

COUNTDOWN TO CHELTENHAM 2016

BY THE end of her first season over hurdles, Dawn Run was a phenomenon. So was her diminutive but formidable owner Mrs Charmian Hill who, aged 63, had been the jockey in Dawn Run's first three races and relinquished the ride only when the Irish turf authorities declined to renew her licence. Thereafter Dawn Run was ridden in most starts by Tony Mullins, son of her trainer Paddy Mullins. Mrs Hill, however, had him replaced at the 1983 and 1984 Cheltenham Festivals, on the second occasion with Jonjo O'Neill when Dawn Run won the Champion Hurdle. Two years later, Dawn Run would line up at Cheltenham with the most impassioned support of any Irish horse since Arkle, bidding to become the first Champion Hurdle winner to also win the Gold Cup. She had been ridden by Mullins for seven races in a row but in the most recent, at Cheltenham in January, the partnership had come unstuck . . .

Literally, very graphically and for the foreseeable future in races, in that incident at the final open ditch at the top of the hill Mullins did indeed lose the ride. A stunned Mrs Hill had been watching with her son and co-owner Oliver, and by the time their plane landed back at Dublin airport, while no decision had been made about who would ride Dawn Run in future, what had been decided is that it would not be Tony Mullins.

"I said, 'As far as I'm concerned he's off,'" reveals Oliver Hill. "My mother had a bit of a dilemma because she had such an attachment to the Mullinses. But to be quite honest with you I was absolutely insistent – no way."

On February 4, it was announced O'Neill had been recalled. Michael Clower's Report From Ireland in The Sporting Life included 'An open letter to Tony Mullins' and it gives an impression of just how high the passions were running on this issue. The concluding sentences read:

The best race I ever witnessed – and her unstoppable effort was the vital element



In an extract from his new book At The Festival – Racing to Glory at Cheltenham in March, Richard Austen remembers the unforgettable Gold Cup victory of the Irish mare Dawn Run



"And, if you can bear it, look upon the bright side. It's Jonjo O'Neill who is on trial now. Remember how Dawn Run was always all out to win with him on her back, remember how she never really seemed at ease with him in the plate? We will not let Charmian Hill forget that and, if Dawn Run does not run for him as sweetly as she has always done for you, you will be back where I for one sincerely believe you still have a right to be."

I do not know whether Jonjo O'Neill read that piece or felt on trial, but with Dawn Run due to run at Punchestown towards the end of February, O'Neill was engaged for that race but he had not been asked to ride her in the Gold Cup. Before Punchestown, he received his first chance to ride Dawn Run over fences when she went for a

racecourse school at Gowran Park.

I asked him how it went. "Bad," Jonjo groans. "That one went desperate."

"We set off to school her on her own and I was only supposed to go round once but she was so bad the first time, I couldn't even get her to go and see the first fence. She wouldn't even trot up to it. And of course Mrs Hill is there and so on. Eventually I got her over the first, and she honestly trotted through it. I thought, 'Will I pull up, or will I go back or what will I do?'"

He continued but Dawn Run continued in the same vein. O'Neill goes on: "So when I thought I was out of view I gave her a belt or two – well, she pulled up and walked with me! I thought 'That wasn't the right thing to do.'"

With their circuit completed, eventually, the rider decided that there was no way he could leave it there, so they carried on.

"I went to the fence down the back where she stopped with me before and she nearly pulled up to a trot with me again. Oh, she was so moody, honestly. Anyway, I kept going and she got a bit better. And I just came back and I said to Mrs Hill and to Paddy, 'That was grand. I was delighted with that', and Paddy looked at me as if I had three heads. It was funny – funny looking back on it. She was favourite for the Gold Cup and I thought not only that she shouldn't be favourite, she shouldn't even be running in it."

One week later, when O'Neill and Dawn Run were due to be reunited in a race context, Punchestown was abandoned. In its place, another schooling session was arranged for the

same track one week before the Gold Cup, this time in the company of a stablemate ridden by Tony Mullins, and this session went better. It could hardly have gone worse, though . . .

For a serious Gold Cup challenger Dawn Run was extremely inexperienced over fences. She had run in just four chases. At 11, Wayward Lad possessed everything that Dawn Run lacked in terms of experience, skilful jumping and a long list of major chasing prizes, but whereas this Gold Cup threatened to come too early for Dawn Run, for him it looked to be too late. Third in 1983 was easily his best in three attempts.

Michael Dickinson believes that if Wayward Lad had been 100 per cent fit in that 1983 Gold Cup, then he would have led home the trainer's 'Famous Five'. His form elsewhere was good enough to win a Gold Cup and some believed passionately that he deserved to win one, to gain the level of recognition that only this race can impart. But many had now written Wayward Lad off as a viable Gold Cup contender.

In the 1985-86 season, he had staged one revival to win his third King George but thereafter the weather prevented him from running again before the festival and severely restricted his training. One indication of the widespread snow and frost is that between February 6 and March 4 not a single race was run in Britain. When racegoers arrived at the festival, they found that the weather had so affected turf management that the grass was not green but brown.

The crowd acclaimed Dawn Run on her way to post. Preparing for the standing start, O'Neill could not get on the inside so he allowed the 15-8 favourite to stand side-on and asked the starter to bring them in again. When the starter acceded to this request, the jockey made sure of the position he wanted. In the failed footsteps of Sir Ken, Bula, Lanzarote and Night Nurse, Dawn Run stood ready in her bid to become the first horse to win the Gold Cup and Champion Hurdle.



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The man on her back says: "My main concern was getting over the first because I thought we'll be going so bloody fast and if she doesn't get a leg out, well, we're gone."

