pennies on myself wherever they run.

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***TUES: Race 2 - The Arkle Chase - 2 miles for novice chasers***

*Selected Current Odds: 5/2 Notebook, 5 Fakir D'Oudaries, 7 Cash Back*

My wife Tanya is amazing in a million different ways, but her tolerance of my sports fanaticism is beyond the call of duty, drawing the line only at darts and full-length stages of the Tour de France. If I do, on rare occasion over-indulge in the racing, (if a bumper is coming on, or Wolverhampton then i'm probably pushing it), then I'm usually in danger of getting switched to a romantic drama, top of which is millennial tear-jerker *The Notebook*. I have avoided that fate so far, and with Tanya delaying her arrival til Tuesday night, I'll be spared watching *Notebook* with her again here.

Henry de Bromhead's novice chaser *Notebook* may thankfully offer around 150mins less torture than the movie, and there has to be a fair chance of a happy ending. This huge horse was never going to be a great hurdler although he was decent enough, but whereas many big horses can be clumsy chasers, this guy has been superb to date. He has wins over *Fakir D'Oudaries* and *Cash Back* that make him Ireland's leading form horse and he comes from a superb stable and has a superb jockey. Whether Cheltenham suits remains a question mark. The only time he has been out of the top 2 was his 12<sup>th</sup> here in the Ballymore last year, but then he was 50/1 there so whilst we can certainly say he didn't outperform it's hard to be dogmatic about underperformance either. Given his narrow margins in victory and short price it may be value to let him prove it here and seek value elsewhere should he come up short.

*Fakir D'Oudaries* was one of the better juvenile hurdlers of last season and jumps fences with the kind of accurate fluency associated with ex-French stock. Having made all in impressive fashion for some high profile early season wins, he was ridden with more restraint at Leopardstown and was unable to reel in *Notebook*. He has been freshened up since and is likely to be tactically more aggressive to use that slick jumping speed, but he is also 7lbs worse off with his weight for age allowance having expired. He has festival and course form and I can see him upping his game from last time, but if he needs to lead to win then that would be a frantic early battle that could leave scars later.

*Cash Back* for master trainer Willie Mullins completes the headline Irish acts and anything that wants to lead this race will have to get by him. Headstrong to the point of tearaway, his talent is obvious as he ran *Notebook* to under a length in the Irish Arkle after having tanked along in the early stages. The early stages of this 2m course often see horses over-racing and is unlikely to help this guy settle. He may not be able to conserve enough to be a big factor at the end of the race, but he is sure to a big factor tactically in the early stages.

If there is a ton of pace on early from the Irish boys (that sounds like a night in *The Retreat* in Cheltenham town), and if there is debris to weave through and a chance to pick up the pieces (now we're in the *Beehive*), the tactical logic suggest looking for something to be ridden from off the pace. Leading home light *Brewin'upastorm* could be just that. A very talented hurdler last season he was miles ahead of *Notebook* when 4<sup>th</sup> in the Ballymore having given the impression he could challenge until running tired from the last. 2 miles over fences looks perfect, and he is 2 from 2 albeit in small fields and having not seen the track since November. I like the horse a lot, but fear he could be slightly undercooked for this test at what is likely to be a fierce early gallop.

The dramatic early pace here can only be stoked further with the presence of confirmed front runner Global Citizen who blasted his way for a tape to tape success in the best domestic trial for this at Kempton. He looks good when it all goes right, but he will have a huge battle on here, and his only previous course form – 7<sup>th</sup> in last year’s Champion Hurdle – could better be described as tailed-off last of those to finish.

Maire Banrigh gets the mares allowance of 7lbs and has run up a sequence in lesser races. She is a very neat jumper, and although she has led, she doesn’t need to. This will be by a huge margin the best race she has contested and whilst the mares allowance is often generous, the history of winning mare novice chasers is pretty slim. I remember backing Brief Gale to win the RSA in 1995 (must have been barely in long trousers), but precious little since.

Mister Fisher could be the most solid of the home horses. Given a classic prep by veteran Henderson including a good course win here over 2m4f and a fine “sharpener” when getting the better of solid yardstick Al Dancer over Doncaster’s sharp 2m last month. The question mark is every win has come in a field of 6 or less, and he was a bit of a flop in the Supreme here last year. Probably slightly better on a drier surface at which point the Marsh Chase on Thursday could become the option.

Espirit Du Large looked an Arkle prospect when winning a major early season novice chase at Sandown. He hasn’t been seen since and still has plenty of promise, but the exploits of those he beat suggest the form was not the highlight it looked at the time.

Indeed the beaten runners from that Sandown race were also the beaten runners in Warwick’s big Arkle trial, the Kingmaker, where they had a considerably more distant view of Rouge Vif. Trained by a pal, Harry Whittington, he has a good profile for this being a scopey chasing sort who seems to be getting better with racing and was superb at Warwick. He was last of 4 here earlier in the year so he has some track suitability to prove but he has to be a contender.

A race that is as tricky as it is fascinating, with race tactics looking likely to be a massive factor. I think Notebook would only deserve his price on the formbook if you could be wholly confident of producing his form here, but that’s a question mark for me. With Cash Back and Global Citizen leading them a dance, I see Notebook and Fakir D’Oudairies chasing the pace looking to get first mover advantage from the bottom of the hill and the run to 2 out. I hope Rouge Vif goes well for Harry, but I expect Mark Walsh to have learned plenty from defeat last time and in **FAKIR D’OUDARIES** he has a slick jumper with tactical speed and stamina and proven course form, that could be enough.

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***TUES: Race 3- The Festival Handicap Chase - 3 miles***

*Selected Current Odds: 7 Vinndication, 10 The Conditional, Discorama, Kildisart*

And now the first of the ten handicaps. These races were for a long time a chance to indulge sentimental, but loss-making betting, jammed full as they invariably are by old favourites we have backed a million times before and just can't let go of. They have though now become something of a focus for this Guide and the cash cows of the last few years. Here's hoping that trend continues.

This race emphasises the slow mutation of festival handicaps from free-for-alls where it was key to have at least 10lbs in hand by running under the radar all year, to densely contest races with low weight ranges and you need to show the handicapper something to be sure of a rating that will get you in. The slowness of the raters to drop classy horses running moderately also means the upper echelons can be stacked with deadwood. This has all contributed to these races becoming a whole lot more punter friendly.

Vinndication is the class act here. A very good novice he stepped up to 3m for the first time when thumping a good field in available Ascot handicap in November. That for is working out really well and this classy chaser has been raised 8lbs to a mark of 159 which is only just below Gold Cup class. Don't worry about the break since as he goes well when fresh and he is clearly going to run well.

When Vinndication was 5<sup>th</sup> in an excellent JLT at last year's festival he was an inch behind Kildisart and now has to give him 9lbs which on the face of it seems a stiff task. That is mostly a result of Vinndication's improvement at Ascot, but Kildisart has been a busy soul since. He went on from the JLT to dominate a good handicap at Aintree, leaving himself rated 156 heading into the season. But like many of trainer Ben Pauling's horses he was not at his best in the Autumn showing little form until last time in a big handicap at Kempton. That day he ran on with seemingly restored enthusiasm for a closing 5<sup>th</sup> off 151, and a mark of 150 here looks very enticing. He gets a 5lb turn around with the winner there Mister Malarkey which helps, but it was more the turn in apparent form momentum which carries the hope that the festival could be about to coincide with him hitting his best.

I don't think Mister Malarkey has been quite at his best here before although his 4<sup>th</sup> in the RSA looks better after the exploits of those in front, that said they were a long way in front. Two who have run well here though are The Conditional and Discorama.

The Conditional won here on soft ground early in the season before running a fine second in the competitive Ladbroke Chase. He has been generously dropped a few pounds for failing to stay in a muddy Warwick marathon last time and will be much better at this trip. I'm not sure he has the class of some of these and may need it very soft to close that gap.

Discorama does have class and a good festival CV. He was a staying on second in a Martin Pipe before getting edged out in last year's National Hunt Chase. That was one of the most gruelling races in Cheltenham memory and I am not sure the severe emphasis on stamina was to his benefit. Not many horses have emerged from that slog with their best form intact, but Discorama was subsequently a

reasonable runner up to firstly Delta Work and then Champagne Classic. He failed in handicap company in the Troytown chase but that was again a stamina test on very deep ground. A hurdles prep since and freshened up he is a contender here if the ground isn't too bad.

Those lower in the weights are complicated by having alternative entries in the amateur riders Kim Muir on Thursday but two of those look likely to run here and go well.

Cogry has a length Cheltenham CV, albeit little at the festival. He has tended to run well in the Autumn, but also goes particularly well for jockey Sam Twiston-Davies which is why I'd expect to see him here rather than entrusted to an amateur. Goes well in most ground conditions and remains on a mark that gives him a solid each way chance.

Big River is an absolute nightmare of a ride and surely won't be trusted to an amateur. Pro Derek Fox knows him well and they ran in this race last year. It was one of my most lasting memories of last year watching something flashing home in white colours in this race, so I looked him up for future reference and it was this guy. He got himself properly tailed off that day, his always slightly sticky jumping not helping, but he found a stride coming down the hill and finished like a 6f sprinter. He is most definitely mercurial, and if he runs here he could easily pull up halfway around, but if he is still going coming down the hill, no matter how far back, he will be in with a chance. Worth a fun flutter at a big price.

I am trying not to mention king of the rogues Singlefarmpayment, as I may mention him more for the Kim Muir, suffice as to say he and I have a lot of history, almost all of it bad, as he runs this track, on decent ground really well. Unfortunately, the measure of how well he runs the course seems to be a short head less well than the best horse in the field. Impossible to win with, but I'll probably get lured in again on the day !!

A classy race in prospect in which it is perfectly feasible that top weight Vinndication is just too good for them all. At the weights I just prefer the chance of **KILDISART** in the hope that his last run was a precursor of better to come. At a long price I can't resist a roguish few quid on **BIG RIVER**.

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**TUES: Race 4 - The Champion Hurdle - 2 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 7/2 Epatante, 5 Pentland Hills, 8 Cilaos Emery*

In the now rarely seen (and probably rightly so on both ethical and comic grounds) 70s sitcom *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, poor Lofty often ended up the volunteer by virtue of standing still whilst his streetwise platoon mates stepped backwards.

It may seem a little harsh to liken Epatante to Don Estelle, but with Espoir D'Allen, Buveur D'Air, Melon, Klassical Dream, Benie des Dieux and Honeysuckle all backing out voluntarily or otherwise, it does look like she has stumbled Lofty-like into the limelight of favouritism for the opening day's feature contest.

Epatante has raced five times since her import from France, winning four. Her novice wins last year were in very poor races, but it's her two wins this season that have catapulted her to market prominence. She crushed a nice field of handicappers at Newbury off a mark of just 137, and then showed how much more she has to offer by streaking away from a fair field in the Grade 1 Christmas Hurdle at Kempton. Her defeat there of last year's Champion third Silver Streak, the currently in form Ballyandy and the useful Verdana Blue is definitely of Champion Hurdle contender quality.

Racing is rarely that easy however, and Epatante's sole UK defeat is the big question mark as that came in her only run at this meeting when well fancied for a poor mares novice hurdle at the 2019 festival. She absolutely bombed there finishing a well beaten 9<sup>th</sup>. On one hand (hoof) it is often profitable to forgive a bad run, on the other, it would be helpful if she had at least laid the track ghost to rest. With significant concerns about the track she doesn't look one to steam into at a short price.

Pentland Hills gives trainer Henderson a second string to the bow. He is the opposite of Epatante having given his best effort over the course when winning last year's Triumph Hurdle. The issue is more current form having travelled beautifully in his two runs this season before failing to deliver a winning blow. He can be forgiven his defeat here on seasonal debut, but getting run down by Ballyandy at Haydock last time was disappointing. Fans seem happy to forgive and concentrate on the back form and the quality of the first 90% of his races. I can see that argument, even more so if the ground is not too soft, but all that promise looks baked in and then some at the current prices. May be better value than his stablemate but arguable if that is value in outright terms.

Willie Mullins looks likely to wait a further 40 mins before unleashing mighty mare Benie Des Dieux, although to my mind she would be the outstanding candidate were she to run here, whilst Henry de Bromhead has reached the same decision with another smart mare in Honeysuckle.

Willie has though supplemented Cilaos Emery, who looked to be a Champion Chase contender until a first fence fall at the Dublin racing festival and has been redirected to hurdles and hence the supplementary entry as he wasn't in the original line-up for this. That route has worked in the past – those with long memories may recall Beech Road, but it's hardly ideal. His warm up win at Gowran was

good, but switching back is hardly ideal, and for all that he is arguably unexposed its worth noting he was 5<sup>th</sup> behind Ballyandy when 5<sup>th</sup> here in the 2017 Supreme, and seems on a fairly lofty betting perch in that context.

Willie also relies on Saldier, although you can't use the words Saldier and reliable together without sandwiching "totally un-" in the middle. He is truly in and out. At my most generous I would say he has a preference for flat tracks and good ground and that his unreliability stems from meeting unsuitable conditions. But he bombed at Leopardstown last time when everything looked right. Arguably, given the likely softer ground and undulating surface, if we can attribute his unreliability to randomness, then he is back in the hunt, but he looks pretty short in the betting.

Supasundae has proven a popular each way pick for this race. He has a festival CV of 6<sup>th</sup> (Bumper), 7<sup>th</sup> (Supreme), 1<sup>st</sup> (Coral Cup), 2<sup>nd</sup> (Stayers), 7<sup>th</sup> (Stayers), and now at the age of 10 he finally steps back in trip to take a tilt at this prize. He is a former Irish Champion Hurdle winner, an Aintree hurdle winner over a sharp 2m4f, and ran with promise on reappearance in the Irish Champion Hurdle this time around. He should come on for that and it is easy to see why a place looks likely, but he has been backed down now to a level where the each way value is drying up unless you strongly fancy landing the win component, and whilst I am a fan, I can't quite reconcile with that.

Coeur Sublime has been attracting money, and this smooth travelling contender is expected to enjoy having been refreshed since a disappointing effort over Christmas. That said, his stand out form is his 3<sup>rd</sup> second to Pentland Hills in the Triumph last year and he will need to be a lot better than that.

