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# Focus on the Cheltenham Festival

**THE MEETING** The Cheltenham Festival is the focal point of the entire National Hunt season for most people and usually determines the champions in most categories, be it over hurdles or fences or, for that matter, in the bumper. The decision to extend the meeting to four days in 2005 has been a qualified success and two of the new races introduced as part of that facelift, the Festival Trophy and Spa Hurdle (sponsored by Ryanair and Albert Bartlett respectively), were rightly upgraded to Grade 1 status in 2008. Further races honouring legendary trainers have since been added in the form of the David Nicholson Mares' Hurdle (2008) and Martin Pipe Conditional Jockeys' Handicap Hurdle (2009).

**THE CONTEXT** Past champions returning to defend their crown is a common theme at the Festival, with Punjabi, Master Minded, Big Buck's and Kauto Star all set to attempt to repeat their 2009 wins in the four heavyweight contests, the last-named having become the first horse ever to reclaim the Gold Cup twelve months ago. Last year's Ryanair winner bids to supplement that Grade 1 success over the longer trip against Kauto Star et al in the Gold Cup itself.

**THE GROUND** This subject has been something of a hot potato in recent years, none more so than in 2007, when the official going description was changed midway through the opening day from "soft, good to soft in places" to "good to soft, soft in places", with many observers of the opinion that conditions were a fair bit faster than even that. The course executive aim for ground which is just on the soft side of good, but twelve months later times suggested conditions were much more testing than the official description of good to soft, watering in the run up to the Festival, which began early last week this year, having long since divided opinion.

**TRAINERS** The behemoth that is Paul Nicholls' Ditcheat yard dominated the meeting in 2009 with five winners, three of which came in the four championship races. It's none too surprising that Nicholls' chasers have led the way in terms of success, but the County Hurdle has also proved a very happy hunting ground, with Sporazene, Desert Quest and American Trilogy successful in 2004, 2006 and 2009 respectively, whilst the quirky Ouninpohja narrowly failed to land the 2007 renewal. Local trainer Jonjo O'Neill arrives at this season's Festival in good form, which surely bodes well for a trainer who's regularly come up trumps at the Festival even when his yard has seemed under a cloud. Several of O'Neill's winners have come at rewarding odds, something Ferdy Murphy has also achieved with remarkable regularity in recent years. However, Nicky Henderson can boast the most career Cheltenham Festival wins amongst current trainers and he enjoyed a hat-trick twelve months ago.

**JOCKEYS** A schooling incident last week saw Sam Thomas join Noel Fehily as big-name jockeys who'll be viewing this year's Festival from the sidelines. More than once Tony McCoy has had injury to contend with in the run-up to the Festival, but he always battles through and has ridden more winners than any other jockey currently riding, even though he's been fairly quiet by his standards in recent years, managing just the one winner for the third successive season in 2009, though that was his force-of-nature ride on Wichita Lineman. Ruby Walsh is out on his own in recent years, not surprisingly given his association with Paul Nicholls and Willie Mullins, and he partnered no fewer than seven winners in 2009. Barry Geraghty also has an impressive recent Festival record, while Robert Thornton is another jockey to watch—he was leading rider in 2007 with four wins and will have the pick of Alan King's powerful team yet again. At the opposite end of the spectrum a top rider who's been struggling for winners in recent years is Richard Johnson.

# Cheltenham Festival Statistics

## TRAINERS

Wins	Runs	%	Trainer	2nds	3rds	£ profit/loss	pattern/listed	hcps
17	166	10	P. F. Nicholls	9	8	-51.69	12-73	4-75
10	82	12	A. King	6	7	1.50	8-40	1-35
9	119	7	N. J. Henderson	10	12	21.83	4-40	3-68
7	66	10	W. P. Mullins, Ireland	2	6	10.25	7-54	0-9
6	58	10	J. Howard Johnson	1	1	-6.13	6-33	0-23
6	85	7	Jonjo O'Neill	7	3	-14.63	3-29	1-37
5	45	11	Ferdy Murphy	3	1	103.00	0-11	3-23
4	14	28	Enda Bolger, Ireland	2	2	4.00	0-0	4-13
4	58	6	Miss Venetia Williams	5	1	40.00	0-10	4-34
3	14	21	T. J. Taaffe, Ireland	0	2	16.00	1-5	2-9
3	73	4	N. A. Twiston-Davies	0	5	-35.00	1-29	1-32
3	84	3	D. E. Pipe	6	2	-65.50	1-31	2-39
2	12	16	M. F. Morris, Ireland	2	0	4.50	1-10	1-1
2	14	14	D. McCain Jnr	0	0	15.50	1-5	0-4
2	24	8	Mrs J. Harrington, Ireland	2	0	-15.00	2-18	0-6
2	53	3	N. Meade, Ireland	3	0	-30.50	2-34	0-15
2	87	2	P. J. Hobbs	7	7	-61.50	2-28	0-48
1	4	25	Philip Fenton, Ireland	0	0	1.50	1-3	0-1
1	9	11	Charles Byrnes, Ireland	2	0	.00	1-5	0-4
1	9	11	Thomas Cooper, Ireland	0	0	.00	1-3	0-4
1	9	11	Paul Nolan, Ireland	0	1	12.00	0-6	1-3
1	10	10	Colm A. Murphy, Ireland	1	3	-7.25	1-8	0-1
1	18	5	C. R. Egerton	1	2	23.00	0-11	1-6
1	29	3	E. J. O'Grady, Ireland	0	2	-17.00	0-15	1-9
0	19	0	Miss H. C. Knight	1	2	-19.00	0-11	0-5

## JOCKEYS

Wins	Rides	%	Jockey	Main Trainer	£ profit/loss	hcps	non-hcps
18	97	18	R. Walsh	P. F. Nicholls	2.81	3-39	15-58
12	71	16	Robert Thornton	A. King	36.00	2-28	10-43
9	72	12	B. J. Geraghty	N. J. Henderson	17.50	2-27	7-45
6	61	9	P. Carberry	N. Meade	29.50	3-25	3-36
6	93	6	A. P. McCoy	Jonjo O'Neill	-69.38	2-38	4-55
5	50	10	D. N. Russell	Charles Byrnes	31.00	4-24	1-26
4	17	23	Miss N. Carberry	Enda Bolger, Ireland	17.00	4-5	0-12
4	58	6	G. Lee	Ferdy Murphy	-.50	1-27	3-31
4	66	6	P. J. Brennan	N. A. Twiston-Davies	7.00	2-31	2-35
4	77	5	Timmy Murphy	D. E. Pipe	-38.00	2-32	2-45
2	20	10	Mr J. T. McNamara	Enda Bolger, Ireland	6.00	1-5	1-15
2	34	5	Denis O'Regan	J. Howard Johnson	-24.63	0-13	2-21
2	69	2	Richard Johnson	P. J. Hobbs	-43.50	0-33	2-36
1	10	10	A. Coleman	Miss Venetia Williams	7.00	1-7	0-3
1	20	5	Jason Maguire	D. McCain Jnr	1.00	0-10	1-10

# totesport Cheltenham Gold Cup

**totesport Cheltenham Gold Cup Chase (Grade 1) (5yo+) 3¼m110y Fri 19th Mar 3.20pm**

Av-Field 17	Av-SP 3.35/1	Av-Timeform Rating on wnr 170	Fav 1,0,1,2,1
<b>2009</b>	<b>16 rns</b>	<b>Dead</b>	<b>TR wnr 181</b>
1 *	KAUTO STAR (FR)	PFNicholls	9-11-10
2 <sup>2</sup>	Denman (Ire)	PFNicholls	9-11-10
3 *	Exotic Dancer (Fr)	JJO'Neill	9-11-10
<b>2008</b>	<b>12 rns</b>	<b>Dead</b>	<b>TR wnr 176</b>
1 *	DENMAN (IRE)	PFNicholls	8-11-10
2 *	Kauto Star (Fr)	PFNicholls	8-11-10
3 *	Neptune Collonges (Fr)	PFNicholls	7-11-10
<b>2007</b>	<b>18 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 165</b>
1 <sup>/</sup>	KAUTO STAR (FR)	PFNicholls	7-11-10
2 <sup>/</sup>	Exotic Dancer (Fr)	JJO'Neill	7-11-10
3 <sup>2/</sup>	Turpin Green (Ire)	NGRichards	8-11-10
<b>2006</b>	<b>22 rns</b>	<b>Good/Firm</b>	<b>TR wnr 165</b>
1 <sup>2/</sup>	WAR OF ATTRITION (IRE)	MFMorris,Ire	7-11-10
2 <sup>2/</sup>	Hedgehunter (Ire)	WPMullins,Ire	10-11-10
3 <sup>/</sup>	Forget The Past	MJPO'Brien,Ire	8-11-10
<b>2005</b>	<b>15 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 164</b>
1 <sup>/</sup>	KICKING KING (IRE)	TJTaaffe,Ire	7-11-10
2 <sup>3/</sup>	Take The Stand (Ire)	PBowen	9-11-10
3 <sup>4/</sup>	Sir Rembrandt (Ire)	RHAlner	9-11-10

**Albertas Run** One of the best staying novices around a couple of years ago, as his RSA win here testifies. Of suspect attitude, though, and largely struggled in open company since, so likely to play similar role as when ninth in this twelve months ago.

