

FROM THE DESK OF...

Bill Oppenheim



THE ROYAL ASCOT OF JUMPING

A week from next Tuesday, at 9 a.m. East Coast time, the three-day Cheltenham Festival of National Hunt Racing (Mar. 11-13) will kick off, with a packed house of more than 50,000 devotees. These are the grown-up racehorses, mainly aged six to 10, who leap tall fences with a single bound (when things go according to plan) and ignite the enthusiasm of tens of thousands of racegoers. Being an American from west of the Appalachians, I didn't know much about it when I became a resident of the big island Across the Pond, but I've developed a lot of respect and admiration for the competitors, both equine and human.

A Jumps Primer...

There are two branches of jump racing, hurdles (smaller) and 'chases (bigger), and, at the sport's championship meeting, the distances range from two miles to three miles-plus. The vast majority of the horses are Thoroughbreds, and a pretty significant number of them come off the flat, especially in 'shorter' races over the smaller obstacles. Horses are 'novice hurdlers' until the end of the first season in which they win a race over hurdles and 'novice chasers', using the same criteria, over fences; besides the championship events in each category, the novice championships are among the meet's most interesting races.

Let's Get on With the Show...

Here is a rundown on the two top 'early-price' races (fixed-odds prices are available now, and have been) each day:

Tuesday, March 11

CHAMPION HURDLE, £300,000, 2m 1/2f

Istabraq ([Sadler's Wells](#)--Betty's Secret, by Secretariat), a three-quarter brother to 1984 Epsom Derby winner Secret, was a three-time winner of the Champion Hurdle 1998-2000, and without doubt, the best hurdler I've seen in the 10 years I've been watching jump racing. His retirement after being pulled up last year when bidding for

his fourth straight win (there was no Cheltenham in 2001, due to foot-and-mouth) makes this year's renewal a pretty open-looking contest. Last year's winner, French-bred **Hors La Loi III** (by Arctic Tern's son, Cyborg, winner of six races on the flat and nine over jumps in France) is a 16-1 outsider, not having won since.

The favorites:

Rhinestone Cowboy, g, 7, (by Be My Native, a champion jumps sire and son of Our Native who ran second in the 1981 Dewhurst and won the G1 Coronation Cup at four). Owned by Sue (Mrs. John) Magnier. Beaten once in his life; 2-1 favorite.

Intersky Falcon (Polar Falcon), g, 6, flat-bred, in fact, out of a Try My Best mare, so inbred 3x3 to Northern Dancer. Trained, like the favorite, by Jonjo O'Neill, favored to dethrone Martin Pipe (the Wayne Lukas of British jump racing, at least in terms of rewriting the record books) as the meet's leading trainer; 4-1 second favorite.

Rooster Booster (Riverwise), g, 9, and has graduated from handicapping this season. I think his sire is a son of Riverman who was unplaced in four tries over jumps; 11-2.

Also: **Like-a-Butterfly** (9-1), m, 9 (by Montelimar, a G2 winner by Alleged); **Flame Creek** (10-1), g, 7, by Shardari (Top Ville), who won the G1 Matchmaker--now Juddmonte--International; and **Landing Light** (In The Wings) (20-1), g, 8 (out of an Ela-Mana-Mou mare).

ARKLE, £140,000, 2m (Novice Chase)

The hot favorite for this is **Azertyuoip** (2-1), a six-year-old gelding by Northern Baby's son Baby Turk, winner of the 1986 G2 Grand Prix de Deauville and a successful jumping sire in France. Two of the live supporting cast, **Farmer Jack** and **Hand Inn Hand**, are seven-year-olds from the first crop by Alflora, the son of Niniski I mentioned a few weeks ago.

Wednesday, March 12

QUEEN MOTHER CHAMPION CHASE, £250,000, 2m

This looks a very hot contest this year. Favorite is last year's Arkle winner, Irish-trained **Moscow Flyer**, g, 9, (2-1), by Moscow Society, the 1988 Queen's Vase second, by Nijinsky II. Other strong contenders are: **Cenkos**, g, 9, (9-2) by 1984 Prix de la Foret second Nikos, by Nonoalco; **Kadarann**, g, 6, (6-1), by Bigstone, a four-time Group 1 winner from 7-9f, now standing in China; previous winner, the French-bred **Edredon Bleu**, g, 11, (8-1), by Grand



A.P. INDY DAY AT GULFSTREAM

On Feb. 23:

YELL ran off with the **Grade 2 Davona Dale** by **6** lengths
SPIN CONTROL broke her maiden by **13 1/2** lengths
MISS HELLIE won allowance event by **2** lengths

Congratulations to owners/breeders Claiborne Farm, Adele Dilschneider, Robert Evans, Emory Hamilton, Helen Alexander and Stewart Armstrong!