One of my more confident bets of last season came just after the festival in a minor handicap hurdle at Wexford, but my selection crashed out at the second last when struggling to catch a runaway leader with the rest beaten. I rued my bad luck, but it turns out luck wasn't a factor as the winner that day was Darver Star off a mark of 106 and after his close 2<sup>nd</sup> to Honeysuckle in the Irish Champion Hurdle he is now rated 152. Just shows that sometimes you can be right about how good your pick is but have no idea what you could run into. For all that back history with Darver Star and the weakness of this race, I can't see him winning this and he is another with insufficient juice in the price for each way money.

With Fusil Raffles needing a form resurrection and Call Me Lord needing the Cheltenham executive to reverse the direction of the course, we finally arrive at those contenders with legitimate each way claims and price tags to match.

Ballyandy has a festival CV of 1<sup>st</sup> (Bumper), 4<sup>th</sup> (Supreme), and 3<sup>rd</sup> (Coral Cup). He is an honest type and has slugged his way through a series of trials for this race, beaten a neck by Call Me Lord, 8<sup>l</sup> by Epatante and then narrowly pipping Pentland Hills. His chances mostly rest on being in solid form and liking this course and he is more the kind of price that could reward a solid run into a place.

Silver Streak has arguably got even less to prove having placed in this race at a monster price when my each way pick for this event last year. He doubtless benefitted from the bizarre nature of that race with

leading contenders falling, being brought down or just bombing out. That said, for a horse who doesn't mind a drier surface he would have been inconvenienced by the sloppy just rained-on ground that day which was responsible for a whole array of untrustworthy looking results. He floundered in the heavy at Newcastle after a smooth good ground Kempton win, but chased home Epatante, admittedly a full 5l behind, in the Christmas Hurdle last time. He doesn't have that mare's worrying course form and can again run into a place provided the ground doesn't end up very soft.

Finally, old Petit Mouchoir deserves some consideration. He improved from 8<sup>th</sup> in a Supreme to finish 3<sup>rd</sup> in this event in 2017. By the next season he was 3<sup>rd</sup> after a madcap effort in the Arkle, and was a non-stayer in the Stayers last year. Written off as a has-been, he has found some form from somewhere with a runner up effort to Saldier at Punchestown, runner up to Sharjah at Christmas and then 3<sup>rd</sup> to Honeysuckle in the Irish Champion. That's consistent form, he is an uncomplicated ride who goes on any ground, and he should run an honest race, albeit he still has plenty of horses he needs to reverse form with to make this frame.

I will assess this as being in the presumed absence of novice Envoi Allen and mares Honeysuckle and Benie des Dieux, any of whom would be a worthy selection if running here. In their absence Epatante is the best horse in the field, but has yet to prove she enjoys this track. With those pitted against her short enough, Pentland Hills being the main danger, the value is in a more speculative each way punt. I'll have some each way money once again on **SILVER STREAK**, and the rock solid **BALLYANDY** could be another one to sneak into the frame.

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**TUES: Race 5 - The David Nicholson Mares Hurdle - 2 miles 4f**

*Current Selected Odds: 8/11 Benie Des Dieux, 7/4 Honeysuckle, 8 Stormy Ireland, 10 Roksana*

The two mares contesting the head of this market could justifiably be Champion Hurdle favourites in their own right and provide a real clash to savour in probably the most interesting mares' hurdle since Sally Gunnell's Barcelona Olympics.

Benie Des Dieux is the incumbent, an impressive winner of 8 of her 9 runs for Willie Mullins since imported from France. That includes winning this race 2 years ago, but also the sole defeat which came when falling at the last here with the race at her mercy last year. She was a sumptuously easy winner of her comeback race at Goran last month looking better than ever. The official raters have had plenty of chance to look at her and say she is 162. I'd say she may have a bit of upside even on that rating. There isn't really much chink in the armour although arguably her win here 2 years ago, whilst on paper a headline achievement, was hard work and on the form book one of her least impressive. She was set to do better of course last year, but even that win-in-the-making running to the last wouldn't suggest she is unbeatable.

The big challenge comes from Honeysuckle, who missed out on what, in hindsight (I have a 100% tipping record in hindsight) would have been an easy novice win here last year due to a minor injury. She has been in great form again this season and remains unbeaten over hurdles. She was superb in the 2m4f Hattons Grace in December and she won the Irish Champion Hurdle last time. Trainer Henry de Bromhead is a thoughtful man and looks likely to avoid the temptation to push her into the Champion Hurdle here. Although she won at Leopardstown she scrambled home having just not jumped with the fluency needed at that trip at that level, but her class just got her home. She will be much happier at this trip and is a huge danger to Benie, albeit she arrives as a Cheltenham virgin.

Roksana and Stormy Ireland fought out the finish after Benie's demise last year. Roksana won that day but hasn't found the same form since. Stormy Ireland though looks as good as ever in low key Irish events and is fancied to be much the better of the pair this time. She will add the pace to the race but it would be a big surprise if she can hold off either or both of the big two.

A cracking match up. The arguably quicker Honeysuckle versus the arguably stronger staying Benie Des Dieux. With plenty of Winter rain, and with the opening day ground likely to be the softest of the week. It should play to the advantage of **BENIE DES DIEUX**. Honeysuckle will give her a good race, and Stormy Ireland looks set for third. No room on this podium for a shock.

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**TUES: Race 6 – The Northern Trust Novices Handicap Chase - 2 miles 4f**

*Current Selected Odds: 13/2 Imperial Aura, 8 Galvin*

Sometimes a race like this ends up at the mercy of a ridiculously well handicapped unexposed novice – as was the case with A Plus Tard last year. More often though, this race has been won by a horse coming through the handicap route even though they tend to make up a smaller part of the runners.

The horse bringing the handicap credentials this year is the Kim Bailey trained Imperial Aura. His third chase start came in a handicap here in January which has traditionally been a good guide to this event. He ran really well there despite getting momentarily outpaced and pulled clear to go down narrowly to the classy Simply The Betts, well clear of subsequent winner On The Slopes. That looked a quality effort at the time and he stayed on really well there (he had been runner up here previously over 3m). That was the stiffer New Course, and the challenge here is whether the guaranteed relentless gallop can emphasise his stamina rather than the speedier course exposing his speed. With it looking set to be soft enough underfoot it looks as if it will shape up with stamina the key in which case he has a mighty chance.

Galvin has been the rage in the markets here for the shrewd Gordon Elliott. He was a fair 6<sup>th</sup> here in the Ballymore last year and a mark of 142 looks potentially generous. He has probably been campaigned with this in mind and could be capable of better than he has shown. That said his jumping has been less than clean so far in all his runs and he would need to be a lot better in this big field to hold a place, and there has been a suspicion to date that he might prefer a sound surface which looks unlikely here.

Annie Mc is a lovely mare who looks set to share top weight. That has been earned by a sequence of wins, but she has beaten a total of 8 rivals over 3 runs, and this will be an altogether different test. Fellow top weight Hold The Note looks more of a threat for the connections who won this two years ago with Mister Whitaker. He ran a blinder in a 3m Grade 2 at Warwick last time, after which he was bumped up 12lbs to this mark but that arguably still has him a few pounds well in.

Espoir De Guye hasn't been seen since romping home at Ascot before Christmas off 130. Now up to 144 he has plenty on his plate in this tougher test, but we know he handles soft ground very well and he remains wholly unexposed.

I am very keen on **IMPERIAL AURA** here as he has everything needed for this race. That January race he was second in forms an all-or-nothing element to this year's guide as the winner there, Simply The Betts is fancied for the Plate, and the third, On The Slopes is fancied for the Grand Annual. If I'm right, then I could be right three times, and it seems only fair to multiply those returns, so the **"Golden Thread"** treble pays c 1000/1 and shouldn't be missed !!

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***TUES: Race 7 - The National Hunt Novice Chase - 3m6f for Amateur riders***

*Selected Current Odds: - 2 Carefully Selected 14 Springfield Fox*

What was always called the 4 miler is now the 3m6fer. This is one of a few modifications after last year's race which was quite frankly a disaster. On gruelling ground, the amateur riders set a strong enough pace and by the end there were just 4 finishers, two of whom walked home, whilst others were strewn exhausted or worse across the entire course like the aftermath of the Charge of the Light Brigade. There was nothing heroic about this failure, and the raw emotions of many racegoers left jumps fans like me struggling to find justification. Whatever else happens this year, let's never see a repeat of 2019.

If class comes to the fore then this race should be fairly straightforward, with the late absence of Champagne Classic, the trio of Carefully Selected, Battleoverdoyen and Copperhead look a cut above. Of the three, Carefully Selected is the only one firmly committed to this target with trainer's son Patrick Mullins gunning for another festival win. The horse ran placed in the bumper two years ago and was close behind top pair Minella Indo and Allaho at the end of a late novice hurdle campaign. He looks just as good over fences and I would forgive a clumsy last run which came too soon after a previous run but was needed to qualify for this. Freshened up he is the obvious favourite.

Copperhead has progressed through handicaps to win the leading festival trial the Reynoldstown at Ascot last time. That looks likely to persuade trainer Tizzard to go for the more prestigious RSA on Wednesday, but if he aims for easier pickings here then he becomes an obvious threat to the favourite.

Battleoverdoyen was long being aimed at the RSA, but a tired fall last time at Leopardstown and the injury of stablemate Champagne Classic, both leaves this race unmanned whilst also potentially exposing his weaknesses at Grade 1 level.. The RSA still looks likely, but if he came here that would be an interesting move.

Of those at longer prices, the eye catcher is Springfield Fox. He has come up through a couple of low level novice handicaps, but he has run away with those events with bold front running tactics. A really fluent jumper and a sound stayer he would be very interesting if turning up here. He could expose jumping or stamina in the class horses, some of whom may not even run here.

There is no doubt that **CAREFULLY SELECTED** looks all set to take this. However, it is well worth adding **SPRINGFIELD FOX** to the ticket should he take up the entry to run here.

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**WED: Race 1 The Neptune Investments Novices Hurdle - 2 1/2 miles (for all-aged novices)**

*Selected Current Odds: 11/8 Envoi Allen, 6 Sporting John, 25 Longhouse Poet*

Tuesday night on the town in Cheltenham can be a night to remember, and indeed that is often the biggest challenge. Memories get clouded by repeated pints of camaraderie and chasing shots of nostalgia, and by the early hours some (and I won't mention any names just to say a Cork-man whose name is an anagram of Donla), end up hugging a bar stool whilst capable of uttering just a couple of words. This year, for most of the travelling Irish contingent, the last two words left in the Jagermeister fog will be "Envoi Allen".

Last year's Champion Bumper winner, and still lifetime unbeaten after a prolific hurdling season, the magnificent Envoi Allen arrives as the biggest Irish banker of the week and it is easy to see why. His form is rock solid, the horses he has beaten have franked the form repeatedly, there are no doubts about the track and he is a fluent jumper and uncomplicated ride. A beautiful looking horse, he doesn't always exhilarate because he tends to do enough to win – comfortably enough – but not an impressive runaway type. He has the option of the shorter Supreme, but this looks much the more likely destination and he is obviously hard to beat. The only negative is not an on track one – it is a betting one. Despite the bookies standing against the tide they can't prevent this horse trading very short, and for each time a Samcro wins this easily, there is a defeat for a Denman or a Champ. So the temptation is to take on the unbeatable !! But what with?

The answer probably doesn't lie in Ireland as Envoi Allen has already dominated there. One he hasn't met is the Mullins trained The Big Getaway. Suitably named as he is massive, he came good last time in impressive fashion. If the ground was very soft he may have a chance to use his relentless gallop and long stride, but these big horses with big futures usually need time to grow into their frame, and Cheltenham may be too much too soon.

Another massive son of Getaway, who almost certainly had his name pinched by the Mullins horse, is Colin Tizzard's The Big Breakaway. A year younger, he faces the same challenge of whether he can match the likes of Envoi Allen whilst still probably a year or two short of his physical maturity. He is an impressive physical specimen, but another likely to find this too much too soon.

If there is one here ready to take on the hotpot then it could be the Philip Hobbs trained Sporting John. He has the Supreme as an option, which may be the case if the ground is very soft, but he stayed really well when winning nicely at Ascot last time, and this trip looks likely to see him at his best on anything but the deep mud. He is another son of Getaway, but whilst also an impressive sort he is more Brian O'Driscoll than Paul O'Connell and has hit the ground running. Gallops well and has a decent turn of foot. His form doesn't compare with Envoi Allen, but he is unbeaten and has loads of potential.

Another Hobbs inmate, Thyme Hill, has looked the pre-eminent domestic novice at this trip. He ran on well for third to Envoi Allen in the bumper last year, and on that form and on his hurdles form there is a case for him finishing close to the favourite. But with the stable having Sporting John, and with Envoi Allen to contend with he is more likely to duck the challenge for perceived easier pickings in Friday's Albert Bartlett, but he would have a good chance if conditions pushed him into this event.

This race is potentially deep with talent, but with many likely to head to either the Supreme or Bartlett it could cut up into a smaller event. Of the longer priced sorts I am pretty sweet on Longhouse Poet. In contrast to some of these, he is a more compact sort and likely to be at his best now. He is trained by and owned by the same connections as last year's winner City Island, and with his owner being the race sponsor this looks the likely destination. He quickened to lead at the last in a longer race at the Dublin Festival only to be outstayed late on, so this looks the right trip. He is held by Envoi Allen on form of a 71 defeat at Naas which exposes his limitations, but he just looks a Cheltenham type to me and I would expect him to get much closer here, which makes him a potential each way prospect.

Clearly picking one to beat Envoi Allen could be a suicidal start to day two, and much as I am a big fan of Sporting John I equally respect the favourite. As such, given I can't back the favourite or oppose him in the win market, I will stick to the each way money and I think **LONGHOUSE POET** is well worth a dabble looking like a horse who could deliver a lifetime best at this track.

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**WED: Race 2 - The RSA Novice Chase. 3 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 10/3 Champ, 4 Minella Indo, 5 Allaho, 6 Copperhead*

Of the last 12 Gold Cup winners, half had contested this RSA chase in their novice year. So whilst the race is capable of throwing up a surprise on occasion, the odds are more likely that you need a Gold Cup class contender.