**Aran Concerto** Exciting novice hurdler whose career has since been blighted by injury. Form he's shown over fences this season miles removed from what will be required to play any meaningful role.

**Carruthers** Front runner who is clearly most at home under testing conditions. Won small-field graduation event at Newbury over Christmas, but couldn't cope with a revitalised Taranis at Cheltenham next time, essentially ending his Gold Cup ambitions at a stroke.

**Casey Jones** Smart chaser on his day, but that still leaves him well shy of the pick of these and he can't be relied upon to give his running, anyway.

**Cooldine** Top-notch novice last term, posting a performance on a par with Looks Like Trouble and Denman (both subsequent Gold Cup winners) in winning RSA Chase here last year. Things not really gone to script since, however, turned over at Punchestown following month and reported to have coughed when running abysmally in Lexus on his return. That said, he comes here on a high having bounced back to his very best when second to Joncol in Irish Hennessy last month and sure to be popular in the market without the 'big two'.

**Denman** A leviathan of the modern era, as much for his pair of Hennessy triumphs as his Gold Cup defeat of Kauto Star two years ago. Latest success at Newbury, from a BHA mark of 174 no less, was notably significant as it marked him out as being better than ever after enduring a frustrating 2008/9 before another setback came his way last month, looking beaten when unseating first-time partner McCoy three out in the Aon. Sure to be primed for this day a whole lot more than that one and bottom line is that, by clear water, his form marks him out as the second best horse in the race.

**Imperial Commander** Injury ended a highly promising novice season, but bounced back in no uncertain manner with twin successes at this track in 2008/9, namely in Paddy Power and Ryanair, and showcased his right to be taking on the top three-milers when going down by a whisker to Kauto Star in Betfair Chase on return. Beaten over a furlong by that rival in the King George when early mistakes cost him dear and even the merest repetition will soon see him found out once again.

**Kauto Star** A thirteen-time Grade 1 winner, incorporating two Gold Cups, and put simply the best chaser of the past forty years. Faultless run around here twelve months ago levelled the score with stablemate Denman, but unbelievably surpassed even that performance when producing a quite stunning display to land fourth straight King George at Kempton on Boxing Day. Supremely accurate jumper and, if he is on song—and there have been few more genuine and reliable horses in the history of the sport—he will be virtually impossible to beat.

**Madison du Berlais** Enjoyed stellar campaign in 2008/9, but hasn't been able to replicate that form this time around, including when very remote second in King George. Never put his best foot forward at Cheltenham and not easy to see him making any significant impression.

**Mon Mome** Moment in the sun came when winning last season's Grand National and repeat bid presumably been principal objective this term, not showing enough when sixth at Haydock last month to suggest he's up to improving on that position in this company.

**My Will** Spent most of his career in the shadow of more illustrious stablemates, three of whom finished ahead of him when he was fifth in this contest last season. Lacklustre display in calmer waters when last seen in December and bit to prove now.

**Notre Pere** Looked all set to become a major player at the top table last spring, winning Gold Cup at Punchestown in April. This winter's performances must be considered disappointing, then, particularly when dropped in grade at Fairyhouse last month (jumped poorly). Easy to overlook all of a sudden.

**Taranis** Career was progressing well before injury struck in 2007 King George. Persevered with and confirmed that ability remains intact with smooth defeat of Carruthers in Cotswold Chase at Cheltenham in January. Must be a possibility he'll advance further, that his first outing for over two years after all, and adds further to Paul Nicholls' well-strung bow.

**Tricky Trickster** Won four-miler at the Festival twelve months ago on what was just his fourth start over fences. Thereafter acquired with the explicit intent of winning this year's Grand National. Narrowly got up in Aon at Newbury last month, though remains likely he's yet to show all of which he's capable. No surprise to see him pushing for a top-five finish.

**What A Friend** Sole blip as a novice in 2008/9 came when sixth to Cooldine in RSA Chase. Looked far from straightforward when runner-up to Denman in Hennessy on reappearance and, though looking more resolute when holding off Money Trix in Lexus at Leopardstown last time, his previous run at Newbury goes to show just how much more he needs to improve.

**CONCLUSION** A third clash between the mighty **Kauto Star** and Denman. The former is not only more likely to arrive at the very top of his game, but he possesses the best form anyway, and for that reason he's simply impossible to oppose. Many will prefer to get involved in a market excluding that pair and **Cooldine** seems the best option. Willie Mullins' eight-year-old made an excellent impression at the Festival twelve months ago and looks firmly back on track now.

## TOP ON FORM

Kauto Star	202 +	Cooldine	172	Mon Mome	170
Denman	194	Madison du Berlais	172	What A Friend	170
Imperial Commander	186	Carruthers	171		

# Smurfit Kappa Champion Hurdle

**Smurfit Kappa Champion Hurdle Challenge Trophy (Grade 1) (4yo+) 2m110y Tue 16th Mar 3.20pm**

Av-Field 16	Av-SP 15.38/1	Av Timeform Rating on wnr 163	Fav 1,1,0,0,3
<b>2009</b>	<b>23 rns</b>	<b>Dead</b>	<b>TR wnr 163</b>
1 <sup>3</sup>	PUNJABI	NJ Henderson	6-11-10
2 *	Celestial Halo (Ire)	PF Nicholls	5-11-10
3 *	Binocular (Fr)	NJ Henderson	5-11-10
<b>2008</b>	<b>15 rns</b>	<b>Soft</b>	<b>TR wnr 163</b>
1 *	KATCHIT (IRE)	AKing	5-11-10
2 *	Osana (Fr)	DEPipe	6-11-10
3 <sup>2</sup>	Punjabi	NHenderson	5-11-10
<b>2007</b>	<b>10 rns</b>	<b>Dead</b>	<b>TR wnr 160</b>
1 <sup>*/</sup>	SUBLIMITY (FR)	JGCarr,Ire	7-11-10
2 <sup>2/</sup>	Brave Inca (Ire)	CAMurphy,Ire	9-11-10
3 <sup>2/</sup>	Afsoun (Fr)	NJHenderson	5-11-10
<b>2006</b>	<b>18 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 164</b>
1 <sup>*/</sup>	BRAVE INCA (IRE)	CAMurphy,Ire	8-11-10
2 <sup>*/</sup>	Macs Joy (Ire)	MrsJHarrington,Ire	7-11-10
3 <sup>0/</sup>	Hardy Eustace (Ire)	DTHughes,Ire	9-11-10
<b>2005</b>	<b>14 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 164</b>
1 <sup>*/</sup>	HARDY EUSTACE (IRE)	DTHughes,Ire	8-11-10
2 <sup>*/</sup>	Harchibald (Fr)	NMeade,Ire	6-11-10
3 <sup>2/</sup>	Brave Inca (Ire)	CAMurphy,Ire	7-11-10

**Binocular** Looked a star in the making when trouncing Celestial Halo twice in 2008, and hot favourite when close third behind stable-companion Punjabi (and old rival Celestial Halo) in last season's Champion Hurdle. Things haven't gone smoothly since, twice beaten by Go Native prior to landing a simple task at Sandown, whilst he was ruled out for season last month with a muscle problem only for connections to perform a U-turn.

**Celestial Halo** Ran fine race when narrow second to Punjabi in 2009 renewal, faring by far the best of those who raced up with strong pace. Reappearance win at Wincanton makes for very good reading now and, although beaten both starts since, certainly shouldn't be overlooked here faced with a test that will suit him well, particularly as he's likely to enjoy his own way at the head of affairs this time around.

**Donnas Palm** Second-season hurdler who's enjoyed a profitable winter, completing hat-trick when easy winner of Grade 2 Tara Hurdle at Navan in December. Rather had his limitations exposed when staying-on second to Solwhit in Irish Champion at Leopardstown last time, however, and Noel Meade's second string here.

**Ebadiyan** Quirky sort who made all to beat Muirhead narrowly in listed event at Naas in January but largely disappointing otherwise in 2009/10 and unlikely to be good enough here, even if on his best behaviour.

**Go Native** Last year's Supreme winner (beat Medermit a neck) who is chasing a £1million bonus following his wins in Fighting Fifth Hurdle at Newcastle (beat Sublimity and Solwhit) and Christmas Hurdle at Kempton (held on by short head from Starluck). Clearly warrants plenty of respect, though has found less than seemed likely several times in past and that trait could prove costly up the Cheltenham hill.