LANE'S END

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Tresor; **Tiutchev**, g, 10, (8-1), by Soviet Star; **Flagship Uberalles**, g, 9, (9-1), by Accordion, an unraced son of Sadler's Wells; and **Native Upmanship** (12-1), a 10-year-old by Be My Native who was second in the race last year. This looks like the deepest championship field at the meet.

ROYAL & SUN ALLIANCE NOVICE CHASE, £140,000, 3m 1/2f

The three favorites in this race wouldn't be out of place in Thursday's festival showpiece, the £350,000 Cheltenham Gold Cup. The favorite is **Keen Leader**, g, 7, (3-1), (by Supreme Leader {Bustino}, leading jumps sire and third in the 1985 G1 English 2000 Guineas). The French-trained **Jair du Cochet**, g, 6, (Rahotep, 4-1), is a spectacular leaper by the 1981 G2 Prix Hocquart winner, himself by Matahawk (by *Sea Hawk). Third favorite **It Takes Time** (5-1) is another by the Alleged horse, Montelimar.

Thursday, March 13

CHELTENHAM GOLD CUP (CHASE), £350,000, 3m 2 1/2f

Last year's spectacular winner **Best Mate** (6-4), now eight, dominates the betting, and has won both his starts this season. He is by the 1986 G2 Prix Eugene Adam winner Un Desperado, a son of Top Ville. Second favorite is Irish-trained **Beef or Salmon**, a seven-year-old who has won all four of his starts this season. Though only a novice, he easily won Ireland's top three-mile chase and key Cheltenham prep, the Hennessy Cognac Gold Cup.

He is by Cajetano, a son of Run the Gantlet who was bred by Bunker Hunt and won about \$160,000 on the flat and over jumps. An interesting outsider is **Behrajan**, an eight-year-old son of Arazi owned by a partnership including Simon Marsh, manager of the Lloyd-Webber's Watership Down Stud. Though there seem to be no chinks in Best Mate's armor, it's been over 30 years since a horse has won this race twice.

STAYERS' HURDLE, £140,000, 3m

Last year's winner, the Francois Doumen-trained **Baracouda** (6-4) is favored--at the moment, and in spite of losing last time out--over the Irish-trained **Limestone Lad** (11-4), a winner of no less than 35 races. The Irish have a big impact on the betting at this meet, and you can bet any horse that has won 35 times has a huge public following; he might go off favorite, or at worst co-favorite, on the day. Baracouda, now eight, is by another son of Alleged, the 1986 French St. Leger runner-up Alesso. Limestone Lad, who is 11, is by Aristocracy, a Group 3 winner in Ireland in 1977, by Lord Gayle, the son of Sir Gaylord who was also the sire of Strong Gale, the top jumping sire of the 'Nineties. The leading British-trained contenders are seven-year-olds **Classified** (by another perennial leading veteran jumps sire, Roselier), and **Galileo**--not the Derby winner by Sadler's Wells, but a Polish-bred by Jape, the 1992 Italian St Leger winner, and yet another by Alleged. This Galileo ran out an impressive winner of the big 'staying' novice hurdle (2m 5f) at Cheltenham last year, but hasn't been out since. It will say a whole lot for Polish breeding and form--he won the Polish St. Leger in his younger days--if he could beat those two hot favorites after a year off. Tall order.

As you can see, flat-raced and flat-bred sires--some with form over as short as one mile-- have a huge, even decisive, influence in National Hunt pedigrees. So, besides being an interesting gambling medium--and yes, there are occasional thrills and spills that result, unfortunately, in injury and death--it's actually quite instructive for those of us interested in flat pedigrees to follow Cheltenham. Any top racing 'festival' or 'carnival' is. Hopefully one day our 24/365 international racing channels will enable us all, anywhere in the world, to follow these top festivals; in fact, maybe you should call up your local TVG and see if you can get it on this year. You won't see any better racing midweek mornings in America, I can guarantee you that.