Favourite Champ has many supporters and he is one who obviously possesses Grade 1 quality. He was a late developer and mostly missed his first novice campaign, as such he is a relatively elderly 8yo for a novice. He was an outstanding novice hurdler last year with his one defeat being when 2nd at the festival here in the Ballymore. His jumps campaign has shown us all sides of the dice. He was pretty impressive on debut at Newbury despite the odd blunder, and overcame obstacles in running to forge clear there again afterwards in a decent race. He came back to break his Cheltenham duck here on New Year's Day, but having surged clear he absolutely crashed through the second last fence for a thumping fall. Attempts to have another round since were thwarted by the mid Feb storms, so he has to come here with that disaster his latest public jumping effort. At his best he is probably the most talented runner here, but the fact that he held an entry in the Stayers hurdle in case his prep run jumping didn't go well suggests that the capacity for disaster remains high. He didn't get the chance to disprove that, and not many horses come here off a fall and are successful. On balance, he looks worth taking on.

The market says the most likely contender is the strapping Minella Indo. He only got better as a novice hurdler, amazingly breaking his maiden by winning the Grade 1 Albert Bartlett here before confirming that with a win at Punchestown. His win here was characterised by taking it up a long way out and then maintaining a relentless gallop with his big long stride. His two chase runs, a second to the since disgraced Laurina, and then a grinding win which is working out well, did not scream Grade 1, but if he progresses as he did in his hurdling year then we may see the best of him at Cheltenham. His prominent running style could put the field in trouble but he will need to jump with more fluency to maximise the impact of the gallop. Trainer de Bromhead will have him well-prepped and jockey Rachael Blackmore has few equals at getting a horse into an effective rhythm.

Sport is not always won on looks, or the savage looking Deontay Wilder would still have the heavyweight boxing belts rather than pub-landlord bare-knuckle throwback Tyson Fury. On looks, the Mullins trained Allaho would win this hands down. Few horses have his scope, but he can run a bit freely, and he ended last season with a W1 L2 record against Minella Indo. He was again too free on jumps debut when second at Leopardstown before crushing a minor field last time. If he jumps with the athleticism of his physique he probably has a chance of putting these to the sword. My concern is if he can last the trip, and that if he is held up to do so will that nullify his greatest threat. I would see him as a massive contender for the 2m5f Marsh chase on Thursday, but Willie may juggle his weapons in deference to octogenarian legend Faugheen. If that means he is stretched out to this trip, then I would fear whether he will stay as well as old foe Minella Indo.

There is a chance Faugheen himself could run here. As a 12yo he is off the scale of precedent for winning a Cheltenham novice, but then he has been off the scale his whole career. The Machine may not have all the horsepower of old but he is still pretty useful. The impression is that this may stretch him in stamina, jumping and class. He obviously gets respect wherever he goes, but that won't stretch to my hard earned cash here.

Copperhead arrives here from the less well tread route of handicap chases. This youngster is improving rapidly and was very impressive stepped up to graded company at Ascot last time. The official handicapper now has him 2lbs ahead of Champ, but I wonder if that Ascot race fell apart somewhat on the soft ground, with the favourites flopping. If he gets it deep here then he can close the class gap, but on a fair surface surely the likes of Champ, Minella and Allaho could have too much for him.

The strapping Battleoverdoyen has won all but two of his lifetime starts and has a big reputation. Unfortunately one of those defeats was when pulled up behind Champ in last year's Ballymore, his only taste of Cheltenham. Add in that his other defeat was when falling last time out, when looking tired and beaten at Leopardstown and it is hard to summon up much enthusiasm for his chances here.

Slate House is technically the highest rate horse here after his grade 1 win at Kempton over Christmas. That race is rarely a good guide for this though, and a subsequent pulled up effort taking on his seniors in the Cotswold Chase here hardly looks ideal preparation.

I can't be backing Champ off that last time fall, and with doubts about Allaho seeing out this trip with the choke out, this looks a pretty solid chance for **MINELLA INDO**. Trusting trainer and jockey to have him cherry ripe for this looks the shortest of the leaps of faith required, and he will absolutely grind this out the whole way.

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**WED: Race 3 - The Coral Cup Handicap Hurdle - 2 1/2 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 10 Protektorat, Birchdale, 14 Dame de Compagnie, Canardier*

So it is not an underestimate to suggest the Coral Cup is something of a challenge for punters. There are astrophysicists pursuing lifetime searches for the proof of the existence of dark matter only because they have already given up on the Coral Cup as too difficult.

Last year's finish was typical with at least 3 horses cruising through to lead as though they had the race won until each was trumped by the next until the unlikely very late surge of William Henry (12 months too late for this Guide!) pipped them all.

That was another win for a class act near the top of the weights, and old William could be back as the very top weight this year. He pulled off an even more remarkable last-ditch win at Fontwell last time, and although 6lbs higher, he can't be ruled out, although his trainer Nicky Henderson has some more likely types.

Birchdale was one of the key Henderson novices coming to the festival last year, but his chances were undermined by the fixation, especially prevalent with this yard, of keeping smart stablemates apart. With favourite Champ representing owner JP McManus and Henderson in the Ballymore, they sent Birchdale up to the 3m of the Albert Bartlett where he was a blatant non-stayer, going from a challenger jumping 2 out to pulled up before the last. Champ was also beaten but won later at Aintree over 3 miles – file that strategy in the folder labelled “cock-up”. All we have seen of Birchdale this season is a poor chasing debut at Ascot in November, with the layoff since he is wisely preserving his novice chase status by stepping back to hurdles. He would have a good chance at his best, and the weight of money for him given his gambling connections, and rumours of a extraordinary racecourse gallop at Kempton have fuelled the belief that he could be on the verge of a special performance.

The same connections – should they dare to run two in the same race, have useful mare Dame De Compagnie. She also has the option of the Martin Pipe, but has a decent racing weight here. Her two runs here this season have been excellent, with the form of the latest win holding up well. She should continue to have the edge on one of my old favourite's Indefatigable on that effort and if she runs here that could look like a tip in itself.

Protektorat has to be hugely respected for the Dan Skelton yard that had become so adept at winning Cheltenham handicaps. He is the kind of classy novice that can go well here. Confirmed as being just below the top class, as his decent run behind Harry Senior showed here in January, he is rightfully likely to shun battling for minor place honours in championship events and instead look to make good use of a mark of 144 for this event. Skelton's old mentor Paul Nicholls has pulled that trick off before, and this fella looks well equipped to have a big chance here. He was a flop as a juvenile, but that can get them well handicapped as he showed when narrowly beaten in a valuable Sandown event. That was off 128 in December, and for all of the promise of his runs since, this is undoubtedly tougher and 16lbs higher sounds like a lot.

Janidil has had a fine season for Willie Mullins. He is entered in pretty much everything bar donning some lippy and sashaying into the mares hurdle, but this looks the likely target. His last two wins have come in valuable handicaps, and his absence since 1 Dec looks more like a ratings preservation strategy

than anything worrying. He has to be respected given his connections, but he is 10lbs higher and in a tougher (and longer) race.

Willie may have a more intriguing chance with last year's 5th Canardier, who returns on a 4lb higher mark. He didn't get much luck in that race and yet was bang there jumping the last. His two runs this season have been poor chasing efforts, but most eye-catchingly is the transfer from a small yard into the powerhouse that is the Mullins yard. This will be his stable debut and he looks like one who only needs to find some improvement under Willie's care to become a major player.

Two more Irish novices catch the eye. Gavin Cromwell took the Champion Hurdle in a breakthrough season last year and has continued the good work this season. His novice Alfa Mix is interesting if choosing this entry over the Martin Pipe. He broke out of novice company with a tidy handicap debut win at Navan before just failing to handle the useful Kilfenora back there last time, there may not be much between that pair here, but Alfa Mix may just have the greater scope to improve.

Sempo would be making a handicap debut off his rating of 142. He of course has options in the novice events or the Martin Pipe, but this looks a race that may be the best fit. He was 6th in the bumper here last year, a race in which the top 6 pulled well clear. He wasn't that far behind Envoi Allen (currently rated 154), Thyme Hill (150), and Abracadabras (149), in which context a mark of 142 looks pretty fair. After a fair hurdling debut, he was 2nd in a terrific Leopardstown maiden, splitting Cobblers Way (subsequent Grade 1 runner up), Francin and The Big Getaway (both subsequent winners). He continued an upward trend by winning easily next time at Thurles. Just three hurdles runs may not be ideal for a test like this, but trainer Joseph O'Brien will know best and if he runs here then it must be taken as a huge vote of confidence.

Another monstrously complex puzzle. Birchdale best fits to historical trends, whilst Sempo and Protektorat represent two unexposed novices, whilst the switch to Mullins makes Canardier the obvious returning for revenge option. **BIRCHDALE** on the rumours of his gallops, and **CANARDIER** on the strength of the Mullins factor get the shout.

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**WED: Race 4 - The Champion Chase - 2 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 2 Altior, 9/4 Defi du Seuil, 11/4 Chacun Pour Soir*

The Champion Chase is sometimes a non-event, and sometimes a main event. This year it is headline material with the biggest three-way standoff since the denouement of Reservoir Dogs.

Now (SPOILER ALERT), it looks highly unlikely that Mr White, Joe and Eddie will all go down here allowing the unlikely Mr Pink to run off with the spoils.

The Good, The Bad and the Ugly may be a better example of the three way shoot out, in which case we can expect the horses to mingle around at the start for 20 minutes to an ever more frantic Morricone score, sweat slowly forming with the ITV camera angles tightening in on the horses' eyes..., but who will be who? Who will be the fastest on the draw, who will err, fall, and who will fire blanks?

Standing in the place reserved for legends is the might Altior, winner at the last 4 festivals including this race the last twice. He was unbeaten over jumps in 4 years until failing to catch Cyrname on seasonal debut over 2m4f in the Ascot mud in November. That step up in trip always seemed to lack much logic. The main rationale seemed to come from his performances last year including winning this race where he looked below his best and scrambled home against horses he would previously have dominated. Time may have told that the whole Henderson yard were just a fraction off their best last year, perhaps a function of interrupted preparations from the equine flu. They look spot on this year and Altior gave food for thought with a comeback Newbury win. That gave sight of both his flaws and strengths, looking in trouble 2 out but hitting an overdrive no horse can match on the run in.

He is a 10yo, and not many win championship races at that age, but if they do, then it's this event, and we are talking about a legend here. Likely to get in trouble coming down the hill, and has opponents this year in a different class to previous seasons, but if he is within a length or two at the last then you can't back against him up that final hill that he just devours.

The young pretender is probably Defi Du Seuil. He is another who rarely loses and has festival wins in both the Triumph Hurdle and the JLT. Both of those events would naturally suggest a longer trip, so it's a reinvention to bring him back to this 2m discipline. He didn't look a 2m natural even in victory here in November, but he did well to narrowly hold off veteran Un De Sceaux at Sandown. He beat that horse much more easily in a grade 1 at Ascot last time and it is harder now to argue against his credentials. He is a horse I love as much like Altior he just keeps winning – but I remain unconvinced this is his race. The Ryanair over an extra half mile looks ideal to me, but he comes here. I don't wholly trust the Ascot form with some lesser horses too close to the class acts, and I would judge him more on Sandown, and to me that makes him a contender, but not the value at these prices.

Chacun Pour Soi fulfils the dark horse category. A hugely impressive looking horse, he is the one capable of some huge leaps, and could put the others under pressure if allowed to push on down the back

straight. He has a verdict over Defi at Punchestown at the back end of last season, and that looks good form. Defi is super consistent and I would be wary of suggestions he wasn't himself there after a hard season and it might be right to think Chacun beat him fair and square. I think Defi has got better as a 2 miler since, but Willie Mullins' horse has clearly got a big chance. My biggest concern would be the Cheltenham factor as we don't know if this fella will be at his best there when we know for absolute certain that the other two will.

It is hard to look beyond the form three, with the biggest contenders for Mr Pink probably being youngster Dynamite Dollars who ran well behind Altior last time after a lengthy injury lay-off.

A fascinating showdown between three legitimate big hitters. For all that they have the younger legs, both Defi and Chacun have a big task lowering the colours of **ALTIOR**. There is a risk he may not be what he was in his more youthful days, but I'll risk that Henderson will rekindle the flame in time.

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**Wed: Race 5 Glenfarclas Cross Country Chase - 4 miles - cross country**

*Selected Current Odds: 1/1 Tiger Roll, 3 Easysland, 12 Urgent de Gregaine*

It's time for many racegoers to offer up a two fingered salute – that being two fingers of the sponsors tippie and a salute to the living legend that is the great Tiger Roll.

The most popular and well-known horse in racing again lines up in an attempt to land a hat-trick of Krypton Factor assault course victories in this bizarre cross-country event. The whisky won't let us down, but what about the horse?

Two years ago he forged past French challenger Urgent De Gregaine, but last year he absolutely slaughtered the field, old foe Urgent included. That could in part have been slightly better ground – they were 20s faster than in 2018, but also Tiger Roll came here last year between an impressive hurdle win and an epic weight carrying second National win – ie the form of his life. This year has more doubt just because a small operation meant a delayed comeback, and whilst he ran with credit on return in the same hurdle prep it was a long way short of last year's winning effort. He is entitled to improve a ton and is the obvious clear favourite for this, but it is taken on trust that he will be back to his best. It is worth noting he still needs to qualify for the National, and that requires a top 4 finish here. That should be no issue, but it could be a factor if he looks in trouble at any stage then he could end up being ridden for top four than risk that place chasing anything better.

It's the French who again offer the challenge. The November race here was won by Diesel D'Allier and as a 7yo he has scope to improve, but he will need to as our old chum, Urgent De Gregaine was only 4.5l behind and gets a 22lb turn around in the weights. That surely should result in the form being comfortably reversed so it is hard to see why they are quoted at broadly the same price.

The December race went to another French raider – the coming force that is Easylands. This youngster is just a 6yo but is already on a 6 race cross country winning streak, including that handicap win here in December. Clearly, he has huge scope to improve, but that was an impressive win in its own right. He has followed up with an easy win at Pau since and arrives here as the obvious heir apparent should the Tiger not be on his usual roll.

Physics tells us that overlaying two huge wave patterns can either bring stability through interference or massive disruption through resonance. If Henderson sends the crazy Might Bite over these crazy obstacles we are likely to get one thing or the other. The most likely being a disastrous case of resonance. The latent talent is there, but this circus may not be the best stage.