**Jumbo Rio** Seems exposed as below the very best, as highlighted by placed efforts in graded company on his last two starts, including when third behind Solwhit and Sublimity in Festival Hurdle at Leopardstown on first occasion.

**Khyber Kim** Much improved for exaggerated waiting tactics this winter, winning two valuable prizes at Cheltenham, namely the Greatwood Hurdle and International Hurdle, beating Medermit into third both times. Also numbered Celestial Halo and Punjabi amongst his victims in latter race, though still a bit to find with the former gelding off level weights this time.

**Medermit** Arguably unlucky when fast-finishing second to Go Native in last year's Supreme Novices' over this course and distance. Stable not firing on all cylinders when he was placed behind Khyber Kim on first two starts this winter, then beat Punjabi (conc 4 lb) in muddling four-runner event at Haydock. Likeable sort, but probably place prospects at best.

**Muirhead** Fared best of Ireland's nine-strong contingent when fifth behind Punjabi in last season's Champion Hurdle but things haven't gone to plan since, tried in cheekpieces when disappointing favourite in Grade 2 at Gowran Park last time. Easy to oppose.

**Punjabi** In frame all nine completed starts at Grade 1 level, including narrow win in 2009 Champion Hurdle (third in 2008 renewal) and short-head second to Solwhit in Rabobank Champion at Punchestown later that spring (a race he'd won in 2008). Hasn't had ideal preparation this time around—probably not fully fit when beaten by the likes Khyber Kim and Medermit—but warmed up with routine win at Kempton late last month and must be respected again, particularly with Barry Geraghty choosing him ahead of Zaynar.

**Solwhit** Top-class hurdler who has won five out of six starts in Grade 1 company, including Rabobank Champion at Punchestown (beat Punjabi short head) and Irish Champion at Leopardstown last time (convincingly beat Donna's Palm). Only defeat in that sequence came when third to Go Native at Newcastle, but unsuited by farcical pace that day and looked very much the one to beat here until suffering a late setback.

**Starluck** Speedy sort who pushed the idling Go Native very close when runner-up in Christmas Hurdle at Kempton. Arguably too big in the betting on that form, though it is worth noting that Cheltenham's stiffer track almost certainly doesn't play to his strengths so well, particularly if the ground is softer than good.

**Won In The Dark** Smart performer on his day and easy winner of minor events at Punchestown and Leopardstown last month. However, he's had his limitations exposed several times at this level (only tenth in 2009 Champion Hurdle) and easy to oppose.

**Zaynar** Lost his unbeaten record over hurdles when runner-up (at 14/1-on!) to Quwetwo at Kelso last month. Didn't run so badly on form as that defeat might suggest and plenty to recommend him on previous efforts, notably his wins in Triumph Hurdle last season and Ascot Hurdle (beat Karabak six lengths) in November. The return of headgear should help back over this shorter trip, though Barry Geraghty's decision to side with Punjabi is a negative sign.

**CONCLUSION** A competitive-looking renewal, with very little between the runners on ratings or in the betting, whilst the water has been further muddied by setbacks to Binocular and, in particular, Solwhit. Previous form in the Champion Hurdle itself regularly proves more reliable than that found in the trials and, as such, **Punjabi** or **Celestial Halo** appeal as the best value at present.

## TOP ON FORM

Solwhit	176 +	Celestial Halo	175	Go Native	172 +
Zaynar	176	Punjabi	174	Donnas Palm	170
Binocular	175	Khyber Kim	173	Medermit	168

# Seasons Holidays Queen Mother Champion Chase

**Seasons Holidays Queen Mother Champion Chase (Grade 1) (5yo+) 2m Wed 17th Mar 3.20pm**

Av-Field 10	Av-SP 5.62/1	Av Timeform Rating on wnr 169	Fav 1,0,0,2,1
<b>2009</b>	<b>12 rns</b>	<b>Dead</b>	<b>TR wnr 164</b>
1 *	MASTER MINDED (FR)	P F Nicholls	6-11-10
2 <sup>3/</sup>	Well Chief (Ger)	DE Pipe	10-11-10
3 <sup>2</sup>	Petit Robin (Fr)	NJ Henderson	6-11-10
<b>2008</b>	<b>8 rns</b>	<b>Dead</b>	<b>TR wnr 179</b>
1 *	MASTER MINDED (FR)	PFNicholls	5-11-10
2 <sup>2</sup>	Voy Por Ustedes (Fr)	AKing	8-11-10
3 <sup>4</sup>	Fair Along (Ger)	PJHobbs	6-11-10
<b>2007</b>	<b>10 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 155</b>
1 <sup>ur/</sup>	VOY POR USTEDES (FR)	AKing	6-11-10
2 <sup>*/</sup>	Dempsey (Ire)	CLlewellyn	9-11-10
3 <sup>3/</sup>	River City (Ire)	NTChance	10-11-10
<b>2006</b>	<b>12 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 163</b>
1 <sup>*/</sup>	NEWMILL (IRE)	JJMurphy,Ire	8-11-10
2 <sup>*/</sup>	Fota Island (Ire)	MFMorris,Ire	10-11-10
3 <sup>3/</sup>	Mister McGoldrick	MrsSJSmith	9-11-10
<b>2005</b>	<b>8 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 181</b>
1 <sup>*/</sup>	MOSCOW FLYER (IRE)	MrsJHarrington,Ire	11-11-10
2 <sup>2/</sup>	Well Chief (Ger)	MCPipe	6-11-10
3 <sup>*/</sup>	Azertyuioip (Fr)	PFNicholls	8-11-10

**Barker** Took off immediately on joining Willie Mullins, winning three times in novice company, including a fifteen-length defeat of a below-par Forpadydeplasterer in a Grade 1 at Punchestown in April. Still going well when unseating in John Durkan there when last seen in December, but probably has too much on his plate in this exalted company.

**Big Zeb** Unseated some way out in this last season, and jumping let him down again when well-held fourth behind Twist Magic in the Tingle Creek at Sandown, but no doubting he's one of the best around when avoiding mistakes, a point he underlined when beating Golden Silver in the Tied Cottage at Punchestown in January. Has the ability to reach at least a place.

**Cornas** Likeable and consistent chaser, though numbers only maiden and minor event successes to his name over fences and has consistently found life tough against the best two-mile chasers.

**Forpadydeplasterer** Most genuine and reliable jumper, in the frame on all thirteen starts so far, and enjoyed finest hour when winning last season's Arkle narrowly from Kalahari King. Clearly at home on the track, but has found one too good on all three starts this season (beaten long way by Twist Magic in Tingle Creek last time) and recent injury scare clearly no positive.

**Free World** Hasn't looked the weak finisher he used to this season, ridden more patiently and placed in competitive handicaps at Cheltenham and Doncaster on last two outings. Clearly more required here, though.

**Golden Silver** Caused an upset in the Irish Arkle in 2008/9 and has very much confirmed himself a high-class chaser this time around, winning twice, including the Grade 1 Dial-A-Bet Chase at Leopardstown in December. Not as fluent as usual when turned over by Big Zeb at Punchestown last time and probably going to come up short.

**Kalahari King** Could barely have taken to chasing any better and stepped up on some highly promising novice performances when running out a clear-cut winner of a well-contested handicap at Doncaster on reappearance, defying a mark of 157 in the process. Foolish to suggest there isn't more to come from him the way he's gone so far and certainly a place contender having also finished second in last season's Arkle.

**Mahogany Blaze** No wins to his name since his novice days and looks up against it once again.

**Master Minded** An outstanding two-miler, not just amongst his own generation but many before, and has landed back-to-back Champion Chases, putting up one of the best performances in recent times when routing Voy Por Ustedes in 2008 and doing no more than necessary to beat Well Chief in a lesser renewal last season. Rib problem blamed for his defeat at the hands of the latter rival at Cheltenham in November, and looked on the way back when easing clear in the Game Spirit at Newbury next time, so very much the one to beat again in his hat-trick bid.

**Newmill** Hit his peak in 2005/6, culminating with success in both this and the Kerrygold Champion at Punchestown, and simply not up to cutting the mustard at this level nowadays, despite winning the Kinloch Brae Chase at Thurles when last seen.

**Oh Crick** Left earlier chasing form behind when landing Grand Annual at Cheltenham and Red Rum at Aintree on final two starts last season, and showed better form again with his reappearance under his belt when third to Twist Magic in the Victor Chandler at Ascot. Work to do on that form to play a role in this and subsequent fourth in the Ascot Chase nothing like as good a run.

**Petit Robin** Very reliable granted favoured two miles and has returned as good as ever this season, winning the Desert Orchid at Kempton prior to finding Twist Magic too good in the Victor Chandler at Ascot. That form leaves him with a bit to find and he'll do well to repeat last season's third.

