# Countdown to Cheltenham 2017



#### **TOMORROW**

## 1.30 Sky Bet Supreme Novices' Hurdle 2m½f

He was 2-5 to be top trainer at the meeting in 2014, 2-9 in 2015 and last year we could have been tempted by anything from 1-14 to 1-33. Entering the 2017 Cheltenham Festival, however, Willie Mullins is 4-6. Almost incredibly he is only second (to Gordon Elliott) in the Irish trainers' table.

This story is not quite on the scale of Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire but his fortunes have a huge bearing on events this week and, as is customary, they receive an early test with a longstanding favourite for the Supreme Novices'.

**Melon** won easily on his first start over hurdles but that is his only start over hurdles. The form is unremarkable. On the other hand the trainer seems to regard Melon as very much his number one, despite also sending out the appealing **Bunk Off Early**.

Having won the Champion Bumper here 12 months ago, the battle-hardened **Ballyandy** clicked as a hurdler to win a top handicap at Newbury last month and it will be a shock if he fails to figure very prominently. **River Wylde** and **Crack Mome** also need a mention. **>>**Selection **Ballyandy** 

## 2.10 Racing Post Arkle Chase 2m

Is **Altior** the sport's top prospect or, despite being a novice, has he arrived in the top rank of chasers already? Probably both. Unbeaten as a hurdler and chaser, last year's Supreme Novices' winner could hardly have made a more powerful impression in the Game Spirit at Newbury.

Jumping the final fence in extravagant style is a good indicator of still having plenty to give and Altior cleared the third-last and last at Newbury by prodigious margins before storming ahead. Sprinter Sacre and Douvan are two among some mighty winners of the Arkle in recent years and at this stage of their careers it looks as if Altior is just as worthy.

Charbel and Forest
Bihan may chase him home.

>> Selection Altior

#### 2.50 Ultima Handicap Chase 3m1f

Course form is a major asset here and race form will be in plentiful supply for this, including from **Holywell**, **The Druids Nephew** and **Un Temps Pour Tout**, who won the last three renewals.

**Noble Endeavor** took a top handicap in Ireland last time and headed last week's betting along with

**Singlefarmpayment**, who impressed here in December.

Heron Heights and Pleasant Company need a mention. Champers On Ice, even if headgear is restored,

# HANDY ANDY



# RICHARD AUSTEN'S RACE-BY-RACE GUIDE

Our chief Spotlight writer analyses every festival race

may hold a better chance in the National Hunt Chase.

>> Selection

Singlefarmpayment (nb)

#### 3.30 Stan James Champion Hurdle 2m½f

That festival marketing slogan 'I'll be there' doesn't have quite the same ring to it this season. Not when those gathering under the banner 'I'll be somewhere else' include the winners of last year's Champion Hurdle, Champion Chase, Stayers' Hurdle and Gold Cup, among others. Deprived of Faugheen and Annie Power, none has been hit harder than Willie Mullins, the Riccis and the Champion Hurdle.

With those connections now resolving to go without Vroum Vroum Mag as well, the Champion is shorn of one contender who was likely to help force the pace.

Petit Mouchoir races

freely and has excelled from the front on his last two starts, while **The New One** would surely benefit from ensuring there is a sound pace. The latter has been third, fifth and fourth in previous Champions, while **My Tent Or Yours** was runner-up in 2014 and 2016, but this is surely last orders for them at the Champion Hurdle bar and they will probably still fail to get served.

Those with careers moving in the opposite direction look more alluring, with obvious potential in the Nicky Henderson pair **Buveur D'Air** (rerouted from chasing) and **Brain Power**, while **Yanworth**, who has been visually unappealing at 2m on sharper tracks, should be well suited by this stiff finish. The 2015 Champion Bumper winner Moon Racer has been switched from the Supreme

Novices' and Ruby Walsh will

now be on Footpad, who

closed to within a length of Petit Mouchoir in the Irish

Champion.
To win a handicap in
December off a mark of 142
and end up winning the
Champion Hurdle is not the
usual career path but such a
deed is not unheard of (Make
A Stand did something of far
greater proportion) and in this
renewal Brain Power may well
be equal to the task.