Obviously Tiger Roll on song wins this doing hoofstands, but for all of the promise of his comeback he is far from certain to be the 2019 version of himself, and if he is at 2018 levels then this could be a contest. Each way terms probably don't offer quite enough juice for old favourite Urgent de Gregaine whose form here since his course debut win is 3232, and it's the youthful promise of fellow raider **EASYLANDS** that is worth a modest investment.

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**WED: Race 6 The Boodles Fred Winter Juvenile Novices Handicap Hurdle - 2 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 5 Aramax, 8 Mick Pastor, 14 Repetio, Tronador, 25 Oak Park, 33 Theatre of War*

If by this race you are in desperate need of a winner then you are most certainly in dire straits. That's fine if you are a sweat-banded ageing Geordie guitar legend, but it's more walk of death than walk of life if you're leaving the betting ring empty handed again at this stage.

Topping the betting charts are a couple of brother in arms in the JP McManus pair Aramax and Mick Pastor. They are both near the head of the weights and will be looking to repeat the success of last year's class act Band Of Outlaws who was able to give weight in a race which had hitherto been dominated by those at the foot of the handicap.

With JP likely to field A Wave Of The Sea and Cerberus (rated 142 and 140) in the Triumph, he will rely on this pair who have very similar ratings. Mick Pastor earned his 140 with an Auteil win in France, His 6th on stable debut for Nicholls at this track was very disappointing, but he looked revitalised when an easy Ludlow winner last time. You'd need to be an optimist to suggest that form backs up a 140 rating, and for all that the stable have an outstanding record in this race, that previous Cheltenham flop doesn't boost confidence that he can defy this mark.

Aramax looks a much more lively JP option off his mark of 138. That was earned with a fluent win in the same race that last year's winner won as his prep for this. He has been slowly running into full form and fitness for Gordon Elliott, himself a multiple winner of this race as a trainer, and that last run was by far his best since the move from France. He jumps well and looks a certain contender, again the form of that last win may not be up to too much but the style was impressive. 138 looks no more than fair, and the price is pretty tight as we come to expect when the bookies see these connections involved.

Thyme White, Galahad Quest and Night Edition all sport the three runs culminating in a win profile that was for a long time the hallmark of a winner here. They are closely bunched around 133/134 ratings which was the top end of historical pattern until last year's trend-buster. It's guesswork to an extent which of these will show the most improvement but when Galahad Quest narrowly battle back to beat Night Edition here, my impression was that Night Edition may have hit the front a fraction soon in hindsight and didn't quite last home. This will be a tougher test, but he will also get the chance of more cover, and he appeals as a likely sort to spring a minor surprise.

Occasionally this can be won by a battle-hardened handicapper and it looks to me as if Repetio could be just such a contender here. He didn't show much for Jim Bolger in four flat races and was a bit of a Summer jumper, starting with a 4th of 6 at Newton Abbot in July. That is most definitely not where to look for festival winners and a handicap debut success at the same track off 106 hardly set the pulse racing, but all he has done since then is improve. He finished really well for a close 3rd at Chepstow, ahead of Triumph hope Sir Psycho (now rated 147) and just a few lengths off winner Nordano (now rated 140). He came here next and was a 10l third behind Allmankind (rated 148) and Botox Has (139), before returning to land a handicap against older horses in strong staying style here off 125. He is up

5lbs for that win and trainer Nigel Hawke immediately realised 130 was a perfect rating for this target and has deliberately kept him off the track to wait for this.

Lets just consider the form of that win and his 5lb raise. The 3rd home, Never Adapt cruised home in a Kempton handicap next time and was heavily fancied for the leading handicap of the season, the Betfair before going lame. The 2nd home, Oakley, finished a creditable 7th in that Betfair hurdle. These are good benchmarks and for a juvenile to outbattle them up the Cheltenham hill is superb form and no wonder the trainer put up the “nothing to see here” signs after that 5lb rise gift from the handicapper.

Gordon Elliott has several other interesting runners, with Tronador, Saint D’oroux, Recent Revelations, Oak Park and Gealach all with outside chances. Of that squad, Tronador is the one who looks like he has been specifically targeted at this and wasn’t given too hard a time in a decent event last time. A mark of 129 will have been exactly what Gordon wanted and he is absolutely in the mix.

Oak Park will need plenty to drop out if he is to make it off a basement rating of 120. He had a “quiet” debut when 9l behind Gealach (129) and was contesting victory when falling at Punchestown against Instant Return (128). His subsequent well beaten 5th in a Grade 1 at Leopardstown was little more than a school in public, and he has every chance to improve and if by some chance he squeezes in off 120, then he could have loads of headroom off that mark, and some late money in the markets further piques interest.

I am always interested when I see golfer Shane Lowry as an owner. The Offaly athletic god was the first owner of our current car (drives a long way but misses the road to the left), and is involved with Theatre Of War. Gavin Cromwell’s speedy ex-flat horse closely ties in with Tronador. I’ll be keeping a close eye on him, partly from a betting perspective but mostly because I’ll probably be popping down to the shops on him in 5 years time.

Of the market leaders and class horses, Aramax has by far the most convincing profile but that has not been lost on the bookies. I’d prefer to take a chance with a lower weighted horse and **REPETITIO** looks sure to run a massive race off his generous mark. Picking which of Gordon’s lesser fancied horses is going to suddenly spring forward and leave their form behind is guesswork, but **OAK PARK** would be the pick at a price, with **TRONADOR** the Elliott option should Oak Park fail to make the cut. Hopefully, it’s a case of money for nothing...

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**WED: Race 7 - The Bumper - 2 miles FLAT**

*Selected Current Odds: 7/4 Appreciate It, 8 Ferny Hollow*

Picking against the great Willie Mullins in this event feels like putting the Bum into Bumper. The Carlow maestro has landed this event 8 times and invariably is the first starting point in any form analysis.

Another huge signal has been the advent of championship level bumper races at the Dublin racing festival in February allowing us the chance to assess the usually unfathomable Irish bumper form in advance of Cheltenham. That initiative is only 2 years old, but both subsequent Cheltenham winners, Relegate and Envoi Allen succeeded in either the mares or geldings Leopardstown bumper.

Add those to factors together and we can see why Appreciate It is trading below 2/1. The Mullins trained gelding was a good winner at Christmas but really stamped his claims with a runaway win at the Dublin festival. He looks every inch a bumper winner (and there are plenty of inches as he is a physically imposing type), and he will be very hard to beat.

Mullins also has the long hyped Ferny Hollow. Odds on in all three bumper starts, he was a disappointment running too freely and getting touched off in his first two starts before finally settling racing in a hood last time for an effortless win. Fans will be hoping the hood has made the difference, and he is tempting, but he remains shorter in the betting than his achievements can justify.

Panic Attack is very interesting as she won with consummate ease in her only start for Willie Mullins at Market Rasen. That will be her only Mullins start as she has since been bought for big money and moved to the David Pipe stable. That sole run was superb, and she has excellent speed. As a 4yo filly she gets all the allowances meaning she receives over a stone from the other market leaders. Whether as a daughter of speedy flat type Canford Cliffs the testing undulations of Cheltenham will suit is certainly debatable. And given Willie's obsession with landing this event it would be a surprise to have let her go if he thought she had the beating of his other two contenders.

The Pipe stable also have Israel Champ whose wins at Cheltenham and Ascot painted him as the leading domestic challenger prior to Panic Attack's change of passport. Those two wins were strong hard fought efforts and he looks likely to run his race. That said he lacks a bit of star quality and I'm not sure he has the tools to take down Willie's star contenders.

One domestic challenger who might have a bit to offer is Third Time Lucki. Fewer horses could have been as well named when, after a runner up effort in a point to point and a debut third in a bumper, his third run saw him cruise to victory at Market Rasen. He followed up under a penalty at Huntingdon in similarly eye-catching style. Those are speed favouring tracks and these undulations offer a different challenge, but his hold up style and turn of foot offer a different tactical weapon to the power gallop of the favourite here. If he can stalk through the field and be played late then he has to be interesting at a fair price.

Gordon Elliott landed this last year with his star Envoi Allen and the big Meath man has another suite of promising types this year, but none with quite the same stardust.

Farouk D'alene is unbeaten having narrowly won a decent Naas bumper recently. He could make his name over obstacles but this race may be coming a bit too quickly for him, and if I think that, then the Gigginstown owners who are notoriously shy of running horses in this event will almost certainly keep him at home.

Eskylane is a more likely Elliott traveler having won his bumper at Navan last time in easy fashion. He is interesting as his debut bumper second came over 2l ahead of third place Appreciate It. The Mullins horse has almost certainly improved massively since then, but then so might this fella. He wasn't much in his point to point days but he could be a fraction overpriced.

Queens Brook would be very interesting if turning out quickly after a wide margin debut win at Gowran Park. It is very hard to make much of that form, but as a mare she gets a useful 7lb allowance which was fully utilised by both Fayonagh and Relegate to land victory in this race. Top amateur Jamie Codd was in the saddle at Gowran and it would be significant if we see his name next to her again here as he would have his pick of several options.

Darling Daughter also claims the 7lb mare's allowance and comes with the best credentials after a win in the mares bumper at the Dublin racing festival that Relegate also won on route. She was a good winner there, but again as a Gigginstown runner it's not certain she will be asked to travel, but interesting if she does

Ocean Wind represents the small yard of Roger Teal, and has a flat bred profile as befits a Godolphin cast off. Teal has worked the miracle and he progressed from a narrow defeat here to win a high-quality Newbury bumper in some style. He is only a 4yo, but Cue Card was similarly young and unexposed before romping home here at a big price.

Last year's bumper is considered well above average with Envoi Allen (1st), Thyme Hill (3rd), Abracadabras (4th) and even Sempo (6th) all favourites or close to for events this year over hurdles. The mare The Glancing Queen was an each way pick for the guide last year and she finishing in amongst those big names in 5th (where all good each way picks finish). She went on to beat Minella Melody (mares novice favourite) cozily at Aintree. That is gilt edged form. She has had injuries which have prevented her from starting a hurdling campaign, but she could win the race against time to be fit to run in the bumper again. If so, she'd again have each way claims if as fit as last year.

It's hard to see **APPRECIATE IT** being beaten and even though the price is clearly short, we could be grateful to line our pockets heading into some punter friendly days. Eskylane, Queens Brook and even the long absent The Glancing Queen could offer alternative value, but the off-the-pace style of **THIRD TIME LUCKI** could be worth a throwaway cover.

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**THURS: Race 1 - The Marsh Novices Chase - 2 1/2 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 5 Itchy Feet, Allaho, 7 Mister Fisher, 8 Faugheen, Samcro,*

When it comes to our hardy group of racegoers there is no question who the venerable old man of the group is. Tanya is the youngster, as she often reminds me, she married a considerably older man. That doesn't make me the daddy though, far from it. Technically, using birth certificates it's Phil, but he races with the zest of a juvenile hurdler. If there's an over-raced veteran gelding, it has to be Andy. With experience comes great wisdom they say, Andy has been at Cheltenham since the Golden Miller days, but he'll still be on Itchy Feet here on account of the great name !

In the runners for the Marsh chase it will not be hard to identify the hairy old veteran as it looks likely to feature festival legend Faugheen. Winner here as a novice hurdler back in the Thatcher years and a Champion Hurdle winner, he bids to win a novice chase at the age of 12, which would be by some margin the oldest such winner in living memory of such a contest. Like Roy Keane turning out for the Irish U21s, what he will lack in peak fitness he makes up for in, well, presence... Most pundits thought Willie Mullins crazy sending an old dog off to learn new tricks, but the old boy has been revitalised with an unbeaten run that completed with a return to Grade 1 success in the Flogas chase at the Dublin festival. Can he add a chapter to the romance of Cheltenham veterans, Sea Pigeon, Big Buck's, Kauto Star, Sprinter Sacre. Well, this is where the swelling orchestral music cuts out and the bucket of cold water that is rational logic kicks in. I wouldn't put anyone off a sentimental flutter, God knows I've sent a snowstorm of sentimental fivers into the ring over the years with barely a flake or two in return, but that is mostly what a Faugheen bet would be. For all his enthusiasm, he just hasn't jumped fences with enough fluency and boldness to expect him to win a race of this quality. It was a fine win last time, but for all that we respect the runner up Easy Game, it shouldn't be good enough to win here. If he finds a rhythm in front then he could be hard to pass, but if you can't get a rhythm at Limerick or Leopardstown it will be very hard to find one in the heat of Cheltenham battle.

Leading the list of party poopers is the aforementioned Itchy Feet for young training sensation Olly Murphy. Half the age of Faugheen he has some festival credentials having very encouragingly produced his season's best here last year as a novice hurdler when 3rd in the Supreme. He was always built like a chaser in waiting and so it has proven with two good wins over fences. The most recent of those was a Grade 1 win at Sandown, a course that really tests jumping proficiency, and he was very good in despatching a fair field. If he produces his season's best here then he has to have a great chance.

Willie may also run the classy looking Allaho. This is a superbly athletic looking horse who should be heading to the very top on looks. He has an entry in the longer RSA, but I think it would be foolish to take such a free running sort over that gruelling trip. This looks much more the ideal test for him, the biggest test for Willie is the sentimental one of fielding a potential major threat against the old warrior Faugheen. If cold hearted pragmatism wins the day, and Allaho is given the job of free-wheeling his way around this 2m5f trip then he could be very hard to catch.

Samcro was the Envoi Allen of his day and had the world at his feet after a smooth Ballymore win. But that was the end of the goods days. His second-year hurdling campaign was a damp squib, and the switch to chasing has deteriorated badly after a promising start. If Gordon can somehow unearth that old promise he could still be brilliant, but for now he looks a shadow of what he promised to be.

I like Easy Game, and he jumps particularly well for a novice. He ran Faugheen close last time and arguably might have won on anything but the soft ground conditions of that Sunday. He also has a verdict over Allaho over Christmas. Much as I like him, and the formbook gives him an obvious chance, he was a consistent novice hurdler too until he came to Cheltenham and bombed out. He is short enough given that previous festival form and is passed over until he shows us some Cheltenham love.