**Twist Magic** Has had his critics down the years, justifiably so at times given he's often finished weakly, though hard to crab his performances this season, seeing things out remarkably well under top weight when third in the Haldon Gold Cup at Exeter prior to making all in fine style in both the Tingle Creek (Forpadydeplasterer second) at Sandown and the Victor Chandler (by twelve lengths from Petit Robin) at Ascot. Disappointing record at Cheltenham well documented, though was going well when falling in the Arkle in 2007 and the feeling is he's a different proposition nowadays.

**Well Chief** One of a triumvirate of vintage two-milers a few seasons back, alongside Moscow Flyer and Azertyuioip, though injury prevented him having his day in the Champion Chase and all this season's evidence points to him being a cut or two below the required level these days, his defeat of Master Minded at Cheltenham on his return almost certainly a result of that great rival underperforming.

**CONCLUSION** Kalahari King impressed many with his wide-margin Doncaster handicap success, but he'll have to improve plenty on that form to prevent the division's leader **Master Minded** from making it three Champion Chases in succession, with his Newbury win implying he retains the majority of his ability. In yet another Festival race in which Paul Nicholls holds the key, Master Minded's stablemate **Twist Magic** makes most appeal for each-way purposes—he almost certainly has the most ability of the remainder and could well be a different character than when tackling this race in previous seasons.

## TOP ON FORM

Master Minded	190	Kalahari King	173 +	Petit Robin	169
Twist Magic	179	Tranquil Sea	173 +	Forpadydeplasterer	167
Big Zeb	175	Golden Silver	171	Barker	167

# Ladbroke's World Hurdle

## Ladbroke's World Hurdle (Grade 1) (4yo+) 3m

Thu 18th Mar 3.20pm

Av-Field 15	Av-SP 5.81/1	Av Timeform Rating on wnr 166	Fav 2,3,0,1,0
<b>2009</b>	<b>14 rns</b>	<b>Dead</b>	<b>TR wnr 172</b>
1 *	BIG BUCK'S (FR)	PF Nicholls	6-11-10
2 <sup>2</sup>	Punchestowns (Fr)	NJ Henderson	6-11-10
3 <sup>2</sup>	Powerstation (Ire)	E O'Connell	9-11-10
<b>2008</b>	<b>17 rns</b>	<b>Dead</b>	<b>TR wnr 169</b>
1 *	INGLIS DREVER	JHJohnson	9-11-10
2 *	Kasbah Bliss (Fr)	FDoumen	6-11-10
3 *	Kazal (Fr)	EGriffin,Ire	7-11-10
<b>2007</b>	<b>14 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 162</b>
1 <sup>2/</sup>	INGLIS DREVER	JHJohnson	8-11-10
2 <sup>*</sup>	Mighty Man (Fr)	HDDaly	7-11-10
3 <sup>*/</sup>	Blazing Bailey	AKing	5-11-10
<b>2006</b>	<b>20 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 163</b>
1 <sup>*/</sup>	MY WAY DE SOLZEN (FR)	AKing	6-11-10
2 <sup>*/</sup>	Golden Cross (Ire)	MHalford,Ire	7-11-10
3 <sup>2/</sup>	Mighty Man (Fr)	HDDaly	6-11-10
<b>2005</b>	<b>12 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 162</b>
1 <sup>*/</sup>	INGLIS DREVER	JHJohnson	6-11-10
2 <sup>*/</sup>	Baracouda (Fr)	FDoumen,Fr	10-11-10
3 <sup>*/</sup>	Rule Supreme (Ire)	WPMullins,Ire	9-11-10

**Ballyfitz** Useful stayer in both spheres, though essentially out of his depth at the top level and a bid to reclaim his Pertemps Final crown (won race in 2008) looks a more suitable Festival aim.

**Big Buck's** Hasn't looked back since reverting to hurdling following luckless departure in last season's Hennessy and has developed into as formidable a force over timber as has been seen for many a year, winning all six starts no less, including this race in 2009. Campaign very much geared towards a repeat bid, landing the odds in both the Long Distance and the Long Walk at Newbury, and the demands of this race play very much to his strengths as an out-and-out stayer. Sets what looks an insurmountable standard.

**Cape Tribulation** Looked good as a novice when wide-margin winner of River Don at Doncaster and every bit as good based on his runs behind Go Native and Medermit over barely adequate two miles on last two starts. Quite whether he wants as stiff a test of stamina as this is another matter, however, and simply not good enough anyway.

**Cousin Vinny** Reportedly had an interrupted preparation prior to being turned over as favourite in last season's Supreme Novices' Hurdle and again tasted defeat when second to stablemate Mikael d'Haguenet in another Grade 1 novice at Punchestown in May. Spell chasing since has been nothing other than a letdown, but always possible return to timber will work the oracle and likely to be suited by longer trip.

**Fair Along** Showed he's as good as ever with wide-margin success in Grade 2 at Wetherby (Pettifour second conceding 4 lb) in October, though has had plenty of hard races down the years and possible judging by last two efforts that he's finally feeling the effects, finding less than seemed likely both times. Overlooked despite his good course record.

**Karabak** Up there with the best novices and has improved further since pitched into open company, chasing home Zaynar in the Ascot Hurdle and Big Buck's in the Long Walk at Newbury. Long since promised to benefit from a thorough test of stamina, so no surprise to see him fare so well in the latter race, and seems sure to give another good account.

**Katchit** Claimed back-to-back Festival wins when adding 2008 Champion Hurdle to his Triumph Hurdle success a year earlier, but not the same force nowadays and it took a step up to three miles in the Cleeve Hurdle to allow him to make more of an impression, finishing third to Tidal Bay and Time For Rupert. Has even more to do here.

**Kayf Aramis** Doughty battler who's been better than ever since leaving Venetia Williams, reaching the frame four times from six starts. Exposed as a cut below the best hurdlers around, however.

**Lie Forrit** Became something of a 'public' horse early this season, hailing from a small stable and winning back-to-back big-field handicaps at Cheltenham and Newbury. Came unstuck when favourite for Cleeve Hurdle won by Tidal Bay next time, but yard reportedly held up by the cold weather at that point and no doubting he's worth another try at this level.

**Mourad** Third in the Triumph as a juvenile and promises to stay at least three miles, though he'll need to improve plenty for the stiffer test of stamina if he's to cause an upset here and also entered in the Coral Cup.

**Mr Thriller** Impressive, well-backed winner of Chepstow handicap on return, then snatched victory from the jaws of defeat when rallying past Starluck in a four-year-old hurdle at Haydock, but efforts since haven't been anything like as good and beaten before trip became a factor in the Cleeve last time.

**Oscar Dan Dan** Dual winner this season, including when beating Ninetieth Minute in the Hatton's Grace at Fairyhouse in December. That was a substandard renewal of that race, though, and looks out of his depth in this.

**Pettifour** Established as a shade shy of the best staying hurdlers around and hard to know how a largely underwhelming stint chasing will have affected him, including mentally. Passed over.

**Powerstation** Has a blinding record around here, placed on five of his six starts, including a remote third to Big Buck's in this last season. Looks to retain all his ability judging by win in Grade 2 at Leopardstown (Oscar Dan Dan second) in December and not out of it for place purposes.

**Sentry Duty** Upset shorter-priced pair Katchit and Mr Thriller at Cheltenham on New Year's Day and hard to crab a horse who's won three of his last five starts and isn't yet fully exposed, though chances are he'll be vulnerable to stronger stayers late on.

**Tidal Bay** Mercurial and often infuriating character who put his best foot forward for first time in a while returned to hurdles when winning the Cleeve here in January. Has the ability to push Big Buck's closest, though feeling is the novelty of reverting to hurdles won't last long and percentage call is to take him on at single-figure odds.

**Time For Rupert** Has done little but improve throughout his career and followed handicap win here with excellent second in the Cleeve conceding 4 lb to five-length winner Tidal Bay. Hard to say he won't pull out more the way he's gone so far, and heads the list of big-priced alternatives to Big Buck's.

**War of Attrition** Top-class chaser in his prime, winning the Gold Cup here in 2006, and has enjoyed something of a renaissance since returned to hurdling for all he isn't as good as he was, winning small-field Grade 2 events at Gowran Park and Navan on last two starts. More clearly required here, though.

**CONCLUSION** A tendency to race lazily is the only minor chink in the armour of the mighty stayer **Big Buck's** and he's value at anything around 8/13 to retain the prize he claimed in a stronger renewal in 2009. Karabak is the one most likely to finish second, though his price very much reflects that and both **Time For Rupert** and **Lie Forrit** represent better value against Big Buck's for each-way, place-only or without-the-favourite purposes.