'Seeing is believing' isn't entirely applicable to his win at Ascot in December given that major sections of the race were shrouded in fog, but what could be seen of Brain Power's emergence in a five-length lead in that top handicap looked scintillating.

Selection Brain Power

## 4.10 OLBG Mares' Hurdle 2m4f

Without Annie Power's fall in 2015 this would have been won by the short-priced

Mullins-trained favourite in each of the last eight seasons, six times at odds-on. Step forward **Limini**, the winner of last year's Mares' Novices' Hurdle, but also now step forward **Vroum Vroum Mag**, again.

The 2016 winner of this race had the full bag of entries yesterday morning but connections seem now to have decided on a repeat bid. She was more Chug Chug Mag over 2m on her latest start (she had a dose of antibiotics afterwards) but this is a more suitable trip. If she's back in top form I would prefer Vroum Vroum Mag to Limini but this is not just about them.

Apple's Jade, Lifeboat
Mona and Jer's Girl all have
to be taken seriously and
several others bring potential.
When Limini travelled well
and asserted by two lengths at
Punchestown last month it was
Apple's Jade who lost out, but
don't rule out a turning of the
tables. When Vroum Vroum
Mag finally lost her unbeaten
record for Mullins in December
it was Apple's Jade who took it.

>> Selection Apple's Jade

#### 4.50 JT McNamara National Hunt Chase 4m

First run in 1860, the National

Battle-hardened Ballyandy can raise the curtain in style with victory in the Supreme Novices' Hurdle

Hunt Chase this year commemorates JT McNamara and it's hard to believe there's been a better rider on its roll of honour, as demonstrated most clearly by his victory on that very tricky customer Rith Dubh in 2002.

One pressing concern in 2017 is whether a similar mastery might be required on **Arpege D'Alene**, who veered all over the shop when second in last year's Pertemps and was not enthused by right-handed Ascot last time. But on his two runs at Cheltenham this term he'd make huge each-way appeal

In-demand Jamie Codd has opted for **A Genie In Abottle**, who possesses the right attributes. **Bellshill** has done more to show his class but suffered recent travails with his jumping.

Bigbadjohn, Flintham and Beware The Bear complete my shortlist with the last-named in particular possessing serious potential.

Selection Beware The Bear (nap)

#### 5.30 Close Brothers Novices' Handicap Chase 2m4½f

Value At Risk has not so far reached the heights that once beckoned for him but a Grade 2 hurdles win last March and a clean-jumping chase win last October are causes for renewed hope.

Last year's Fred Winter runner-up Romain De Senam is eyecatching with the step up in trip, while Captain Redbeard is interesting at longer odds. Last week's betting had a justifiable favourite in Foxtail Hill, who dominated a good handicap here in January.

>> Selection Value At Risk

## WEDNESDAY

#### 1.30 Neptune Investment Management Novices' Hurdle 2m5f

Finian's Oscar is injured but had already been displaced as favourite by **Neon Wolf**, with **Bacardys** threatening to usurp him as well. The latter's wresting of a 2m2f Grade 1 from Bunk Off Early reinforced the notion that 2m5f would suit him, while Neon Wolf is acclaimed as the most exciting novice hurdler in Britain. He could start a very short price.

There has not been a winner at more than 7-1 in the last nine renewals and that may well continue but another trend could be broken. Since the race was founded in 1971, Gaelstrom in 1993 is the only winning mare. Mares of serious quality are in much greater abundance this season, however, and these days their allowance has gone up to 7lb. •• Continues page 4

# Countdown to Cheltenham 2017

There is a Mares' Hurdle and Mares Novices' Hurdle to divert them but the concentration of resources in a few hands means that **Let's Dance** could still end up in this race. She boasts serious form over the last two seasons and has been well suited by this winter's step up to 2m4f. Unlike some of these, she has also shown her effectiveness on a variety of ground. ▶ Selection Let's Dance (if absent, Neon Wolf)