Black Op ran second here as a novice hurdle to Samcro and brings top novice chase form to the table. He was run down by the classy Champ late on at Newbury and suffered the same fate behind Slate House at Kempton over Christmas. This course and distance looks a better combination for him and he was just 6l off Defi du Seuil and Lostintranslation here in a brief chasing foray last year, and if he can jump fluently then it may help him getting a lead from the undoubted pace-setters here having done the donkeywork himself of late. He could run a big race.

Nicky Henderson is wondering where to aim Mister Fisher. This horse has always had the scope to jump fences. He was just below the best as a novice hurdler, disappointing here in the Supreme on ground far too soft for him. I liked his last win in a decent little race at Doncaster and he looks sure to run well at this meeting. The suspicion is that if the ground is soft he'll head for the Arkle and if it is decent he will end up here. Ironically, I would like him best in a decent ground Arkle and I don't think we'll see that. If he runs here it's a sign the ground is favourable for him, but this trip on this course at the likely racing pace may be a little more than he wants.

Reserve Tank could be a Spring horse having won Grade 1 novice hurdles at both Aintree and Punchestown festivals last year. His chasing career hasn't been that impressive so far in small fields and this test looks a step too far at this stage.

The class act here could be **ALLAHO**, with the key question being whether Willie will try to feather the bed for Faugheen by taking Allaho elsewhere. If he were to run here in an event that suits him ideally, then he would be a confident pick.

**ITCHY FEET** is the most eye-catching of the domestic challengers should Allaho miss the race, but it could be that a grinder like Black Op could just outstay the big names if it's soft. Obviously those conditions also bring in Faugheen, and he will obviously be the sentimental bet, but his jumping suggests more mental than senti.

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**THURS: Race 2 - The Pertemps Handicap Hurdle - 3 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 7 Sire De Berlais, Relegate, Phoenix Way, The Storyteller,*

Some Festival races are tales of long held unrequited love – the worst type, and definitely the most expensive type, but my beloved Pertemps Final, most cherished of them all, thankfully gives a whole lot more than in takes.

It is the only festival race that requires prequalification and leads to a merry dance of contenders trying to ensure they get a place (by finishing in the top 6 of a qualifier), trying to ensure they get enough weight to make it into the top 20 places, but not so much as to dent their winning chances. These mixed motives make for labyrinthine plotting and intrigue, and I just love it.

One sure way to find the winner has been to look to the minor placings in Leopardstown's notoriously competitive Christmas qualifier. Numerous winners have come that route including last year's Guide pick and winner Sire De Berlais who snuck in under a typically cagy Davy Russell to grab the 6<sup>th</sup> spot last year.

Sure enough, look to 6<sup>th</sup> spot in that race this year and there again is the extraordinary D Russell, this time guiding ex-festival winning chaser The Storyteller into the last qualifying spot on return to hurdling, With trainer Elliott already a legend in festival handicap hurdles, it's no surprise to see that team at the head if the market. He is 7lbs higher on UK ratings but a mark of 149 is not far above the chase mark of 147 he won off here. Most of the Irish challengers here have a 3-5lb alignment adjustment upwards, so this guy has been punished around 3lbs more than most. It has the hallmarks of a well-judged plot, but whilst with Sire De Berlais the 6<sup>th</sup> place was never in doubt and he clearly had more under the bonnet, The Storyteller looked likely to miss out until staying on well late on to edge out the rest for 6<sup>th</sup>. That didn't scream as much potential, either that or Davy was playing a blinder on top to make it look so !!

Sire De Berlais is back, and jockey Barry Gerraghty will have been in training as he had to push, shove and cajole this fella for the full 3 miles last year before lifting him up the hill for a narrow win. That was the ride of the year and I was very grateful to see it. He looked threatening again when qualifying in typically understated fashion at Warwick and he is only 4lbs higher than last year. It is very tempting to show him some loyalty, but he had nothing in hand last year after such an inspired ride and surely it is asking too much for a similarly miraculous performance this year..

JP McManus has another leading contender in Phoenix Way who won his only race this season at Huntingdon, taking that qualifier by a head over the in form Kansas City Chief. That was a curious performance as he appeared to scramble home having travelled like much the best horse. That ability to travel in his races will be ideal here, and a mark of 140 puts him on pretty much the ideal racing weight. Barry Gerraghty rode him there and it will be fascinating to see which of this horse and Sire de Berlais he picks. I can see him being directed to SdB due to the connection they had last year, but if that means either Mark Walsh or Jonjo Jnr get the leg up here then that is just as good.

One who really catches the eye is the mare Relegate. She has one previous festival experience when winning the bumper here two years ago with a storming last to first burst up the hill. She was a less than fluent jumper of hurdles last season but still ran with credit in Grade 1 company at Leopardstown.

She left Willie Mullins over the close season and made her reappearance late in the Punchestown qualifier used by Delta Work before his win here two years ago. Now with the second incarnation of the Colm Murphy yard, she could have been forgiven for being rusty in that qualifier, but although ridden with constraint, she stayed on really well for a decent fourth place. She jumped better, and will need to maintain that improvement in this big field, but if she takes to the race, we know she loves the track, and her handicap rating is very tempting.

Skandiburg looked a really dour stayer winning here last time and a 5lb rise looks fair enough. Should enjoy the strong pace here and will be a player if it becomes a real slog. He looked beaten at one point in that last run and if he again loses his position in this race it will need a Sire De Berlais resurrection to get back into the mix.

Welsh Saint is a novice who won the Haydock qualifier in good style. A 4lb rise is again pretty generous, but you'd wonder if he would be streetwise enough in this big field where experience often counts. The same may apply to the progressive Silver Sheen who could improve enough to overcome a 6lb rise for a win in the Warwick qualifier. He has better big field experience than Welsh Saint and may do the better of the pair, but both have a big job on their hands.

One at a fair price is another of the McManus battalion in the mercurial veteran A Great View. He has a habit of getting out of touch before storming home, which is exactly what he did when a close 6<sup>th</sup> in this race two years ago. Managed to show enough enthusiasm to finish just ahead of Relegate when 3<sup>rd</sup> at Punchestown last time when not knocked about. The faster they go, and the earlier he gets in trouble the better. He may not have enough to win but is an entertaining each way bet as he will be finishing better than anything else.

My favourite race of the meeting. Phoenix Way looks well worth a look, but I'm going to chance a couple of mercurial types. **RELEGATE** could be very well handicapped if she wants to be and I'll trust her new stable to have her buzzing. **A GREAT VIEW** offers each way value provided he can stay in touch close enough for his late race surge to play a part.

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**THURS: Race 3 - The Ryanair Chase - 2 1/2 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 5/2 A Plus Tard, 3 Min, 6 Frodon,*

Let's hope Bryony Frost remembers her boarding pass as she is reunited with the lovable Frodon in an attempt to repeat last year's memorable heroics. Loaded with emotional baggage (don't tell the sponsors), the dynamic duo will look to repeat last year's catch me if you can tactics. The horse burst back to form last time at Kempton but it is far from clear he is quite as buzzing as he was last year. Doubtless the two will remain very hard to pass and having profited from their never say die effort last year its tempting to back them for the double, but this looks a tough race and they are as sure to have things their own way this time.

Chief tactic spoiler may be the classy Min. But for Altior he would have won a Supreme and a Champion Chase, as it is he is still searching for a first festival win. Forget a curious and disastrous tactical ride from Ruby in last year's Champion and judged on previous efforts it is easy to see why he is the clear top rated in this race. Tends to give his best when allowed to bowl along in front, which will put him at odds with Frodon, which not suit either of them too much. For all his top class form here, the suspicion is that he has been marginally better at other tracks like Aintree. He'll need to be every bit his best here as there is very strong opposition.

A Plus Tard was another to do us a favour last year when absolutely running away with the novice handicap off what proved to be a laughably low mark. His form suggests he is distinctly at his best when going left handed, and he showed his class by landing a Grade 1 over Christmas at Leopardstown, lowering the colours of the much hyped Chacun Pour Soir. Trainer Henry de Bromhead is one of Ireland's finest and jockey Rachael Blackmore is simply top class, and this horse has bags of promise. Will be ridden more conservatively, but is sure to loom large off the home bend and could swamp the other favourites for speed if they have ben battling too long at the front.

The market suggests the only other meaningful contender is Ridersonthestorm. He was trained in Ireland when fancied for the novice handicap lat year but he fell some way out although in hindsight he was unlikely to beat A Plus Tard. Has kept progressing for new trainer Nigel Twiston-Davies culminating in a Grade one win at Ascot recently. Its arguable if that for is quite up the other main players here. Add in what a gruelling race that was just a few weeks ago and he'd look the most likely of the big names to blow out.

Aso gave Frodon a fright as an upgraded handicapper last year, and he, Saint Calvados and Janika represent that category again this year.

Aso has struggled in three runs this season to emulate that fine runner-up effort from last year. That makes his big price understandable, but the Cheltenham annals are full of horses who raise their game for the festival and rarely in between and it would be no surprise if he was back in the mix again.

Saint Calvados runs for my good friend Harry Whittington. Harry is having a fantastic season and a first festival winner beckons, although he may need to wait another 90 minutes. Saint Calvados has run exceptionally well giving weight in decent handicaps and deserves a shot at this level. When he has

been raised in class before he has come up short and whilst a change in tactics have undoubtedly improved him, he is still likely to com up just short again. Don't worry Harry, be patient...

Janika chased home Ridersonthestorm in that tough Ascot race. He went close in a handicap here last year and looks the tough sort who may be able to come again after Ascot, but even at his best he looks 7lbs or more behind the main contenders here.

We love Frodon and Bryony, we respect Min and Paul Townsend, but this looks booked for the fabulous combination of **A PLUS TARD** and Rachael Blackmore.

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**THURS: Race 4 - The Stayers Hurdle - 3 1/4 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 4/6 Paisley Park, 8 Summerville Boy*

It's a while since the giddy days of the noughties, when Arsenal were a joy to watch (happy days...please again one day), when England were rugby world champions (oh mother of God no....please never again), and when the first port of call for the Stayers hurdle was simply "what won it last year". Two wins for Barracuda, then three wins for Inglis Driver, then four wins for Big Bucks.

It has been regifted from horse to horse since then like a boxset of the best of Derek Thompson, but surely that is about to end as we head back in time and prepare for another repeat winner.

The superb Paisley Park took this race in some style last season having looked in trouble coming down the hill. Those moments of threat are an attribute shared with those previous multiple champions – somehow its almost as though you need a real stayer to reign for a long period, and that type of horse typically hits a flat spot as others accelerate before the stamina kicks in and they reel them back in. Paisley Park has remained unbeaten this year and showed all his quality when winning the main trial for this, the Cleeve Hurdle here in January. If anything, he looks more dominant this season, and there looks to be precious little threat to the repeat. That said, the betting market tells us exactly that.

With Benie Des Dieux and Champ highly unlikely to run here, the main market challenge comes from former Supreme Novice winner Summerville Boy. He set out to make all in the Cleeve, and came up just under 2l short of beating Paisley Park. That is close enough to consider him the main danger. The question is whether in dictating a quick, slow, quick gallop there he maximised his position and may be beaten further if Paisley gets a nice gallop throughout, or whether Summerville Boy himself would benefit from letting something else go on. He is the most likely for straight forecast backers.

City Island did the guide a big favour when lowering Champ's colours to take last year's Ballymore. He was on a roll then but is now whatever the opposite of that is, as his two runs this season have been disastrous chasing efforts. It is far from obvious he wants this longer trip, and in a year with a terrible Champion Hurdle, the wisdom of taking on a top class champion over an unfamiliar trip looks questionable. Would be a leap of faith if he were in form, but can't be considered given his current state.

Emitom is a much more solid shout at a similar price. He was a decent novice last season, missing this festival but chasing home Chap over 3m at Aintree. His reappearance blow out in the Relkeel Hurdle can probably be ignored as he needed the race, and his sound beating of rivals at Haydock last time is a much clearer indicator of his talent. Has the ability to get in the mix here, but I would have preferred to see some Cheltenham achievement on the CV at this level.

Penhill won this 2 years ago, but hasn't looked in the same form this season. As an ex-flat horse I'd be a bit forgiving of his efforts in this midwinter mud, and if it really dries out he comes back into consideration, but I'd be worried that he may have become a bit jaded.

Apples Jade looks ready to retire to the paddocks and has developed a deep aversion to this course in recent years, whilst the talented L'Ami Serge is getting harder to win with than Fine Gael.

If anything is to creep into the frame at a huge price it might be old warrior Tobefair. He ran a good second to Sire De Berlais in the Pertemps final last year and won a fair handicap here at the start of the season. He is now rated 154, which whilst a stone behind Paisley, is only 2lbs behind the fancied Summerville Boy. He was staying on into 4<sup>th</sup>, admittedly getting weight in the Cleeve, but he would have been inconvenienced by the lack of pace there more than most. He probably needs the mud flying to give of his best, but if it becomes a slog don't be surprised if he plods into the frame.

This clearly will be won by PAISLEY PARK. There isn't a huge amount of value in backing him at odds-on. **SUMMERVILLE BOY** was the clear second best here in Jan, and assuming he will be ridden with a little more tactical restraint then he looks excellent value in the **betting without the favourite** market, and that is the way to play this race.

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**THURS: Race 5 - The Festival Plate - 2 1/2 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 9 Simply The Betts, 16 Deyrann de Carjac*

There have been 16 previous editions of this Guide, which wouldn't be possible or sane if it didn't throw up a fair share of winners. But whilst all the races have been kind at times, the Plate had become my Moby Dick, until I finally slayed the great white whale courtesy of Siruh Du Lac last year. My wife Tanya once returned to work from the Christmas break to tell colleagues how she had been in floods of tears watching the ending of Moby Dick. Now anyone who knows her will know she gets emotionally invested at the sight of an Andrex puppy, but grizzly Gregory Peck beckoning his shipmates to their doom while lashed to the back of a great white whale? Their confused silence lasted until Tanya's clarification of "oh no, I mean Free Willy".