### TOP ON FORM

Big Buck's	185 +	Sentry Duty	169 +	Fair Along	167
Karabak	172	Time For Rupert	169	Powerstation	167
Tidal Bay	171 \$	Pettifour	168	Mr Thriller	166

# Ryanair Chase (Festival)

## Ryanair Chase (Festival) (Grade 1) (5yo+) 2m5f

Thu 18th Mar 2.40pm

Av-Field 10	Av-SP 5.46/1	Av Timeform Rating on wnr 161	Fav 0,1,0,0,2
<b>2009</b>	<b>10 rns</b>	<b>Dead</b>	<b>TR wnr 162</b>
1 <sup>6</sup>	IMPERIAL COMMANDER (IRE)	NA Twiston Davies	8-11-10
2 *	Voy Por Ustedes (Fr)	A King	8-11-10
3 <sup>2</sup>	Schindlers Hunt (Ire)	DT Hughes	9-11-10
<b>2008*</b>	<b>9 rns</b>	<b>Dead</b>	<b>TR wnr 163</b>
1 <sup>2</sup>	OUR VIC (IRE)	DEPipe	10-11-10
2 <sup>2</sup>	Mossbank (Ire)	MHourigan,Ire	8-11-10
3 <sup>2</sup>	Turko (Fr)	PFNicholls	8-11-10
<b>2007</b>	<b>9 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 157</b>
1 <sup>*/</sup>	TARANIS (FR)	PFNicholls	6-11-0
2 <sup>2/</sup>	Our Vic (Ire)	DEPipe	9-11-5
3 <sup>*/</sup>	Billyvoddan (Ire)	HDDaly	8-11-0
<b>2006</b>	<b>11 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 160</b>
1 <sup>3/</sup>	FONDMORT (FR)	NJHenderson	10-11-0
2 <sup>0/</sup>	Laccloudal (Fr)	PJHobbs	7-11-0
3 <sup>3/</sup>	Impek (Fr)	MissHCKnight	10-11-3
<b>2005</b>	<b>12 rns</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>TR wnr 162</b>
1 <sup>2/</sup>	THISTHATANDTOTHER (IRE)	PFNicholls	9-11-3
2 <sup>0/</sup>	Fondmort (Fr)	NJHenderson	9-11-0
3 <sup>*/</sup>	Rathgar Beau (Ire)	ESheehy,Ire	9-11-3

\*2008 renewal run over the Old Course (2m4f110y)

**Albertas Run** Winner of the RSA Chase two years ago but more downs than ups in open company since. Best efforts this season when winning the Amlin 1965 Chase and when chasing home Monet's Garden in the Ascot Chase, but even a reproduction of those performances leave him with plenty to find.

**Barbers Shop** Something of a bridesmaid over the last couple of seasons but has come up against a peak-form Denman and Kauto Star when fourth in the Hennessy and third in the King George respectively this season. Well worth trying back at this sort of trip and form entitles him to an each-way chance.

**Chapoturgeon** Talented but error-prone chaser who put it all together to win the Jewson at last year's Festival. Let down by jumping in Paddy Power and Boylesports Gold Cup first two starts this season and not seen since a weak-finishing seventh over course and distance in January.

**Deep Purple** Developed into a very smart chaser with wins in the Charlie Hall and Peterborough Chase in the autumn, though both races have subsequently been let down by the placed horses. Not seen since breaking a blood vessel in the King George.

**Jack The Giant** Has had his problems, but a very talented performer on his day, successful on his last four starts, including when a wide-margin winner of a two-mile handicap at Ascot when last seen in November 2008. Yard look to have better claims elsewhere.

**Master Medic** Completed four-timer in handicap at Ascot on reappearance and progressed further when only one to make a race of it with Fix The Rib there next time, again shaping like two and a half miles would prove his optimum. Absent since pulling up in the King George, but a bold showing wouldn't be a surprise.

**Petit Robin** Looked exciting prospect when easy winner of Newbury handicap on his first start over fences in Britain and has since run with credit numerous times at the top level at two miles, finding Master Minded too good when placed in last year's Victor Chandler and Champion Chase and unable to go with Twist Magic in the latest renewal of the former race last time. Connections reportedly favouring coming here to avoid those rivals in the Champion Chase, but it's debatable whether he's as effective around two and a half miles.

**Planet of Sound** Not yet fully exposed and built on his Arkle third when winning the Haldon Gold Cup at Exeter on his reappearance. Improved again when chasing home Albertas Run at Ascot next time and entitled to reverse those placings on these terms, but hardly comes here on the back of an ideal preparation after an early fall behind Monet's Garden there last time.

**Poquelin** Has very much come into his own around two and a half miles and is one of the most improved chasers in training this season, winning a handicap at Cheltenham in October, finishing second to Tranquil Sea in the Paddy Power, and improving again when a well-backed winner of the Boylesports Gold Cup in December. The form of that last win, where he had subsequent Racing Post Chase winner Razor Royale seven lengths back in second, is on a par with the standard required to win an average renewal of the Ryanair, so it's hard to knock his claims.

**Schindlers Hunt** Very smart and experienced chaser who excelled himself when third to Imperial Commander in this last year before going on to give Voy Por Ustedes an almighty scare when second in the Melling Chase at Aintree. This season's efforts suggest he's still up to performing to that level and he was still in front at the last before finding his stamina stretched when third to Joncol in the Irish Hennessy last time. Drop from three miles will suit and hard to see him out of the frame.

**Scotsirish** Very smart chaser who has shown himself to be as good as ever this season, winning Grade 2 chase at Navan over seventeen furlongs on his latest start. Up against it on balance, however.

**Tranquil Sea** Grade 1-winning novice hurdler and two seasons over fences have seen him progress well. Looked an improved performer when beating Joncol at Naas in October and fully confirmed that impression with a high-class effort to win the Paddy Power Gold Cup at Cheltenham in November, having matters in control from a long way out and merely shaken up after the last to beat Poquelin by four and a half lengths. Revised weights suggest there should be little between the pair and Tranquil Sea showed his well-being as recently as late-February when an easy winner of the Grade 2 Newlands Chase at Leopardstown.

**Voy Por Ustedes** Grand performer and a credit to connections, winning in Grade 1 company in each of the four seasons prior to 2009/10. Like his yard as a whole, though, hasn't fired on all cylinders this term, with his jumping looking increasingly ragged, including when beating only a 200/1 shot when fourth of 5 behind Master Minded in the Game Spirit at Newbury last time. Return to further may help, but has a bit to prove.

**J'y Vole** Progressive mare who has looked better than ever this winter, putting up a career-best effort when winning the Red Mills Chase at Gowran last time by fifteen lengths from Watson Lake. Done most of her racing on right-handed tracks over fences and has jumped that way when going left-handed before.

**CONCLUSION** A competitive renewal, if perhaps one lacking the stars of the other Grade 1 open chases at the meeting, a few turning up here to avoid stiffer competition in the Gold Cup and Champion Chase. At the time of writing, **Poquelin** and Tranquil Sea are disputing favouritism and, of the pair we'd slightly favour the former, but a more appealing bet at the current 12/1 is **Schindlers Hunt** each way, a proven performer under the likely conditions who looks as good as ever.

### TOP ON FORM

Poquelin	176	Golden Silver	171	Voy Por Ustedes	171
Tranquil Sea (Ire)	173 +	Herecomesthetruth	171 ?	Deep Purple	170
Barbers Shop	171	J'y Vole	171	Jake The Giant	170

# Trainer Interviews

## HENRIETTA KNIGHT

*Knights name will forever be associated with the Cheltenham Festival thanks to the achievements of her legendary three-time Gold Cup winner Best Mate. This year she heads to Prestbury Park with her best chance of success since the last of those triumphs in 2004.*

**Somersby (Timeform Rating 157)** Everything's gone very well, excellent. It's a very tough race as it always is, very competitive with some extremely good horses in it. There's probably a good half dozen I'm afraid of, the Irish ones and Nicky Henderson's and Paul Nicholls has put a dark horse in. I trained the dam of Riverside Theatre and I thought he looked good when he won at Kempton. Somersby's jumping has been very encouraging so far, but youngsters can always make mistakes, can't they? I always think funny things can happen in the Arkle, but touch wood he jumps very well.

**Calgary Bay (Timeform Rating 151p)** Hopefully he'll run in the William Hill Trophy [also holds an entry in the Gold Cup] and Graham Lee will ride him. We wanted to go for the Great Yorkshire at Doncaster but it was abandoned. He has to go left-handed and there are limited choices for him. He definitely wants three miles and decent ground. I don't know why he ran so badly at Newbury. I think he might just have pulled a muscle in his back or something as for the first time in his life he didn't jump very well, but he was excellent at Doncaster next time and seems very well.