#### 2.10 RSA Novices' Chase 3m<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>f

There is something in the name that inspires caution, and something in the performance and price too. Might Bite put up by far the best show by a staying novice in Britain this term at Kempton on Boxing Day but it was incomplete – he crashed out at the final fence. For another negative he twice failed to show his best side at Cheltenham last season. Last week's prices about him were unexciting but those odds might be different on the day and there are certainly question marks over his

opponents. Second favourite **Alpha** Des Obeaux, for instance, has the best form of all, thanks to his second in last year's Stayers' Hurdle, but he was pulled up in late December with burst blood vessels. Whisper is a Coral Cup winner, a dual Grade 1 winner over 3m as a hurdler at Aintree and now a dual 2m5f novice

One is **Acapella Bourgeois** and a belief that this front-runner was flattered by the scale of his win at Navan is not incompatible with one that he is still very good, because that win was by 32 lengths. He has to be a major player if connections decide

chase winner here, but there

are better jumpers.

the ground is soft enough. Bigbadjohn and Briery Belle look the most interesting outsiders >> Selection Acapella Bourgeois

### 2.50 Coral Cup 2m5f

The rumpus over Gigginstown

handicap marks in Britain and the previous intention of supplementing him for the Champion Hurdle have combined to make **Tombstone** a high-profile candidate. He is half the price of any other horse but it's hard not to notice that this race is personified. It would be 2m5f and he has never raced over hurdles beyond 2m2f. Others are crying out more loudly for this trip. wait until next season.

If Tombstone runs in the County Hurdle, Gordon Elliott could still end up with the favourite in **Automated**, an evecatching winner last time out over **Scoir Mear**, who is also of major interest and a much bigger price. **Peregrine Run** is shortlisted after his course-and-distance novice win in November.

# Stamina-laden **Native River** is solid Gold

With the Martin Pipe as an alternative engagement and a highly attractive one judged by many of the mooted running plans, the final line-up is terribly unclear. One uncontroversial prediction is that JP McManus should have a strong hand, for instance with Modus, Consul De Thaix, River Frost and No Comment, as well as Scoir

The selection, though, is a left-field one. **Taquin Du** Seuil won the JLT in 2014 and a top handicap chase here in November this season, but watching his hurdles run at Chepstow in October it is easy to think his best chance of another big win at Cheltenham lies in this Coral Cup. ► Selection Taquin Du Seuil

### 3.30 Betway Queen **Mother Champion Chase**

There is a horse at this meeting who could seriously trouble **Douvan** but he is almost certain to be absent from this line-up. With Altior still entered but due to take his plaudits in the Arkle, last vear's Arkle winner should have a clear path to glory in the Champion Chase.

Douvan's Arkle rivals moved up on him just before the home turn last vear but Ruby Walsh was like a statue in comparison to the other jockeys. It was the same at the final fence and Douvan was clear, took a chance, and then was pushed out to score by seven lengths.

Given the departure of Vaniteux two out, there is a glimmer of hope for Douvan's opponents in that performance out he has clocked markedly higher RPRs in his five runs since, three of them much higher. It's not all about ratings and visually Douvan is class instructive to see him given a major test in the closing stages for once but that may have to

Stablemate **Un De Sceaux** is bound for the Ryanair and Fox Norton, who was returning from injury when slammed by Altior at Newbury, might be too. **Special Tiara** needs to prove he's as good as last season, which leaves **God's Own** as the one most likely to follow Douvan home. Selection Douvan

#### 4.10 Glenfarclas Chase (Cross Country) 3m6f If **Any Currency** were to

triumph it would be one of the stories of the meeting. After seconds in 2014 (by a short head) and 2015, he went one better last vear but then had it taken away after traces were detected of a substance that should have left his system long before. Trainer Martin Keighley had to end celebrations of his first festival winner but was cleared of any wrongdoing. Any Currency is now 14 but there was a sign here in January that he could be on his way back.

With rather less romance to the story, but probably the lion's share of bets, there is December's course-anddistance winner Cantlow, who was stylishly put in his place by Urgent De Gregaine in that January race but was giving the French raider 15lb.