The Kleenex will be out again here if our good friend Harry Whittington lands a festival prize with his useful novice Simply The Betts. He is the second of the "Golden Thread" horses running from a hot handicap her in Jan. If Imperial Aura lands the handicap on Tuesday then this fella's chances will be all the more obvious. He jumped really well that day and galloped powerfully near the front the whole way dispelling any stamina concerns by staying on really well up the hill to win. That looked impressive to the eye and has been franked by a runaway subsequent win of the third that day who was a dozen lengths behind. A rise in rating for that win ruled out the novice handicap, but leaves him on a potentially ideal weight for this. Good luck Harry!

Most of these have few secrets from the handicapper, with the collective of Oldgrangewood, Siruh Du Lac, Spiritofthegames and Cepage all closely intertwined and rated to finish in a bunch. That could be the bunch that contest this race, but it is more likely that something will arrive here with just too much improvement to come for these old regulars to handle.

Ben Dundee fits the unexposed bill and is well fancied for arch plotter Gordon Elliott. Ran a cracker to be second in a top handicap at Navan, and tuned up for this with a quiet hurdles run. Ran a distant 3<sup>rd</sup> to A Plus Tard in the novice handicap last year off 141, but his Irish mark of 142 has been adjusted up to 147 here and that may just have spiked his guns a little.

Deyrann de Carjac has the option of the novice handicap here off top weight but he has tended to prefer good ground and this race's position later in the week could be key to delivering that. On some bits of form such as his 3<sup>rd</sup> behind the top class Champ and Black Op at Newbury and his defeat of Pym he would look temptingly well handicapped off just 145, and he cannot be resisted to add depth to the ticket.

This could be big moment for our friend Harry, and we like the looks of his **SIMPLY THE BETTS** who we will be cheering on as he hopefully wings the last like Willy over the harbour wall. On a pure point of handicapping and in the hope of better ground, **DEYRANN DE CARJAC** looks well worth a punt.

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**THURS: Race 6 - The Mares Novice Hurdle - 2 miles**

*Selected Current Odds: 5/2 Minella Melody, 14 Ard Abhainn, 100-1 Igiveashit*

OK – rant time. And for those of you expecting a rant along the lines of what a useless waste of time this race, by far the weakest at the festival, and that it's a dangerous first step to more terrible dilution, then I refer you to the 2018 and 2019 editions of this Guide...

No, this year's rant is the existence of a penalty system in a race designed to find a champion. There would no penalties if this was a grade 1 race. It's the pre-eminent mares novice hurdle of the season, there to establish a mares novice champion, yet the racing authorities, probably in their wisdom, have decided that even though it's a championship event it still warrants no more than Grade 2 status. That's fine. The National Hunt Chase is Grade 2 and used to have a (bizarre) penalty system but that was dropped a few years ago, and it is hard to see why it is retained for the mares novice event. Sure penalties are par for the course in other Grade 2 events, but this should be recognised for it's intent, and that is surely undermined by having anything other than level weights.....and breathe...

The penalty is pertinent as favourite Minella Melody is saddled with the extra 5lbs here along with a few others. Henry de Bromhead's mare remains favourite off the back of a smooth defeat of Ireland's leading mares at Fairyhouse last time out. That was achieved under a penalty as well so she has little to fear from revised weights here and she looks well placed to break the vice like grip of Willie Mullins and the two mares that chased her home Colreevy and Dolcita. Of those two, Colreevy looks the biggest challenger as she is capable of excellent form.

Concertista is interesting having been beaten a short head in this on hurdling debut last season. She remains a maiden having disappointed this season, but not many races are run in the style of this event and she could recapture her best now reunited with those conditions.

Floressa leads the home challenge and has an honest chance, but the Irish have the edge here and there is a bit of value lower down the betting list. Gordon Elliott's Ard Abhainn looks hugely overpriced. She won her hurdles debut at Clonmel before third of 5 at Punchestown. She stayed on well there but couldn't catch Minella Melody, losing out by 2.5l. She followed that with an easy Thurles win in a listed race. That Minella Melody form entitles her to be in the mix for a place here, but as a 3m point winner and having screamed stamina in her runs to date, the switch from a 5 runner affair to this big field, likely strong pace and stiff track are all reasons why she may be able to close that gap. Should probably be half the price.

Santa Rossa was an outstanding bumper horse last season. She has the talent to be a contender, but has been rushed here with just one hurdle run when 3<sup>rd</sup> at Fairyhouse. That wasn't a bad effort for a debut performance, but she'll need to come on a ton to feature here. It's possible on raw talent but the bookies are giving nothing away.

Minella Melody is obviously the most likely winner, but there are good reasons to think **ARD ABHAINN** can close the gap to her under these race conditions and that makes her superb value.

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**THURS: Race 7- Kim Muir Handicap Chase - 3 1/4 miles - Amateurs**

*Selected Current Odds: 7 Ravenhill, 8 Le Breuil, No Comment, At The Acorn*

And now let's take a moment out to discuss hairy old veteran Cheltenham geldings. Yes, that could be my pal Andy, the Kim Muir king, who loves nothing more than spotting some slow old Trevor-Hemmings owned carthorse to burgle some massive each way value on. He'll be drawing a line through the top 10 in the betting and then starting his analysis, but for all his prep, it's usually the lager-fueled last minute pick that wins the day for him. This year his pick is perhaps more mainstream as I know he has been backing Le Breuil for the National for months, and he will be rowing in with him to show his potential here.

For all that Andy is a reliable old gelding, there is nothing reliable about my old villain Singlefarmpayment. There is a lot of history with him and me – all of it excruciatingly painful. It all started in the 2017 Ultima when I had him well backed as a novice – as it turned out subsequent races meant he would have landed a new-car sized payout for me. He cruised into contention that day and somehow lost out in a ding dong battle to the line. He was 5<sup>th</sup> in the race in 2018 on unsuitably soft ground when I left him alone, but I piled on weeks later on quick ground here to see him once again touched off a short head. Twice is very unfortunate, but it looks more than that after he did just the same in December 2018 with another short head defeat here – he is simply a monkey. Without wanting to come over all Elaine Page (not sure that reads right...), "I know him so well, but in the end I need a little bit more than him for security..." And yet, and yet. He has dropped from those mid 140 marks to 139, he looks likely to head here rather than his usual tilt at the Ultima, which not only is a fractional drop in class, but allows more time for the ground to dry out to something more befitting his preference, his record chasing at this track on good to soft or better ground is 122242 (spot the agony...), on soft or worse it is BP5047. If he gets a drying good to soft, I'll not be able to help myself. Hit it Barbara...if it is good (or good to soft), if it is fine (oh so fine), isn't it madness (almost certainly), he will be mine....

Until a few weeks ago this was easy with obvious plot horse Glenloe thrown in, but late injury has seen punters migrate to another of Gordon Elliott's, making Ravenhill favourite. Not many 10yos make their festival debuts as favourites, and it needs us to buy in to the idea that he is either a late bloomer or just supremely well handicapped. His form this year has probably been his best, with 5<sup>TH</sup> In the Galway Plate and runner up in the Kerry National, His mark of 142 looks reasonable without being a gift, and he has to overcome a fall last time out. He looks a fraction short in the market.

By contrast (and rarely) it is much easier to follow Andy's logic (an oxymoron if ever you wanted one), in picking Le Breuil. He won the disastrous 4m National Hunt chase here last year, a race in which only 2 genuinely finished (2 more completed at a walk). That was a tremendously brave effort for a horse who up til then had looked suited by both shorter distances and better ground. He was raised to 150 off the back of that and has been targeted at the Grand National this season, with his two chase runs coming firstly over the Aintree fences when weakening late on after a good run in the Becher chase, and then a distant 5<sup>th</sup> at Warwick in another marathon. Both of those were muddy slogs and he has been dropped 5lbs to a more tasty 145 just allowing him into this race. If we believe his greatest hour here last year

was despite of, rather than because of, the extreme muddy test, then this will be his first chance to prove that as he steps back to a bare 3m on what might be a better racing surface. Whilst he won't want to leave his National chances on the track here, equally he can't now get penalised after the National weights were fixed, so if the race is there to be won, then go and win it.

No Comment looks the leading JP McManus hope having come 5<sup>th</sup> in this race last year. The 9yo was previously 6<sup>th</sup> in the National Hunt Chase and 7<sup>th</sup> in the Martin Pipe on previous visits a rate of improvement that suggests he'll be a banker bet when he's a 12yo. He is kept very lightly raced – just 7 chases in 3 seasons. – so there is scope to improve on that 5<sup>th</sup> place. He is a pound lower this year and this will have been the target for the last 12 months.

Legendary Irish trainer Tony Martin was once the first port of call for all big festival gambles. He hasn't had the ammunition for a while, but if his At The Acorn gets in off a low weight here then expect to see a blast from the past. This horse looks well handicapped after recording some useful novice form he found all sorts of trouble in a wild race at the Dublin festival before coming home well for 6<sup>th</sup>. He needs around 30 to drop out of this and that is touch and go, but if he does sneak in then he has to be on the shortlist.

Andy, and particularly my good friend John, will be having the Trevor Hemmings hot flushes for useful novice Deise Aba. Those colours landed 3 of these in 5 years back in the day and Philip Hobb's stayer will be looking to end a 10yr drought for the owner. He was particularly good at Sandown last time at a course that takes a lot of jumping for a novice. He has only had 7 races under rules and is entitled to be improving fast. A 7lb rise for that win is workable and he comes here with a leading chance.

The handicapper has given Milan Native a mark of 138 and he is hard to assess as his season has comprised of chasing home better horses at the kind of distance that would comply with a restraining order. Indeed the jockeys may have been operating under exactly that with his handicap mark in mind. He has had 5 runs over fences so he has picked up experience, but how much if any he has in hand is guesswork. If you see his price collapsing that might suggest some of those inside the Elliott yard may know where he stands relative to Ravenhill.

You've just got to love this race and there are all sorts of plot and sub-plots lurking. I have huge respect for Deise Aba and At The Acorn, but my shortlist has to be No Comment, Le Breuil and Singlefarmpayment. **LE BREUIL** looks worth support in conditions that should suit and with the backing of Kim Muir king Andy, as for the main pick – and knowing the best I can probably hope for is a crushing short head defeat, it has to be **SINGLEFARMPAYMENT**. You'll see me head in hands afterwards, quietly whispering... “looking back I could have played it differently.....”

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***FRI: Race 1 The Triumph Hurdle - 2 miles for novices aged 4 years old***

*Selected Current Odds: 3 Solo, 4 Goshen, 9/2 Allmankind, 6 Aspire Tower*

There has been talk in recent months of moving to a 5 day festival. I would urge the Cheltenham executive to position themselves on the last drag up the Evesham Road on Friday to take the pulse, metaphorically at least – physically probably being a near impossibility – of the bedraggled all-weekers climbing wearily for one last tilt at glory like tailed off Kim Muir also-rans, being rapidly overtaken by shiny suited juveniles fresh to the party with their partners in seasonally mis-judged Ascot-wear. Those poor exhausted soles, can they really find it in them for a fifth day, climbing that hill for a mares bumper? It's not so much a case of less is more, as enough is enough.

Once we arrive footsore and wallet-weary to Gold Cup day, on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> no less, we kick off with what looks a truly cracking edition of the Triumph Hurdle.

This is always a test of stamina for juveniles, and this year is likely to be more than most with a searching gallop almost assured.

Leading the charge will be blazing front runner Allmankind. The form of his all the way Chepstow win at least theoretically has the edge on the Irish through the well beaten Cerberus. He was impressive here before that too and he was a decent flat horse. The issue is whether he can maintain his gallop the whole way here. Typically jockey Harry Skelton may look to get a breather into him coming down the hill, but he is surrounded by fellow prominent racers here and the likelihood is he will be challenged as soon as the foot comes off the pedal. That is likely to force him to burn his reserves too soon.

Chief antagonist for Allmankind's pace dominance is likely to be rapid improver Goshen. He won all 5 races in 2019 with ease, three on the flat and two over jumps, and his Ascot win in January took a huge boost when the runner up trotted up in a big handicap next time. A lot has been made of a perceived right hand bias and how that could undermine his chances on this left hand course. I don't buy that, or at least I consider it wholly unproven. It is true that some horses have distinct directional bias. That is sometimes visible in their running style and sometimes only in the form book. There are no black marks in the form book for Goshen, he just hasn't been tested this way around, so the theory is based on visuals, in particular a market tendency to jump well to his right late in races. Well this a left handed track, but the New Course famously only has two hurdles in the last three quarters of a mile. Runners often pull wide to the stand side rail in the straight, making the last hurdle a de facto right biased obstacle. The second last, midway down the hill, is also often jumped wide especially in soft ground. So if Goshen does have a right hand bias, and it only merges late in the race, then it should be no problem here.

Ireland's main hope looks to be Aspire Tower. He looked a real contender when making all to win easily at Leopardstown over Christmas. Of similar ability to the other leading lights here on the flat, his prospects took a bit of a knock with a last fence fall last time at Leopardstown. It is never good coming to the festival off a fall, but more than that he was looking to have a fight on his hands from Cerberus at the time. He would probably have won that battle but nothing like as convincingly as Allmankind did to the same rival at Chepstow. Probably worth opposing on the collateral form line and given the tip-up last time out.

What was looking like a three way battle became more like a four horse battle, and arguably a one horse no-battle when Solo made his UK debut at Kempton just over 3 weeks ago. This is a tried and tested route for the ex-French juveniles, shipped in and entering the fray at the last hour, with Zarkandar and Soldatino both pulling off that trick in recent years. French juveniles tend to be precocious jumps bred horses and have become more the model for these top juvenile races, although Pentland Hills showed last year there is still room for the ex-flat convert. Solo was a good second on debut to another Nicolls acquiree, Strategem, whose defeat at lowly Bangor recently showed this ploy doesn't always work. In fairness to Solo he improved to streak home in his second French start before deeply impressing with his Kempton romp. He impresses on looks, he has a fine long gallop and his hurdling was very efficient. Given that trainer Nicholls would probably never dare to compare a horse to Kauto Star or Denman, it was the highest praise available when he likened Solo to the superb Master Minded, another French import of the past. The biggest doubt will be whether he can back that performance up less than 4 weeks later, but he did something similar with a short enough gap between his two French runs. He could be different class.