Although his confidence in her jumping was shaky to say the least, O'Neill believed that, when presented with an unmistakably bona-fide racecourse assignment, Dawn Run would at least show a lot more dash than in either of her recent racecourse workouts. In this, he was not disappointed: "We were trapping I tell you. We're going like two-year-olds out of the stalls going to the first and she's not the best at getting the height."

WHILE Dawn Run set off with a purpose, Run And Skip was even quicker away. Catching him fast,

Dawn Run clipped the fence and nodded on landing. Suffering nothing more untoward, however, her jockey thought: "We're halfway round now anyway."

Dawn Run was usually a front-runner but the concept of an 'easy lead' was alien to her. Making the pace was not about sneaking a tactical advantage, it was what her extreme competitive spirit demanded, and given that a turn of foot was not one of her strengths it was also about battering the resistance from her rivals. In the Gold Cup she had to deal with one rival determined to do exactly the same thing and the lead could not have come any harder.

On their rapid completion of the first circuit, Dawn Run and Run And Skip were ten or 12 lengths clear. Run And Skip surged forward going into the water jump and that was where Dawn Run's race started to look like a losing battle. She was literally on the back foot when splashing alarmingly and she was metaphorically on the back foot throughout almost everything that followed.

Jonjo was concerned: "I was trying to give her a breather and she left her hind legs in the water. That put me behind Run And Skip and I knew I had to get up in front with her again."

At the final ditch, where her previous visit to Cheltenham had met with such an indignity, there was no

indecision as Dawn Run and Run And Skip once more jumped together. Up to this point the race had been all about two horses. Now, however, you did not have to scan nearly so far back to see the pursuers and at their head was Wayward Lad. Along with Righthand Man and Forgive 'n Forget, they were not just in touch, they were well in touch and closing.

Dawn Run had a difference of opinion with Jonjo at the fifth-last, clouted the next, and between the fences for nearly all of the second circuit she generally looked to be going as fast as she could. Three out she was back to within a fraction of Run And Skip but now Wayward Lad and Forgive 'n Forget were on them. Hearing that pair coming up behind him caused consternation for Dawn Run's jockey and it was not long before he also had a dispiriting sight to contend with.

In line for home and from right to left as racegoers looked at them, Dawn Run, Run And Skip, Wayward Lad and Forgive 'n Forget took the second-last almost in unison. Then Run And Skip finally cracked, going from first to fourth in three strides. O'Neill determined: "If I don't fly the second-last I ain't going to win anything, you know, so I gave her a slap down the shoulder and she flew the second-last – and they passed

me as if I was standing still!"

Up in the grandstand, among her family and recorded by at least two film crews, even Charmian Hill lost hope. After guarded comments – "A long way to go yet" – and quiet entreaties – "Now watch this one, there's a drop; watch it girl" – earlier in the race had given way to roars of "Come on the girl!" and "Come on the mare!" approaching the second-last, Mrs Hill's voice quietened and a dozen strides before the final fence she muttered "No. No," almost as if conceding defeat. The crowd hushed with her as Dawn Run lost a length and a half on the new leaders.

Wayward Lad was the first to go on, but Forgive 'n Forget nosed ahead just before the last and looked to be going better. He did not take it as fluently as Wayward Lad, though, and it was the Dickinson veteran, having been under very hard right-hand driving from Graham Bradley, who was now propelled to the front again. Forgive 'n Forget drifted further right and Wayward Lad went two lengths clear.

Almost as soon as Wayward Lad moved himself within touching distance of the Gold Cup he started to drift left towards the rail. To many of those watching, his place in Cheltenham history looked there for the taking nevertheless, but instead, halfway up the run-in, incredibly,

Dawn Run was challenging again and suddenly galloping on much the stronger. Mrs Hill was in full cry and most of the crowd was with her.

HALF a dozen strides before the line, Wayward Lad's bid for the Gold Cup was over as Dawn Run was driven to the front. The lead had changed a dozen times. Dawn Run had it for the fifth time and Jonjo was able to pass the post with his right arm aloft as Dawn Run won by a length. Forgive 'n Forget was another two and a half lengths away in third, with Run And Skip a length behind him. All horses returned safe.

Tony Mullins watched it all unfold from the front lawn and had been accompanied there, uninvited, by two men from the British non-racing press who were trying to get a 'sour grapes quote', but it did not spoil his enjoyment of the race finish. After the last fence he thought Dawn Run was beaten but, in the mass of racegoers and with no big screen in those days, the horses went out of his sight. Mullins turned to look at the crowd in the grandstand. He could see which among them were her Irish supporters and he knew that Dawn Run had got back up.

Call it her will to win, her bloody-mindedness, her strength of stamina or her mares' 5lb allowance, but as I remember it Dawn Run could dig deep

to mine resources other horses did not possess or kept out of reach. In the 1948 Racehorses annual there is a horse called Solway, who sticks in the mind because he was described as "8cwt of cowardice". Dawn Run does so because she was the polar opposite. Is this character assessment hugely coloured by the memory of what happened in one race? I admit it, and consider it only natural because Dawn Run's unstoppable effort in the 1986 Gold Cup was the most vital element – with Wayward Lad's not far behind it – that made this the best race I have ever witnessed.

In the aftermath that day at Cheltenham racecourse it was immediately obvious that I was not the only one thinking along those lines. In the midst of it, I found myself standing next to an emotional Tony Dickinson on the weighing-room steps and offered my commiserations.

In the parade ring and winner's enclosure just in front of us, emotions were running far higher and we watched a pitch invasion by hundreds of people, as thousands of others looked on, who all acclaimed Dawn Run, Jonjo and the greatest race.

► *At The Festival – Racing to Glory at Cheltenham in March*, published by SportsBooks, can be purchased at £20 (free p&p) from racingpost.com/shop and atthefestivalbook.com