Cause Of Causes trailed them in that event on his crosscountry debut but the 2015 National Hunt Chase and 2016 Kim Muir winner was last week backed into second favouritism. First Lieutenant and Sausalito **Sunrise** are other notable recruits from the premier

>> Selection Cantlow

#### 4.50 Fred Winter Juvenile Handicap Hurdle 2m½f

Paul Nicholls pulled the ex-French rabbit from his hat in the last two renewals and he fields one of this year's market leaders in Dreamcatching, but Nicky Henderson may have done best in this season's cross-channel trading with **Divin Bere** and

Domperignon Du Lys. Project Bluebook, Prospectus, Dakota Moirette and Dino Velvet **Call** makes a striking appearance as second favourite for Tony Martin. Selection Divin Bere (nb)

#### **5.30** Weatherbys Champion Bumper 2m½f

The betting is dominated by Carter McKay, whom Willie Mullins describes as the captain of his bumper team after two wins, first over Bakmai and then comprehensively over the promising West Coast Time.

A 20-length verdict for Fayonagh in a mares' Listed race has to be respected, though, as does the superiority of Cause Touiours at Warwick, while Somedav and Western Ryder are two to note among those who have had more of a scrap >> Selection Fayonagh

#### **THURSDAY**

## 1.30 JLT Novices' Chase

Yorkhill is one of the stars of the meeting. The way he won last year's Neptune ensures that but the picture rapidly became more complicated even when he was a novice hurdler. This season he's won two novice chases but jumps markedly to the left. Jockeys, please don't try to go up his nside. A recent racecourse session added to disquiet about that jumping but not his overall wellbeing. Yorkhill is probably the best horse in this field but proving his status might not be straightforward.

**Top Notch** has a slightly higher RPR than Yorkhill over hurdles and replicated that on his fourth chase win. **Politologue** might not get up the hill as well as some but he can still provide a stern test pefore that and so can **Disko**, who has looked his most persuasive over this sort of trip but also showed the stamina to go close in a 3m Grade 1 Flying Angel looks a value

>> Selection Disko

#### 2.10 Pertemps Network Final 3m

After last year with If In Doubt there is a temptation to throw in the towel with the Pertemps It's nevertheless a bit surprising to see JP McManus el the same way with only the two entries but For Good **Measure** has been backed.

With this year's entrants I am left with the strong feeling that the most striking performances have also been iumped on by the BHA handicapper. Who among Presenting Percy, Tobefair, Sutton Manor, **Isleofhopendreams** and **Impulsive Star** can defy his attentions is a hard call but Impulsive Star is lightly raced and shapes increasingly as if

he has more to give.

Lots of others could be given a mention but I'll settle for El Bandit, Rocklander and

>> Selection Impulsive Star

Jury Duty.

2.50 Ryanair Chase 2m5f Gigginstown have still not won their own race and it's not for want of trying. **Empire Of** Dirt was tasked with bringing home the family silver for this attempt but with Don Poli's withdrawal from the Gold Cup perhaps there will be a

Having dominated the 3m Troytown and gone close in the Irish Gold Cup, Empire Of Dirt would be well worth his slot on Friday but he also won the Plate last March. He would have a huge shout in this. The kev reason why he can succeed where last season's forebears failed, however, is that sadly he is not up against Vautour.

He is up against **Un De** Sceaux, another Willie Mullins star who has better form than Empire Of Dirt but that's from Un De Sceaux's 2m, not from the wins at up to 2m5f registered in his French alter ego. Last vear's Champion Chase runner-up is usually strong at the finish over 2m and much more tractable than he used to be but this race still involves a reinvention.

That's clearly not the case with 2015 winner **Uxizandre** or the smart Gigginstown second string **Sub** Lieutenant. Fox Norton has never been beyond 2m1f but some highly successful calls by Colin Tizzard with the

stamina of others in his yard have been noted. >> Selection Empire Of Dirt

#### 3.30 Sun Bets Stayers' Hurdle 3m

Eight wins on the trot.

reliability, the trip, ground, course and festival form -Unowhatimeanharry would look a strong candidate for sainthood, let alone the Stavers' Hurdle. He is clearly the one to beat but is he far enough ahead of the rest to make much appeal when the bookmakers are offering only a shade of odds against? He would be a worthy champion but there are bets to be struck against him.