With so much talent at the head of the market, the scope for an each way pick is pretty thin given only 3 paying places. A Wave Of The Sea was the ultimate beneficiary of Aspire Tower's fall last time having been 35l behind that rival at Christmas. He doesn't do anything particularly fast but he seems to stay well, and if the front runners go to fast he could arguably stay on for a place through the beaten horses, but given his win chance is remote, the place part of an each way would only offer up a roughly evens return on total staked – and that's not nearly enough reward for the risk.

A better each way prospect may be another Nicholls contender in Sir Psycho. He has come a long way quickly having been beaten in a handicap at Taunton off 117 in November, but a wide margin novice win and then a very impressive win at Haydock sees him now rated 147. He really impresses and it may well be he needs the soft ground as it was quicker when he flopped. Given the winter drenching, there is a fair chance he may get ground he enjoys and he appeals most as one who could shake up the big 4 and claim at least a place.

A super start to the final day. I am not against Goshen and he looks sure to go well, as might Sir Psycho at a price, but the fluent win of **SOLO** at Kempton suggested something special and it will be a big disappointment if he doesn't ink himself in as one of the horses of the next five years by taking this in impressive style.

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***FRI: Race 2 - The County Handicap Hurdle - 2 miles***

*Selected Current Odds; 9 Ciel De Neige, 12 Mohaayed, 14 Aramon, 16 Janidil*

The last 16 runnings of this race have seen 4 wins for Willie Mullins, 4 wins for Paul Nicholls and 3 wins in the last 4 years for Nicholls student Dan Skelton. That would be an impressive indicator except they have 10 of the top 14 in the betting !!

Skelton's last two winners, Mohaayed and Ch'tibello are both back for more. Ch'tibello has been trying his hand in Champion Hurdle trials and this would be his first handicap since last year's win. He is 9lbs higher this year, which would have thwarted him last year, and is likely to do so here.

Mohaayed runs in his 4th County Hurdle having been 7th off 134 as a novice, before providing us with a highlight to remember when taking the 2018 race off 139. They were both characterized as basically his best runs of the season, and the same was arguably true of his 7th last year off a punishing mark of 153. This year has seen him plug around towards the mid-rear of some classy soft ground handicaps and that has been enough to see him dropped all the way down to 142. Only 3lb higher than when winning that is generous treatment and he looks his stable's best chance of maintaining their record.

Willie could probably hold a County Hurdle all of his own with a raft of interesting entries. I was sweet on last year's Fred Winter 4th Ciel De Neige in the Betfair at Newbury last time and his second place was as hard to decipher as it was to stomach. He never had the kind of cover I would have hoped for and then the race fell apart (literally) leaving him exposed and in the lead a fair way from home. He just didn't last out, looking a bit green in the process. If he can be covered up here and switched off then he clearly has scope of this mark.

Janidil has won three on the bounce this season and was particularly good in a valuable handicap at Fairyhouse last time when particularly strong at the finish have travelled with authority throughout. He went up 10lbs for that but the handicapper could be struggling to match his progress. He was giving 4<sup>th</sup> home Ciel de Neige 4lbs that day. That is 10lbs now in this race and that extra 6lbs looks manageable given both the margin of the win and the style of the win that day. It looks significant that Willie has left him off the track since leaving him on this workable mark where one more good run might have compelled him up into graded company.

The other one of Willie's to consider is the frustrating mare Buildmeupbuttercup. She is a class act on the flat but has consistently undermined her hurdling chances with sloppy jumping. A low sun taking out all the hurdles would help. It hindered her when she split Janidil and Ciel De Neige at Fairyhouse and despite the winner's reassessment, she is only a pound better off here. It again undermined her when a mistake at the last when leading contributed to 5<sup>th</sup> in a valuable handicap at the Dublin festival last time. This race, with just 2 flights of hurdles in the last 6f promises to help a lot. It will be a big surprise if she doesn't arrive full of running off the home turn. She will need to be played very late though with the jump and climb finish probably less than ideal.

Eldorado Allen looks the type that could go well in this having a touch of class. His comeback second at Sandown first time out under a big weight was truly outstanding. He was though worthy of pitching into a Champion Hurdle trial after that but probably ran a little below his best on deep ground after a relatively short break from that comeback. Freshened up for this, if he can find progress from that

Sandown form he looks just the horse to run a big race, He has held a Champion Hurdle entry til quite late which is a sign of the regard he is held in. A mark of 150 looks within scope.

Soviet Pimpernel has an entry in the Supreme. That may be flying a bit high but his course form with Quel Destin from earlier in the season reads well, and whilst his Fairyhouse blow out was a disappointment that was in the Royal Bond with 1-2-3 of Envoi Allen – Abracadabras and Darver Star. This looks the race for him, and of connections can be persuaded from a glory hunt tilt at Grade 1 then he becomes a fascinating challenger here.

Remiluc is an 11yo from an unfashionable stable and is priced accordingly. But he was an unfashionable 9yo when winning a handicap at a big price here in Jan 2018, an unfashionable 9yo when a 50/1 runner up to Mohaayed here in 2018, and an unfashionable 11yo as recently as last month when a 66/1 3<sup>rd</sup> a short head behind Ciel de Neige in the Betfair. Up just 4lbs for that he is still a pound lower than when second here 2 years ago. He obviously doesn't have the flashy appeal of many of these, but has yet again been ignored in the market and looks overpriced.

A cracking edition in which I can't let 2018 hero **MOHAAYED** go unbacked. But Willie has a huge entry here and much as I like Ciel de Neige, it looks like **JANIDIL** may have the ideal profile and scope to keep improving. Remiluc may reward big odds punters again.

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***FRI: Race 3 The Albert Bartlett Novice Hurdle - 3m***

*Selected Current Odds: 9/2 Thyme Hill, 11/2 Monkfish, 6 Latest Exhibition 10 Harry Senior*

This can be a soul-destroying (and wallet-destroying) race as a collection of classy novices are pummelled into submission by some hitherto unremarkable plodder who slugs their way around the endless muddy laps to record the one win of their lives worthy of merit.

That said for every Berties Dream (god bless you), Very Wood (God damn you), Martello Tower or Klbricken Storm, there are also a few classy winners in Bobs Worth, Unowhatimeanharry and Penhill – so we can't completely overlook the form book.

The classy types this year are headed by unbeaten hurdler Thyme Hill. He looked a horse to follow when closing down on winner Envoi Allen on his way to a close third in the Bumper here last year. His first two hurdles wins, including one here suggested he is every bit as good over obstacles, whilst his grinding win in the Challow at Newbury last time said a lot for his guts and determination to win. He has the best staying novice form in the UK, and looks likely to come here rather than the hard-to-win Ballymore, and fully deserves to be favourite. I have long been a fan, but there could be other angles to this race.

The leading Irish challenger in the betting is the huge Willie Mullins novice Monkfish. A very expensive recruit from point to points, he looks every one of his many inches like a staying chaser of the future. He falls into the could-be-anything category, but he comes here pretty lightly raced for this test. Last year's winner Minella Indo was similarly lightly raced, but most horses with this profile struggle here and he looks plenty short enough in the betting.

A more likely Irish winner to my eyes is the super professional Latest Exhibition. He boasts rock solid credentials with his only defeat over hurdles coming behind the classy Abracadabras over an inadequate 2m. he really shod his true worth stepped up to 2m6f last time in a grade 1 at the Leopardstown festival which is probably the strongest single form line to this contest. That race has strength in depth and all the big-name horses finished in the top 6, but none were able to match this fella's finishing effort. He was never more on top than at the finish and he has the blend of speed and staying power to be a big danger.

Colin Tizzard won this a couple of years ago. His rangy chaser-to-be The Big Breakaway has this option as well as the Ballymore. He is one of those horses like Monkfish whose obvious physical credentials scream of a massive future, but punters need to be wary of what that means today. The concept of present value asks us to take future value and discount it to today's value using an appropriate risky discount factor. Horses like this fella have obvious potential future riches awaiting, but we sometimes need to ramp up that discount factor as it may not be so valuable today, after all I remember walking away from the 2011 Festival thinking I'd seen the best prospect ever, Sprinter Sacre – I was probably right, but he was only good for 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Supreme at that stage of his career.

Tizzard may have a better chance with the sturdy Harry Senior. This guy has been a slow burner, losing out to good novices Sporting John and Edwardstone over 2m before breaking his duck upped to 2m4f at Chepstow. He really caught the eye here last time when staying on much the best to land a Grade 2

novice over 2m4f from some decent rivals. He just looked better the further he went that day and looks set to be a real force with this added emphasis on stamina. He has a really effective galloping style and is the kind of slugger touched with class that prospers in this race.

Diol Ker has a 71 winning verdict over Monkfish back in early November, but whilst the runner up has progressed in 2 wins since, we haven't seen Diol Ker since. He obviously has scope to improve, but he had previous experience prior to that Naas win and it may be that he was just more ready at that time. His absence since is not ideal.

Fury Road carried a big reputation into a Grade 1 at Leopardstown and ran well albeit just over 5l behind Latest Exhibition in 4<sup>th</sup> that day. He has a huge knee carriage and hits the ground with a hard pummelling action that shouts that he will be at his best when it's very soft. That he got as close as he did to decent horses on good to soft last time suggests he may be no lost cause if it comes up really deep. I won't back him yet, but if it comes up heavy then he should be in anyone's squad.

Another mudlark is useful staying chaser Ramses De Teillee, who ran in the Grand National off 149 last April. He is 3 from 3 as a novice hurdler this season, landing good staying prizes on soft ground the last twice. He will not lack for slugging qualities but will probably need it very soft to blunt the greater class of some of the leading lights here.

Cobblers Way looked a decent mid-ranking novice at shorter trips but put up a fine effort from the front to finish second to Latest Exhibition at Leopardstown. He couldn't match that winner for speed that day but the way he rallied back past the useful Longhouse Poet to still be close at the death suggests this greater stamina test could see him improve again. He may not get things his own way up front in particular with The Cashel Man in opposition, but it's not clear at this early stage of his career if he needs to lead or has simply produced his best when doing so because he can ensure a stamina test. Could be interesting if he gets that test here whilst able to conserve a little by slipstreaming rather than setting the gallop.

The Cashel Man is interesting himself on his narrow defeat by Thyme Hill. He is a tremendously slick hurdler and can put pressure on his field from the front. That said this looks terrible placing as bombing off the front of a Coral Cup looks much more a fit, but Henderson sends him here where they only jump 2 hurdles in the last ¾ of a mile, and where he is less likely to be able to slip his field.

Mossy Fern and Redford Road represent the Twiston-Davies yard. Mossy Fern seems to be the stable's preferred contender, but as just a 5yo he is pretty young for this test, Very Wood won in at 5 but that was a black swan event (in many ways).

A cracking renewal and plenty with chances. I respect the class of Thyme Hill who I have long fancied for this, and Latest Exhibition, but at the odds there could be better value with **HARRY SENIOR** who looks tailor-made for this, whilst **COBBLERS WAY** is worth a look at longer odds for last year's winning yard.

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***FRI: Race 4 - The Gold Cup Chase 3 1/4 miles***

*Current Selected Odds: 7/2 Al Boum Photo, Santini, 6 Delta Work*

And now the main event of the week – that’s with due deference to my beloved Pertemps Final, the baby Guinness drink off between The Hooley and the Broderick brothers, or our group’s best dressed award (a close run call between Tanya and Phil, the Chanel boots, faux fur and elegant hats possibly just shading it for Phil !! Andy and Donald compete for the places, John and I aim for faded elegance and get, well just faded, whilst they’ll be putting the green screens around Pete).

The Gold Cup is a supreme test of speed and stamina – not many get into this race if they can’t race comfortably at speed – none win this if they can stay that last gruelling climb to the finishing line.

The obvious starting point is last year’s winner Al Boum Photo. Not many horses defend this title. Best Mate did it twice, but that is now 17 years ago (Holy shit where did that go?) and it was over 30 years before that since L’Escargot defended. That shows the impact a Gold Cup can have – it is such a tough race to win not many bounce back in as good a form. Injuries at this level are common and there are always a new draft of contenders from the previous year’s novice ranks. Willie Mullins is a training genius and he has sought to maximise ABP’s chances by using the Best Mate approach – ie the minimum amount of racing from one Gold Cup to the next. After following last year’s success with defeat to Kemboy at Punchestown, he has had just the one run, an easy win at Tramore, exactly the same prep as when winning last year. He is still only 8 and there is no reason to think he won’t run to the same level as his 2.5l win last year. The question therefore is if anything can run better?

All those beaten in last year’s race will need a compelling reason to close gap. Bristol De Mai came closest of those re-opposing when third. That was a decent effort for a horse who had reserved his best for Haydock and had been disappointing at the track previously. Having lost his Haydock crown to Lostintranslation and then beaten here by Santini, he looks to have a lot to do to close the gap on those two let alone Al Boum Photo.

Clan Des Obeaux was 5<sup>th</sup> last year having looked threatening at the bottom of the hill but fading out of it. He again won the prestigious King George over Christmas in impressive fashion, and has wisely sidestepped the additional run he had last year at Newbury. That extra freshness may be beneficial, but to my eyes he travelled beautifully last year and just didn’t get home, and that is a hard fact to solve just by added freshness. Admittedly, I thought Al Boum would be a nonstayer last year based on his fading fall in the RSA the year before, but the safest bet is probably to expect Clan Des Obeaux run to a similar race this year, with a minor frame place likely.

Presenting Percy is one of this guide’s favourite horses but his flop in this race last year brought his festival record to 2 from 3 for us. If he could find the form of his fluent RSA win over Monalee and a falling Al Boum Photo then he would have an obvious chance. He has been campaigned mor

conventionally this season but defeats at Punchestown and Leopardstown twice whilst creditable efforts still fall below his past standards and what is needed to win this. His trainer is expert at having them right for Cheltenham, so all is not lost, but even as an avid fan I have to accept that the likely situation is that he is just short of the horse he promised to be.

Kemboy fell at the first in this last year. His subsequent wins at Aintree and Punchestown suggested he is right up there with the best in this class. But that Cheltenham failure leaves him 0 from 3 at the track the suspicion being he is best on flat track like Leopardstown, Aintree, and to a lesser extent Punchestown. With that profile in mind it is worrying that he has lost both Leopardstown runs to Delta Work this season as it looks unlikely on past efforts that he will find improvement in Cheltenham. His day may come again at the later Spring festivals.

