

COUNTDOWN TO CHELTENHAM

RACING POST
THE PULSE OF THE FESTIVAL

ALL my earliest Cheltenham memories are small-framed and black and white to an O'Sullivan soundtrack. Is memory playing one of its inexhaustible repertoire of tricks when I recall Sir Peter's tones having an extra measure of seriousness and solemnity as they wheeled at the start of major festival races, a deceptive air of calm before the storm of great deeds?

In middle age you look back in search of what have been life's constant refrains – faithful friends, the power of words, an early start with tobacco that argues an early end, a propensity to punt, the pop of corks, fascination with wars, the growing of children and, running through it all, a profound preoccupation with a particular place at a very specific time. Cheltenham in March.

And what I remember clearest of all from those stolen afternoons watching Cheltenham on the box was a fierce desire, an ache, to be there and be part of something that the child in me could not as yet define but which I knew to be overpowering. The shires and the Cotswolds were light years from the suburbs of youth but their lure was already irresistible.

I was 19 when I first went to the festival and have missed not a day since. The three days that became four have tapped out a rhythm through my life and when the climactic crash of the drums is stilled after the last race on Gold Cup day they are replaced by the steady click of the metronome marking the start of the countdown to the following year.

Part of Cheltenham's magic lies in its flirtation with the savage. At festival pace no other course asks questions of horse and rider in such a searching way – the rise and fall of the terrain, the fences and that long climb to the gods at the end strip everything to the bone. Nowhere else brings courage more to the fore.

And to go there and stand witness to extraordinary events is a rare and wonderful act of being at one with your fellow clutterers of the planet. The elements of pilgrimage are incredibly strong as time, effort, expense and often a wearying journey are involved, and if the target of the worshippers is not exactly holy, the centre of the festival universe – the winner's enclosure – has about it a strong sense of something sacred not least for the sacrifices that have to be made in order for horse and humans to stand there.

Of course the punter can take the

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WHY I LOVE CHELTENHAM

Alastair Down on the impact the festival has had on his life – and probably beyond



most savage pummelling, yet joy still somehow wins through. There are places of magic and emotion in other sports – Seve or Nicklaus walking in triumph down the 18th at St Andrews – but nothing holds a candle to the dance of triumph down the horsewalk in front of the exultant and admiring stands baying the praise of the victors and giving visceral thanks for what they have just been privileged to see.

Everybody can recall their own moments when the spine surrenders to the shiver, the throat struggles and eyes fight a losing battle with the blur of tears. Different horses stir different emotions – the presence of the

indisputably unparalleled in Arkle, the joy of justice being done in the mire to Desert Orchid, the fierceness of struggle when Monksfield, Night Nurse and Sea Pigeon battled for the mastery, the banshee blast that willed Dawn Run back in front as the yards dwindled and the post loomed.

And never underestimate the ritual of the meeting as the clan gathers. In every corner of these islands, from inner-city apartment, small-town semi and rural outpost, groups of friends gather and make their way to Cheltenham year on year each a tiny tributary feeding the 60,000-strong river of humanity that will inundate

the course on opening day.

The Chippings, Slaughters and Swells of the Wolds fill with folk hell-bent on enjoying themselves. For four days all the normal rules are suspended, money seems to have no more value than the notes you get in a Monopoly box and hope springs hot that this is the week when it is your turn to eviscerate the old enemy.

PUBS, hotels and B&Bs are rammed with the same returning guests, and high good humour is the order of the day such as the ruddy-faced Cork man in charge of a large group of hard-charging Irishmen who came down to breakfast and greeted his bleary troops with the immortal: "Mornin' lads – another day of drinking and guessing!"

And as you get older you have the thrill of seeing the young fall in thrall to the meeting. When my kids were small they loved Cheltenham because the house would fill up with their parents' friends who were the most

fun, entertaining or plain unhinged, with not a bed, sofa or floor space unoccupied. Now they themselves are addicts of the exuberance of the four days and have decades ahead of them through which they can weave their own personal folklore of festival history.

And when the time comes I suspect my ashes will find their final resting place at the top of the hill – a place of solitude and skylarks in summer but where the denouement begins to boil to brutal in winter. At the top of the hill all the dreams are still alive, the triumphs and tragedies of the long sloop down and hard haul up the hill to victory yet to unfold before the rapt ranks in the stands.

On a quiet day, a few souls who share my blood, and some of those friends who truly understood why that blood was ever quickened in that place in the month when the hares go mad, will perform a simple ceremony. And that will be me done and literally dusted – forever lodged somewhere I believe I belong.

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