## FERDY MURPHY

*Festival success is something Ferdie Murphy has become accustomed to. Ever since a double in 1996, Murphy's horses can be relied upon to have been trained to a peak for Cheltenham. Indeed, following the Leyburn handler blind has proved profitable, as the big price successes of Hot Weld and Joes Edge testify.*

**Kalahari King (Timeform Rating 162+)** No problems. Came through his piece of work yesterday really, really well and we'll just let him tick away until Wednesday now. We think our lad's preparation has gone well, we've no doubt he's got his conditions, they're sure to be pretty similar as to when he was unlucky there last year. He won at Aintree but wasn't right when he ran in the Celebration Chase and his run back looked a good trial, he won it well, so we're quietly confident we've got a very good horse and we've got him right so we'll be hopeful for a hell of a run. I still think Twist Magic is a bigger threat than Master Minded, I've always thought that. I think Ruby is a big plus to Twist Magic, and he won't be riding, but I think he and Paul Nicholls have done a tremendous job with him this season.

**Watch My Back (Timeform Rating 144)** His preparations have gone really well. He's had a whizz round Cheltenham and missed a couple of fences and nearly came down at the ditch, but that wasn't his fault according to Graham and he did well to stand up. So to be beaten just over six lengths by Poquelin was a fantastic effort and I was very pleased with him at Doncaster, too. We learned a lot that day, he's schooled well since and we've had a really clear run with him touch wood. I think he should be favourite.

**The Hollinwell (Timeform Rating 138+)** He goes for the Jewson. He did an incredible piece of work yesterday morning and, though we aren't entirely sure if Cheltenham is the place for him, he is seriously, seriously well. He's done nothing wrong this year; the ground when he was second at Hexham was only just raceable and he didn't quite get home on the day. Having said that, if he'd had as hard a race as the winner he'd probably have beat him, and Abbeybraney is no slouch anyway and we were giving him 6 lb. We backed off him then and used the Warwick race as a prep and he

had a good blow there. That took him up to 138 and we couldn't run him again after that. He's made the running over fences so far, but we couldn't do that at Cheltenham so we'll be dropping him in. We don't want to make the running because there's a danger he could leave his career behind, and he's got a big future, Graham seriously thinks he'll be a Ryanair horse next year. He didn't used to like being held up—he was very green and raw—but we've done a lot of schooling behind five or so other horses and he's got better and better. We'd be very sweet on him.

**Galant Nuit (Timeform Rating 137)** He's in both the William Hill and Kim Muir, but he won't get into the first of those. He's been off since winning there last time and is fine and well. He'll run his race but I just wonder if he'd have enough pace with the ground as it's going to be. He's better on soft ground. If there was any chance of **Poker de Sivola (Timeform Rating 127)** making the cut he would win the Kim Muir! He schooled a piece of work here yesterday as good as he's ever done, and he is a good horse on his day. I think he should have won the race last year, she went way too wide on him, just got pushed wider and wider. He's a lot brighter and wiser this year and a lot stronger. He got no penalty for winning at Catterick last time which normally you'd be happy about, but I wouldn't have minded going up 3 lb or 4 lb as it would have guaranteed us a run.

## DONALD MCCAIN

*It's difficult to think of another more upwardly-mobile trainer than Donald McCain, and he's already twice tasted success at this meeting with Cloudy Lane and Whiteoak*

**Ballabriggs (Timeform Rating 147)** He's a horse we've always liked, and it's great that he's done as much as he has this season having had his problems last year. He's a very big, massive horse and he's probably only just come into himself, but he's really going the right way now. He'll have to lump a big weight, but he's the type of horse who can carry weight. We're very hopeful because he's a very good horse in very good form.

**Peddlers Cross (Timeform Rating 143p)** He's going well. He worked the other day at Bangor and I was really happy with him. We're still undecided about his target. We were leaning towards the Neptune, but his piece of work the other day was very good indeed and forced us to reconsider. We'll probably make the decision as late as possible, but whichever race he goes for he's my most likely winner of the week.

**Any Given Day (Timeform Rating 137)** The County Hurdle is the most likely target at the moment. He's in the boys' race as well but obviously we'll have a big weight in that. He's grand, he's working really well and we're very happy with him. He should run a big race all being well.

**Fabalu (Timeform Rating 134+)** We've been aiming for this race (National Hunt Chase) for about two years! He's always looked the sort who'll be well suited by the race, the way he jumps and stays. He's a grand horse and the race is just made for him.

**Fiendish Flame (Timeform Rating 133+)** We've done what we wanted and got some wins in him but his handicap mark has suffered as a consequence and maybe you could argue we should have played things a bit more slowly. He's too high in the weights to win, but he won't mind the ground and is in good nick—he's been fine since winning at Musselburgh—so should give a good account.

## IAN WILLIAMS

*Ian Williams has held a licence for 12 years now and it's fair to say that the last twelve months have been the most successful time of his career to date, with boundless success in both codes.*

**Weird Al (Timeform Rating 146p)** Probably won't be too affected by the ground, I imagine he'll appreciate decent ground even though he's won well on soft this winter. He's made huge progress, is in good form and I'm really looking forward to the big day. What he has in course experience, he lacks in general experience—I mean he's raced only four times over obstacles, three of those being over

fences and two of them at Cheltenham. What do you take from that? You take from it that he wants looking after and the progress should keep coming. Long Run and Punchestowns are serious racehorses, there's no doubt at all about that. We'd like to be running against them and performing to their level of ability because they've achieved it and we've still got it to prove.

**Fredo (Timeform Rating 129)** He'll run in the Pertemps. He's up 14 lb from Haydock which will make it a lot sterner test. He needed a fair weight raise to get into the race, 10 lb would have been nicer but he did win well I suppose. Obviously that hike is an issue in such a good race, but I don't think the likely ground will bother him and he'll go there with a respectable chance.

**Bob 'N' You (Timeform Rating 124)** With the likely weight rise he could get into the Pertemps off a nice weight. He's run some good races in novice company this year and has been fairly treated by the handicapper I think. He'll appreciate a return to good ground and a stiff, galloping three miles.

## EDWARD O'GRADY

*Edward O'Grady is the most successful living Irish trainer at the Festival having sent out a total of seventeen winners from his base in County Tipperary since Mr Midland provided him with his first success in 1974.*

**Tranquil Sea (Timeform Rating 162+)** I am very pleased with his preparation and Leopardstown last week was super, I was very pleased with that. I think he looks to have a reasonable chance but the Ryanair is probably more competitive this year because people are avoiding the Gold Cup. The going by Thursday looks like being possibly good with the present forecast which will suit the favourite, Poquelin. I think my fella will be fine on good ground but it just so happens, in this particular instance, that the favourite will be stiffer opposition on that ground than he would be on soft. I also think this is possibly Barbers Shop's best trip—he has been tried over longer, and run superb races in things like the Gold Cup and the King George, much higher class races than my horse has ever run in. Tranquil Sea has gone from listed to Grade 2 to Grade 1 and that is quite a big jump, so I am well aware that this is sort of a quantum leap and it may or may not happen.

**Jumbo Rio (Timeform Rating 154)** He has an invitation to go to Japan (for the Nakayama Grand Jump) but I don't know if that will happen and I am very tempted to run him in the Champion Hurdle. I don't fancy him carrying top weight in the handicaps so I think there is a fair chance that we will let him take his chance in the Champion.

**Alaivan (Timeform Rating 143p)** If I owned Carlito Brigante I would be disappointed that he isn't favourite—if I was a punter, I would be delighted with the price Carlito Brigante is. He beat my horse terribly well at Leopardstown, and okay it is up to me to make excuses for my horse but the fact of the matter is that Carlito Brigante beat us on the day. He then went out and won the Scottish Triumph Hurdle so, by rights, I think he should be favourite, but obviously I am hoping I can reverse the placings with him. The bare nuts and bolts of it would suggest that Carlito Brigante should beat him and, while I hope *Timeform* are right (Alaivan rated 1 lb higher than Carlito Brigante), facts have a habit of proving themselves right.

**Osana (Timeform Rating 143)** I think he will be fitter and better when he is there. We think he is a very good jumper, I think a fast pace and a truly-run race will suit him well, where he necessarily won't have to do the donkey work. I would prefer not to have to make the running. I think the Arkle is a very good race for the simple fact that we have some very, very good horses in it. I do think the Irish novices are a bit better than their British counterparts and at the moment my horse is only number three on the pecking order over here, so I can only hope that I can improve that.

**Capellanus (Timeform Rating 120)** He will hopefully take his chance in the Fred Winter. I think that the four-year-olds as a group are rated too highly. He is rated 124 and, while I think he has got a chance off his mark, in general I reckon the four-year-olds are rated about twelve pounds too high. What I mean is, he is rated 112 here, but if I run him off 124 against four-year-olds at Cheltenham then he will be 124 when I

bring him home, and, quite frankly I think that is unfair. In Britain they have more opportunities for higher-rated horses but when you come back here and have to run against older horses it makes life terribly difficult.