So the primary threats to a title defence look much more likely to come, as they always do, from last year's novice quarters with Lostintranslation coming from the old JLT, and both Santini and Delta Work from the traditional Gold Cup breeding ground of the RSA.

Lostintranslation looks the part as a bold jumping prominent racer he captured many hearts in brave and narrow defeat to the top class Defi Du Seuil in last year's JLT. A trouncing of RSA winner Topofthegame at Aintree may have been a case of that horse being below his best, but a defeat of Bristol de Mai at that one's beloved Haydock had Lostintranslation promoted to favourite for this. That lasted one lap of Kempton, which was just about all it took to realise he was having an off day there. Not all horses like that race and a few have bounced back from disappointment there to win this. If we determine he will be back to his best then he is entitled to be a big player. Whether he truly wants this test of stamina remains to be seen, and that coupled with the poor run last time is enough doubt to look elsewhere.

Delta Work ran a curious race in the RSA last year, cruising into contention then seemingly beaten by the last before edging close again in the hill. After a terrible reappearance at Down Royal he has bravely battled home twice at Leopardstown in Grade 1s including the Irish Gold Cup last time. That clearly deserves respect here and he comes with a fighting chance. The margin of victory has been small enough, and there must be a question mark if he can raise his game as seems likely to have to win this.

Santini has always been a reputation horse and often trades too short in the market. He is a curious mix of being a real stayer but one who probably needs a decent surface to be at his best. He had mud when placed in an Albert Bartlett, whilst the going was ideal in the RSA last year, but the 3m trip on the Old Course was probably not quite enough of a test. He was also unlucky last year, having been held up by the equine flu jabs and coming to the race fresh from a foot problem that held up any last minute work. This year he opened with an awful effort in victory at Sandown, but freshened up and with a small wind operation, he was much more impressive beating Bristol de Mai on going that would have been soft enough for him here in January. That was 3m, this is 3m2f, and the way he was stretching away at the end suggests that at this trip he would have had a winning margin comparable or better than Al Boum Photo's margin over the same horse in this race last year. With his prep having gone perfectly, and with

potentially drying ground, everything may finally be in his favour this year and we might finally see what has long been promised from this athletic chaser.

There is no much depth in the outsiders, and enough depth in the favourites to think there is unlikely to be much each way value here this year.

Al Boum Photo is a s likely to defend his title as any winner of the last decade, but history tells us the novices of last year will provide the greater threat. Lostintranslation is a fine horse but with clouds to clear, so it looks like Delta Work and Santini from last year's RSA are the key players. This looks like it could be the moment for **SANTINI** to finally deliver, with Al Boum Photo for runner up and Delta World for the frame.

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***FRI: Race 5 - The Foxhunters Chase - 3 1/4 miles for Amateur Riders***

*Current Selected Odds – 5 Hazel Hill, 7 Minella Rocco, Billaway, Staker Wallace 10 Caid du Berlais*

Ghost hunters, Heir hunters, Bargain hunters or fox hunters. Not sure which of those is the most ethically unsound pursuit, but it is time for one of them to take centre stage. No, we won't be treated to a pair of red fleeced antique nerds bartering with me to buy my already worthless placepot ticket for £80 in front of a perplexed Tim Wonnacott – instead it's time the odd mix of gentleman amateurs, chinless toffery, hardy west country women, and near professional Irish geniuses to compete for the Foxhunters crown.

Last year's winner Hazel Hill is favourite to repeat. He was on a roll last year coming here with 12 wins in 13 runs. He was a good winner, but he scraped home back here in a weaker event a month later and looked a bit ragged when narrowly losing to Minella Rocco recently. That will probably be fixed but he is now a 12yo, and whilst many horses win this in their advanced years it is still likely that the best he can be is as good as last year and any slippage opens the door to challengers.

Minella Rocco was a good winner here as a novice, and has been second in a Gold Cup. That gives him an obvious class edge on back form, but he had been tailing off for a while and although he now has verdicts over both Hazel Hill and Bob And Co, the impression is that he was lucky on both occasions. This course suits him and he would go well on drying ground, but he has to be vulnerable.

Billaway is a coming youngster. He comes from the high-class Mullins yard and has been a decent enough sort without looking likely to win this. Then he showed dramatic improvement from his seasonal debut when sprinting away with a good hunter chase at Naas. The question really is whether that is a sign of improvement in the hands of a master trainer and we should expect that and more in this race, or whether that race just fell in his lap and he will revert to being promising without being outstanding. The odds are pretty tempting given we are being asked to place our faith in Mr Mullins.

Staker Wallace is lightly raced and ran a blinder back from a long lay off when leading the Naas race until the run to the last when Billaway breezed past. He is entitled to come on for that and has easily won a point to point since. He could be anything having competed in only 4 chases in his life. He could come on, but has 8l and weight to find with Billaway and that might be too much.

Last year's runner up Shantou Flyer is a quality horse whose chances probably improve if his daring owner-rider takes the mount on Bob and Co. That would improve Shantou's chances but he probably needs mud. Stablemate Caid Du Berlais probably won't sit quicker as it was when he ran away with the Punchestown champion hunter having pulled up here last year. He has an easy point win in the bag this Spring and is a big contender under the useful Will Biddick.

A fascinating contest in which **BILLAWAY** and Caid Du Berlais make the most appeal, with the Mullins contender the most likely to post a lifetime best.

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***FRI: Race 6 - The Grand Annual Chase - 2 miles***

*Current Selected Odds – 7 Greaneteen, 9 Lisp, 14 Brelan Das 16 On The Slopes*

I like to mention that my festival CV includes picking both Beware The Bear to win the Ultima and William Henry to win the Coral Cup. I usually omit that they were 2018 tips and I deserted both by the time they returned to win those races in 2019 !!. Well I run that risk here as last year's tip, Magic Saint returns much more experienced and in good form. He is also about 5lb higher in the weights but that may not stop him running a cracker. Despite that I just prefer to look elsewhere.

Novices Greaneteen and Lisp head the market. Greaneteen is a typical Nicholls contender and arrives on a roll of 3 straight wins. That said he is up 18lbs for those wins, the last of which was a success at 2/5 in a 3 runner Fakenham affair. This will be a very different test and I doubt if he is as close to stablemate Magic Saint as a 5lb gap suggests.

Lisp has stronger credentials and a mark of 144 is a pound lower than when he was 5<sup>th</sup> in the County Hurdle here last year. He has had just 3 chase starts, all in small fields, but his close third to Mister Fisher at Doncaster last time was an excellent effort. The Alan King stable know how to win this race with a novice and he has plenty of appeal.

Gordon Elliott brings a couple of useful novices of his own in Chosen Mate and Eclair De Beaufeu. Chosen Mate won in really impressive fashion in the fog at Gowran last time and is definite contender here. Although a mark of 147 seems fully loaded. He is marginally preferred to stablemate Éclair, who ran away with a top handicap at Leopardstown earning a big bump up to 149. That's 13lbs higher than when a late faller as he was just starting to fade in the County Hurdle last year. That makes him a stone worse off with Lisp on that run and I am not sure Éclair has done enough over fences to warrant that turnaround.

I am very sweet on the form of a novice handicap here from January. The winner, Simply The Betts and the runner up Imperial Aura are two strong fancies for the Plate and the Northern Trust respectively. If as hoped they both go in, then that advertises heavily the claims of the third home that day On The Slopes who looks likely to step back to this 2m test. Sure he was 11l behind the front two that day but that doesn't tell the whole story as he swept to the front 3 out and had both those rivals in trouble before the fuel gauge hit empty on the run to the last and that classy pair outstayed him from there. That eye catching mid race move suggested he is capable of better and a subsequent all-the way romp over 2m2f around speedy Kempton confirmed that view. A 7lb rise looks very fair and sneaks him in here off a basement rating. Can lead or sit just off it, and looks a cracking bet.

Another stepping down in trip could be Spiritofthegames who last saw 2 miles in the 2018 County Hurdle. His chasing career has been exclusively at 2m4f over which he was a great 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Plate here last year. He has continued to run well at that trip and at this course since but looking just a fraction high in the weights to land the win. It would be an interesting move for the shrewd Skelton yard to step him back. He is likely to be run off his feet, but few will stay as well as him, and he can find a rhythm at

this distance then he will be staying on best of them all. Always runs with cheekpieces and interest will be further spiked if we see a change in headgear with blinkers or visor making a first appearance.

If we respect the chances of last year's 10<sup>th</sup>, Magic Saint off a 5lb higher mark, then what of last year's winner Croco Rouge, also 5lbs higher. He ran a great race last time at Doncaster suggesting that he is ready to defend. That said, whilst his win as a 12yo last year was a trend buster, repeating as a 13yo would be astonishing.

An interesting contender is the experienced Marracudja. He was spotted running on very well late on for 8<sup>th</sup> in this race last year. That was off 139 and now he returns off a controversial mark of 154. That was earned by virtue of a close third in the Garde 1 Clarence House chase, 7l behind Defi du Seuil, (rated 170), 5l behind Un De Sceaux (rated 166) and 10l ahead of Janika (rated 162). The handicapper didn't know what to make of that. Leaving Marracudja unchanged in the low 140s would have been to rubbish that form, whilst rating him as if the form was rock solid would have meant a mark of c163. He split the difference suggesting the Ascot form is questionable. We'll know by this race as Defi will have contested the Champion Chase. I suspect 154 is asking too much, but it's feasible to take the view that he could be 9lbs well in !!

A fast and furious blast in store, but I am sticking to the golden thread theory and the potentially well-n **ON THE SLOPES** is a confident pick to go well. **LISP** makes by far the most appeal of the market leaders, and whilst fully expecting Magic Saint to hit me with the year-too-soon curse, it's the intriguing step back in trip for Spirtofthegames that has most appeal of the longer odds.

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***FRI: Race 7 - The Martin Pipe Handicap Hurdle - 2 1/2 miles for Conditional Jockeys***

*Current Selected Odds – 7 Front View, Ilikedwayurthinkin, 8 Column Of Fire, Pileon*

This race has become something of a punters pal and has certainly helped me walk away from the festival with a spring in my step the last few years, or at least whatever passes for a spring at the end of this relentless week.

Whilst the unexposed novice is the classic fit for this race, the big field can be an intimidating challenge, and 8 of the last 10 winners had at least 5 runs over hurdles, suggesting some experience is desirable. Indeed last year's winner Early Doors (gave that one a might cheer !!) failed to win this as a lightly raced novice but came back to win it the following year.

Gordon Elliott learnt his trade under mentor Martin Pipe and seems to have a big contender or two for this every year, with 2 wins and 3 seconds in the last 7 years. He has the usual squad of entries this year but the one that most seems to fit the bill is the Gigginstown owned Column Of Fire. He is in his second season hurdling after an aborted campaign last year. After chasing home useful types Elixir D'Ainay and Longhouse Poet in his first two runs this year, an unlucky late fall was quickly right by a fluent maiden victory. He dipped his toe into a big field handicap over 3m at the Dublin Festival, and a strong finishing 3<sup>rd</sup> of 28 was a valuable learning experience. Elliott went the same route with last year's runner up Dallas des Pictons, but Column OF Fire looks likely to find more in a finish, and he has to be near the top of the list.

Last year's winning owner has a couple of well fancied contenders in Front View and Ilikedwayurthinkin. Front View looks a classy sort for last year's wining stable. He was a nice second last time in the race 2018 winner Blow By Blow (Oh happy day) prepped in. This looks a very fair mark and I would be surprised if he isn't a fair bit better, but he has had only the three hurdle runs so will need to overcome the inexperience factor. The race is restricted to conditional jockeys, and last years winner Jonjo O'Neill jnr sneaks in by virtue of his status at the start of the season, Very much on the road to being a top jockey he will not be faze by the pressure of this race and that is a massive asset to and already quality individual.

Ilikedwayurthinkin won twice in a week at Galway last Summer and his two runs since have clearly had some firm intent – namely not to get to close to winning to ruin this handy rating. He has the experience for this race, but is a lot higher in the weights than for those Galway wins and it's a leap of faith whether they have been hiding enough from the handicapper to be winning a race as competitive as this.

Pileon has made hay with two easy novice wins after a nice introductory 4<sup>th</sup> at this course. He will have the benefit of one of the young hot property jockeys in Ben Jones and looks the leading domestic

challenger. He has the inexperience factor to meet having had just the 3 hurdle runs and never in a field bigger than 8 runners, and that may be too much of a challenge.

A huge number of other potential challengers, many of whom hold other entries, but a few to note from the pack are headed by Dame De Compagnie who has returned from injury in fine form, following a staying on 5<sup>th</sup> in the top notch Greatwood hurdle with a fluent defeat of the useful Indefatigable here in December. The 8lb rise for that effort looks well earned, and she has been kept fresh since. If she comes here over a possible Coral Cup challenge then she'd have to be a big contender.

Five O'Clock won the Thurles race in which Front View was second and is only 6lb worse off for that cosy win. Probably deserves on the book to be closer to that rival in the betting although there was the distinct impression that Front View was being ridden for a handicap mark that day.

Alfa Mix is another with the Coral Cup as an option but would be very interesting here. Ran a blinder in a Navan handicap last time to be just edged out and has curiously been left on his Irish mark, which looks generous given most of his country-folk have a 5-7lb rating alignment to overcome. With the stable having likedwayurthinkin, I expect he'll head for the Coral but if he comes here he is very much on the shortlist.

Gordon Elliott has another big chance with The Bosses Oscar whose novice form is working out well, although he is another coming here off just 3 hurdle runs. The Meath maestro may have a less obvious but interesting chance with Thatsy. He has already graduated from novice company to run in two well contested Leopardstown handicaps. He has run as though this extra trip would help, and with his trainer likely to have him cherry ripe for this he makes most appeal of those at longer odds.

A very deep handicap with lots of big contenders, but we could be treated to a replay of last year when Gigginstown and Elliott were just touched off by O'Brien, JP McManus and Jonjo Jnr. Column of Fire and Front View are the two horses this time, and they are fancied for the reverse forecast (hey its only the Martin Pipe – how hard can it be?) **FRONT VIEW** may just have the class edge and gets a narrow vote.

And that's is it. The end of a week where we get to live the dream. Now, as Henry says at the end of Goodfellas, "I get to live the rest of my life like a schnook", well at least until next March.....

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