In the assumed absence of the prolifically entered but hard-to-pin-down **Vroum** Vroum Mag, it's Snow **Falcon** who is top of my list. He's as good as any of the Irish judged on his latest close second to **Shaneshill** at Gowran Park, conceding the winner 5lb, and he keeps on most thorough stamina test at 3m will bring out the best in

The 2015 winner **Cole Harden** gave his most positive signal for a long time behind the favourite in January. Ballyoptic has reportedly had a wind operation, while West Approach will seemingly be spurning his fine opportunity in the Albert

The 2014 Champion Hurdle winner **Jezki** (recently back from a long absence) won at

Punchestown in April 2015 on his only attempt at 3m. But I'd still much prefer one who had this stamina test as a necessity rather than an afterthought. As the eminently sensible rebranding states, this is the Stayers' Hurdle.

>> Selection Snow Falcon (each-way, nb)

## 4.10 Brown Advisory & Merriebelle Stable Plate

Favourites have a poor record in this race but it is not hard to see why **Diamond King**, running off 1lb higher than last year's Coral Cup-winning mark, has been supported.

David Pipe and Venetia Williams have clocked up regular Plate winners and the latter could field, among others, Tango De Juilley, who has not run since runnerup in this on his only start last season. Pipe's squad includes **Starchitect**, who is well in on 2016 hurdles form.

All hope is not yet lost for dual festival runner-up Bouvreuil. Pougne Bobbi dominated two starts back and Colin Tizzard has given a good mention to his **Sizing** Codelco. >> Selection Starchitect

## 4.50 Trull House Stud Mares' Novices' Hurdle

Hot favourite at the five-day stage was Let's Dance and, as the tip for her in the Neptune suggests, I'm a big fan but more at 2m4f than 2m. **Airlie Beach** won the Grade

1 Royal Bond over 2m and fellow Mullins mares Asthuria and Augusta Kate had big runs curtailed by last flight falls last time out.

Mullins should have a strong hand but I also cannot pass over the visual impression left by **La Bague Au Roi** at Newbury. Forge Meadow was radically improved to win her latest start and **Titi De Montmartre** produced late charges to win two Grade 3s in France in November. >> Selection La Bague Au Roi

#### 5.30 Fulke Walwyn Kim **Muir Handicap Chase** 3m2f

Squouateur was seventh as 9-4 favourite for last year's Martin Pipe but ante-post backers seemingly still want him on their side. Disputing favouritism is the 2016 Pertemps winner Mall Dini.

**Heron Heights** has a range of options thanks to his novice status but he is 4-7 as a chaser, with the style of his latest win over 3m here in prove a good mark. **The** Crafty Butcher is also interesting from Ireland, with Whats Happening and **Potters Cross** among the British hopes. >> Selection Heron Heights

## FRIDAY

### 1.30 JCB Triumph Hurdle 2m1f

**Defi Du Seuil** has carried all before him in Britain and most of that carrying has been done up the hill at Cheltenham, but these are dauntingly short odds for one who will face a far more competitive field and

probably return to much less

testing ground. The former is more worrying than the latter and **Mega** Fortune for one is in major contention after finishing well on top of **Bapaume** in a Leopardstown Group 1.

Charli Parcs looked a top prospect on his British debut but **Master Blueyes** was going much the better when Charli Parcs crashed out at the second-last on their second Kempton meeting.

This does not look a field brimful of talent, which helps to explain the favourite's price, but Forth Bridge. Soldier In Action and Poker Play, to name but three, might all prove a good deal better than their current ratings. >> Selection Mega Fortune

## 2.10 Randox Health **County Handicap Hurdle**

The scale in which the season is dominated by this meeting is well illustrated by today's two handicap hurdles. Whereas the Betfair Hurdle at Newbury in February had prize-money of £155,000 and 20 five-day entries, this race boasts £95,000 and 74. The Martin Pipe worth £65,000 has 115.

In coming straight from the Greatwood here in November, North Hill Harvey is following the same agenda as last year's winning stablemate Superb Story. **Tombstone** is

another high-profile candidate. while **Peace And Co** won the Triumph on this day two years ago and Ivanovich Gorbatov did so last year.