**Shot From The Hip (Timeform Rating 108+)** We are very happy with him. We hope that he will come on from his last race and that he will give a good account of himself.

## COLM MURPHY

*Colm Murphy took out a trainer's licence in 2000, but he has already saddled Brave Inca to win twice at the Festival, the Supreme Novices Hurdle in 2004 and the Champion Hurdle two years later.*

**Big Zeb (Timeform Rating 164)** He's very well, I am very happy with him and it is a case of all systems go and roll on next Wednesday. The ground is not really an issue with him—he has won on heavy ground and he ran a cracker last year on good ground at Punchestown. We have done a lot of schooling with him and, please God, he will show the benefits of that, but it has been a case of so far so good with him this year. If the Master Minded that won the Queen Mother two years ago turns up then he will be very hard to beat but it depends on how Master Minded is I suppose.

**Voler La Vedette (Timeform Rating 150)** She did a nice piece of work on Tuesday and that should leave her fairly right. It was always an option to run her in the Champion and if the (David Nicholson) mares race wasn't there it would take the choice out of it, but she is a 20/1 chance for the Champion and she is second favourite for the mares race, so it looks the logical race to run her in. We had a lot of frost before Leopardstown and we missed a bit of work with her, so she was probably going there fresher than you would have liked and she didn't settle in the race, but she is a half-sister to Hennessy, who wants four and a half miles, and I always thought the further she would go the better she would be. Ground doesn't seem to be an issue with her as she has won on all sorts.

## CHARLES BYRNES

*Charles Byrnes has long had a reputation for being one of the shrewdest trainers in Ireland but in recent times he has added some real quality to his string, with Weapon's Amnesty supplying him with his first winner at the Festival in the Spa Hurdle last year.*

**Solwhit (Timeform Rating 165)** He has been busy enough, it has really only been a matter of keeping him ticking over. He probably had a hard enough race at Leopardstown the last day, but I was able to give him a couple of weeks off after that and he put back on the weight that he lost and is fresh and well in himself again. Our main concern would be if the ground came up fast and he may get caught for a bit of speed—ideally on goodish ground, he would want two and a half. There isn't much we can do about that now so we will take our chance.

**Weapon's Amnesty (Timeform Rating 147)** He's in good form. He is not the most natural jumper but he warms up to it well and he tends to jump the last four or five better than he jumps the first four or five. He has won around the track which is a plus. It looks like being an extremely hot race but I think he has each-way prospects. Punchestowns was to be my nap of the meeting but we'll just have to wait and see what the situation is with him.

**Sounds of Jupiter (Timeform Rating 127)** He'll probably run in the Fred Winter. We think he has a chance but we are a bit disappointed with the weight he has got to be honest. I think the handicapper has been very, very harsh on him. The likes of Doctor Deejay and Cross Appeal are both around 5 lb below us and their form is surely better than our horse's. He got beaten in Limerick and Thurles and only ended up winning a maiden at Limerick, so I thought he got too much weight for what he has done, but I'd say we'll let him take his chance anyway.

## Spotlight On...Novice Chasers

<b>156p</b>	<b>Long Run</b>	<b>149p</b>	<b>Hey Big Spender</b>
<b>155</b>	<b>Captain Cee Bee</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>Burton Port</b>
<b>154</b>	<b>French Opera</b>	<b>147p</b>	<b>Diamond Harry</b>
<b>154</b>	<b>Sizing Europe</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>Weapon's Amnesty</b>
<b>151p</b>	<b>Somersby</b>	<b>146p</b>	<b>Weird AI</b>
<b>149P</b>	<b>Punchestowns</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>Bensalem</b>

Whilst the majority of hype surrounding this year's Festival relates to Friday's clash between Kauto Star and Denman, they're not the only high-profile stablemates set to do battle for Grade 1 honours this week, with the match up of **Long Run** and **Punchestowns** making for a potentially vintage RSA Chase two days earlier. It's the former who goes into Cheltenham as the season's highest-rated novice, having supplemented two graded successes in France with a devastating thirteen-length defeat of Tazbar in the Feltham at Christmas. He wasn't quite so good when following up in the Kingmaker at Warwick last month, but the two-mile trip was almost certainly an issue in that, and he did at least go a long way to answering questions over his jumping with a much more consistent round. He has a really high cruising speed and, as long as his fencing stands up to the test of Cheltenham under his amateur rider, he can be expected to produce the sort of performance that would usually be good enough to win this race returning to three miles. The sticking point, however, is his stablemate Punchestowns, who proved himself a top-class hurdler when chasing Big Buck's home in last year's World Hurdle, and has looked every bit as good a prospect in two unbeaten starts at two and a half miles over fences for all he hasn't been asked to record a figure to match up to Long Run. He jumps well by and large, and with the step back up in trip sure to work in his favour, he arguably has the more potential of the two. Whilst he suffered a brief health scare last week, recent reports suggest that's firmly behind him, and he certainly makes the more appeal at the prices.

There's a third string to Nicky Henderson's bow in **Burton Port**, and he's set to line up as the third highest rated in the race. Trevor Hemmings' six-year-old has won all four of his starts over fences, though it has to be said that he was made to work a lot harder than might have been expected when landing the odds in a substandard Reynoldstown at Ascot last time, and it will come as no surprise were several to improve past him, chief amongst them being **Diamond Harry**. Nick Williams' charge already has a verdict over Burton Port from a valuable handicap over fixed brush hurdles at Haydock back in November, and what's more did it in concession of 15 lb with something in reserve. Since then, Harry has gone on to win two good-quality novice chases, beating more experienced rivals in Grade 2 company back at Haydock on the first occasion. He's already proven in the pressure-pot that is the Cheltenham Festival, having been beaten little over five lengths by Mikael d'Haguenet in last year's Baring Bingham, though he'll have to jump a whole lot better than he did in scraping home from Bensalem at Newbury last time if he's to stand a chance.

One who's unlikely to be found wanting in the jumping department is **Weird AI**. Not only is Ian Williams' hope unbeaten in four starts over obstacles, but he has plenty of Cheltenham experience too, having gained two of his three chase wins at Prestbury Park. This will be much the biggest occasion of his short career so far, but perhaps more a concern is that he's yet to meet opposition any stronger than **Knockara Beau** (rated 138) and, whilst he gives the impression he's yet to show his all, he'll definitely have to step up appreciably to feature. The same comment applies to **The Nightingale** (143p), whose second wide-margin success in as many chase starts came in last month's Pendil at Kempton. His slick jumping could well see him reach a higher standard than he ever

did over hurdles, whilst he's completely unexposed at three miles, but it's hard to escape the fact he has some fourteen lengths to make up on Diamond Harry alone from last year's novice hurdle. The best of those who ran in the Festival novice hurdles last year could even be the Spa winner **Weapon's Amnesty**. He's just about the only Irish-trained runner to make much appeal, and, acknowledging his jumping can be sticky, he will be well suited by the return to three miles having been held off by **Citizen Vic** (144+) in the P J Moriarty over twenty-one furlongs at Leopardstown last month. Saying that, he'll still face some task against Punchestowns.

If the RSA Chase looks something of an English benefit, it's the Irish who hold the upper hand in the Arkle, at least if the market is to be believed. The Grade 1 over two miles at Leopardstown's Christmas meeting is probably the key trial here, featuring as it did both **Sizing Europe** and **Captain Cee Bee**. The former came on the back of three unbeaten starts over fences and stretched his sequence to four with a clear-cut defeat of **Osana** (143), but things could have been very different had Captain Cee Bee survived his mistake at the last, Eddie Harty's charge looking all over the winner at the time as he loomed upsides. Captain Cee Bee has since gone on to put in a clear round at Naas, and probably deserves to be the shorter priced of the pair, with a Festival success already under his belt courtesy of his defeat of Binocular in the 2008 Supreme, though Sizing Europe will clearly be no pushover having recorded a slightly higher figure over hurdles when winning that season's AIG Champion Hurdle. It's not just a two-pronged attack from across the Irish Sea either, with the lightly-raced **Sports Line** (145p) also coming into calculations. Willie Mullins' imposing seven-year-old proved himself smart from just four starts over timber and is arguably unlucky not to be unbeaten two runs into his chasing career, having looked all over the winner in January's Irish Arkle only to be run down by one who'd sat much further off the pace. Conditions could be an unknown with him at Cheltenham, given he's raced mainly on testing ground, but he's respected all the same.

