

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 eye-catching 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.

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