Cue Card can yet be

characterised as unlucky but

his fall three out in the Gold

Cup is an abiding memory not

just from last year's festival but

among many festivals. I had

backed him, but that was one

of the most deflating moments

One second he'd hit the front

not tipped him, I had not

I have experienced on a

and the next he was on the

deck. That moment, added to

what is now Cue Card's seven

years of endeavour, makes this

Gold Cup the most emotionally

Having missed the meeting

in 2014 and 2015, Cue Card is

left with time running out and

his stamina still unproven. He

is the form pick and probably

chink in a horse's stamina, this

stiff finish will expose it and I

recommending one who has no

stamina doubt whatsoever as

feel more comfortable with

the next Gold Cup winner.

upward curve and possesses

all the solid virtues which this

abundance. Champion jockey

Richard Johnson has not had a

winner at the meeting since

year he has a great chance of

Dual runner-up **Diakadam** 

action once again, of course he

can, and **Empire Of Dirt** is

the 2014 Pertemps but this

success in the festival's

can be in the thick of the

fourth on my list if he's

showpiece.

Cue Card's stablemate

**Native River** needs to

improve but he is on an

race will draw on in

will stay but if there is one

charged prospect of

Cheltenham 2017.

racecourse.

For three darker horses, try Vosne Romanee. De Name **Escapes Me** and **Verni**, the last-named a winner twice this season who can still prove capable of a great deal better. Selection Verni

#### 2.50 Albert Bartlett Novices' Hurdle 3m

West Approach would be comfortably top rated but looks set for the Stayers' Hurdle instead, so Death Duty is likely to be all the rage. He has been for some time, in truth, with a succession of stylish 2m4f wins accompanied by the rave reviews of Gordon Elliott.

To spoil the party somewhat, however, he has raced on only soft or heavy ground and never beyond 2m4f and that's a concern, for all his star quality His Navan victim **Monalee**, who has since won over 3m, may well appreciate today's οσ a σοοd deal better.

Wholestone has been exemplary, **The Worlds End** stretches out in grand style, Willoughby Court could improve for the trip and **Penhill** has undergone a metamorphosis from his Flat persona to be a legitimate contender. >> Selection Monalee

## 3.30 Timico Cheltenham Gold Cup 3m2½f

With the simply amazing career he's had, there is no way

tempting mark on his handicap debut in the **Grand Annual** 

Le Prezien (right) is on a

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> redirected from the Ryanair. However, if Cue Card fails to show his best this could be a very open race. There are currently clear holes in their arguments but with suitable conditions and a slice of luck More Of That, Sizing John, Minella Rocco, **Bristol De Mai**. Champagne West and Outlander could all have their say. **▶** Selection Native River (nap)

#### 4.10 St James's Place Foxhunter Chase 3m2½f

**On The Fringe** is now a 12yo and he's registered the Cheltenham, Aintree and Punchestown treble in both of the last two seasons but it was a close call here last year on good ground when he did not show his best form. Paint The Clouds, Current Event and Pacha Du Polder were among those in close attendance.

Wonderful Charm at his old level would be a formidable newcomer to the race and he's won his two hunter chases easily. A large number have been plying their trade mostly in points of late, with Ask The Weatherman and Sweet As **A Nut** having additionally mpressed this winter in a hunter chase.

>> Selection Pacha Du Polder

#### 4.50 Martin Pipe Conditional Jockeys' Handicap Hurdle 2m4½f

The Storyteller was ruled out on Saturday but the remaining 114-strong entry for this race is still not short of striking candidates, among whom the ante-post players have already latched on to No Comment, Tin Soldier, Battleford, Runfordave and Brio

Conti. Among those at longer prices. I'd nominate Coo Star Sivola, Rather Be, Tommy Silver, Fixe Le Kap and Rocklander.

>> Selection Coo Star Sivola

### 5.30 Johnny Henderson **Grand Annual Chase**

Dandridge and Rock The World were placed last year but might again lose out to a Nicholls-trained 6vo, this time in the shape of Le Prezien. who won a Grade 2 novice chase here in November and makes his handicap debut off a tempting mark.

**Theinval** is unexposed at 2m. **Un Beau Roman** has run very well here twice this season. This race is usually mayhem, so the mistakes made by **Powersbomb** are a concern, but he would put up a bold show if plotting his way around safely. A safe return from the festival is the primary wish for all this week and let's celebrate whoever passes the post first.

Selection Le Prezien (nb)