It's clearly going to take a good British novice to withstand the Irish challenge, but **Somersby** could well be up to the task. Henrietta Knight's six-year-old proved himself on the big occasion when third behind the Champion Hurdle hopes Go Native and Medermit in last year's Supreme, and it's hard to imagine a novice jumping fences any better than he has in two unbeaten starts so far. He's already dented the notable reputation of Crack Away Jack in the Henry VIII at Sandown, and certainly won't want for know-how for all he's been absent three months since then. He's probably the way to play this, certainly making more appeal than **Riverside Theatre** (143p), acknowledging the latter also jumps boldly and brings a record of two wins from two to the table. Riverside Theatre's form doesn't look as strong for one, the better of his efforts being a twelve-length defeat of the hampered El Dancer (128), whilst his progress over hurdles levelled out some way short of the market leaders' standard, too. It could even be that **Woolcombe Folly** (138p) proves the second best of the British-trained team. His smart hurdles form marks him down as having more ability than Riverside Theatre, and his narrow success in the Lightning on his only start over fences so far came at the expense of the more experienced **I'm Delilah** (135p). It's just to be hoped his jumping stands up following a reported schooling accident on Thursday which led to Sam Thomas being air-lifted to hospital.

The third non-handicap novice chase is the four-mile NH Chase, and **Massasoit** (141) ranks as the highest-rated participant having twice chased Burton Port home, and followed an easy success with a very useful third against seasoned handicappers at Sandown. Whether he has the resolve to match his ability has been questioned several times over, however, and the strong-staying **Any Currency** (140) and smooth-travelling **Far More Serious** (138) make more appeal at current odds.

## Spotlight On...Novice Hurdlers

<b>152p</b>	<b>Dunguib</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>Fionnegas</b>
<b>149p</b>	<b>Rite of Passage</b>	<b>144p</b>	<b>Enterprise Park</b>
<b>148p</b>	<b>Tell Massini</b>	<b>144x</b>	<b>Reve de Sivola</b>
<b>147p</b>	<b>Get Me Out of Here</b>	<b>143p</b>	<b>Peddlers Cross</b>
<b>147p</b>	<b>Menorah</b>	<b>143p</b>	<b>Wishfull Thinking</b>
<b>147</b>	<b>Najaf</b>	<b>141p</b>	<b>Quel Esprit</b>

The 'Irish banker' is a feature of every Festival, and more often than not in recent years has appeared in the very first race, the Supreme Novices' Hurdle. The fate of the 'banker' has been mixed; for while Like-A-Butterfly and Brave Inca justified heavy support with victory, the likes of Sweet Wake and Cousin Vinny dealt serious dents to many a Festival bankroll in defeat. In this piece last year, we mentioned that Cousin Vinny was the best bumper horse in Timeform's history, but that particular record lasted just the one season, as Dunguib swept the NH Flat scene last term, ending up with a bumper rating 1 lb higher than Cousin Vinny. While that horse has proved something of a disappointment since, **Dunguib** has so far given every indication that he can reach the top as a hurdler, in so doing firmly establishing himself as this year's 'banker'. Unextended in winning his four races so far over timber, including Grade 1 events on his last two starts, Dunguib's form is already good enough to take an average renewal of the Supreme, with the prospect of much more to come. The only negative against him is the sloppy display of jumping he put in last time, which may be enough to prevent some from steaming in at odds-on, but there isn't much doubt in our minds that he is the best horse in the race and should get plenty of punters' Festivals off to the perfect start.

If Dunguib does underperform then **Get Me Out of Here**, who found significant improvement last time when winning the Totesport Trophy, could be the one to step into the breach. A strong-traveller, he has done everything asked of him over hurdles and looks the best of the home-based challengers. The other claimant to that title is **Menorah**, whose best effort came when hacking up in a novice at Kempton on Boxing Day. He was below form last time in a rather strange race at Ascot, and though it's easy enough to forgive him that run, his style of racing suggests that Cheltenham may not be ideal for him.

Nicky Henderson has two Supreme Novices' on his CV, but his last winner of the race was back in 1992 when Flown was successful. This year, his main hope for victory number three is **Oscar Whisky** (133P), who very much falls into the 'could be anything' category. He cruised to victory in a maiden at Newbury on his hurdling debut and backed it up next time when winning a novice at Sandown in similar style. The substance of those wins is open to question, with nothing Oscar Whisky has beaten recording anything better than fairly useful form on *Timeform* ratings, but the manner of his wins serves as clear notice of a hugely talented individual. One that we are more inclined to side against is the Irish raider, **Blackstairmountain** (133p). He has had only one race so far over hurdles, winning a maiden at Punchestown with the minimum of fuss. However, that was a slowly-run affair and the form hasn't really been put to the test by those that finished in behind. He obviously warrants respect, not least due to connections, but will meet horses here who were both better than him in bumpers and possess superior form over hurdles. Plenty of improvement is needed.

Irish punters will be hoping for some Dunguib winnings to reinvest on **Rite of Passage** in Wednesday's Baring Bingham. Like Dunguib, Rite of Passage is undefeated as a hurdler and remains open to considerable improvement. He comfortably accounted for the talented Healy's Bar (rated 146

by *Timeform*) last time out, and with the distinct prospect of much more to come, he is a worthy favourite to give Dermot Weld his first Festival winner since Rare Holiday won the Triumph Hurdle in 1990. If you're after an alternative, you could do worse than side with **Finian's Rainbow** (140p), who shaped like the best horse in the race even when meeting his only defeat so far in the Challow at Newbury. His conqueror that day, **Reve de Sivola**, is, in our view, too sketchy a jumper to confirm the placings at Cheltenham, where he is also unlikely to get his ground. **Quel Esprit** will spearhead Willie Mullins' assault on the race, and he is another, along with Dunguib and Rite of Passage, who represents last season's notably strong Champion Bumper form. He met with a slight setback when only second in steadily-run race last time and, though sure to be better suited by a stronger gallop at Cheltenham, will need to find more improvement than some if he is to win. Mullins will also go to war with **Arvika Ligeonniere** (132p), who represents the same ownership as last year's winner Mikael d'Haguenet. His last run was in a good novice hurdle at Fairyhouse where he went down by half a length to **Summit Meeting** (133), who also holds an entry for Cheltenham. Of the two it is the former who strikes as the better long term prospect, having given the impression that he would have won that day had there been a stronger gallop. Needless to say he needs to improve significantly to get involved at the Festival, but this big chasing type looks likely to be well suited by the sort of test he will encounter there and could be one of the more interesting 'dark horses'. One who fits the 'dark horse' bill is **Flat Out** (134P), also trained by Willie Mullins. He made all to win on his hurdling debut at Punchestown last time and is rated with a 'P', denoting the likelihood of significant improvement. Fiveforthree, who won the Baring Bingham for Mullins in 2008, had a similar profile going into Cheltenham, which bodes well for Flat Out's chances this time round, whichever one of his engagements he takes up. It would be remiss to continue without mentioning Donald McCain's **Peddlers Cross**, who also has the Baring Bingham as his target. His bare form isn't the easiest to quantify, but his two hurdling wins have come by a combined thirty-seven lengths and he is clearly a most exciting novice.

The Spa is arguably the least prestigious of the Festival's Grade 1 novice hurdles but, in truth, the level of performance required to win it since its inauguration more or less bears comparison with that needed in both the Supreme and the Baring Bingham. This year, the strongest challengers appear to be **Tell Massini** and **Enterprise Park**. The former has not been seen since winning over the Spa course and distance in mid-December, though his best performance came at Cheltenham the time before when dismissing a host of subsequent winners in a good time. Sure to stay and with his effectiveness on the track proven, Tell Massini is clearly a smart novice in the making and ought to make his presence felt at the Festival. Enterprise Park is another absentee from the racecourse in 2010, but he has impressed as the type to make his mark in good company, successful on both starts over timber. Representing Willie Mullins, he is obviously entitled to plenty of respect here, having accounted for two next time out winners when winning at Limerick last time. Wexford trainer Paul Nolan looks set to head to Cheltenham this year with his strongest selection of contenders yet. One of his better chances appears to be **Shinrock Paddy** (140p) in the Spa. Last time out he won the same Grade 1 that Mikael d'Haguenet took en route to Cheltenham glory in 2009, and looks sure to benefit from the step up to three miles. The extra emphasis on stamina may well be sufficient to see him go very close indeed. One other worth nothing is last year's Festival Foxhunter winner, **Cappa Bleu** (133p), who treads a rather unorthodox path in returning to the scene of his greatest chasing triumph as a novice hurdler. He finished second on his only hurdles start, but should improve and probably has the talent to at least get involved in the finish here. One perhaps worth opposing in this market is **Restless Harry** (139+). He provided a big day for trainer Robin Dickin when winning at Cheltenham on Trials Day, but for all that he is an admirable type, he dictated affairs on that occasion, which he is unlikely to be able to do at the Festival.