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MINI GUIDE

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL BETTING GUIDE



PAUL FERGUSON *PLUS GUEST AUTHORS*

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Welcome

Some years, the seasons flow. Others not so much. And this current season certainly falls into the latter category, with us seeing unseasonably quick ground throughout November and December, followed by the recent outbreak of Equine Influenza.

The 'EI' situation resulted in the loss of six days racing; however, even as this Guide goes to print, the full extent of after-effects isn't really known. Given that numerous trainers were forced into taking extra measures to ensure their horses could return to action – by vaccinating those horses who hadn't been within the last six months – this is sure to have an impact on certain horses missing potential pre-Cheltenham prep races and possibly even on their general build-up to the big meeting.

Add this to the quicker-than-usual ground during the autumn and early winter, and I feel that we could well be seeing plenty of horses – novices in particular – who will be arriving at Cheltenham on the back of lighter campaigns than would have normally been the case. This should be factored in when looking at statistics/trends, such as how many runs a horse would ideally have had prior to a certain race, for example.

For those of you who don't know my background, for the past 12 years I have written the *Jumpers To Follow* publication and ventured into the trends world when penning last year's Aintree and Punchestown Festivals Betting Guide. Whilst the trends are there to assist you, I am still very much of the view that the horse has to be good enough to win the race at the end of the day. The patterns and statistics can help narrow things down and filter things out, but the horse has to have the ability (and temperament) and that should always be remembered. With this in mind, you will probably notice that I make more reference to the actual horses – past and present – than might have been the case in recent years. I hope this make the book easier to digest, rather than simply looking at facts and figures.

In addition to covering the 28 Cheltenham races, this year we have added 18 contests from Aintree and, with the intention of adding a touch of *Jumpers to Follow* to the Guide, in between both sections I have come up with a dozen horses to follow for the spring. I have also taken an in-depth look at the bumper divisions, highlighting horses from that sphere, who should be worth noting in the weeks ahead.

Before you get to my stuff, there is plenty of excellent content from elsewhere. Given this is the 20th year of the Guide, it is with great pleasure that the original author, Paul Jones, returns with a look at how the trends have changed during the past couple of decades. Other contributors include Rory Delargy, who I have had the pleasure of working with in the past and nominated Many Clouds as his handicapper to follow when contributing to *Jumpers To Follow* in 2014-15; Jane Mangan, who has been a regular fixture in JTF since her days in the saddle and she first alerted readers to Presenting Percy having ridden him at the 2016 Punchestown Festival; and Ed Quigley, formerly 'Longshot Ted' in the *Racing Post* and now freelance journalist.

In addition, there is plenty of content from our partners at *Sporting Life*, led by Ben Linfoot taking a detailed look the potential key stories on each of the four days. Furthermore, one of my colleagues on the Bettrends Team, Michael White – who produces an antepost column throughout the season – gives his thoughts on the Grand National, whilst those of you who are reading the digital edition can expect to read my preview for that particular race after the Cheltenham Festival. I will also be adding a festival review, highlighting horses who caught the eye with Aintree in mind.

Finally, thank you to everyone else who has contributed in some way – including Gina Bryce, who kindly wrote the Foreword – and to everyone who has purchased a copy.

Enjoy the festival and good luck!

Paul



1.30 Sky Bet Supreme Novices' Hurdle

(Grade 1) 2m½f – Old Course



OVERVIEW

The traditional curtain-raiser is often run at a frantic pace in the early exchanges and, as a consequence, you need a smooth-travelling horse – one that can hold their position – and one that jumps fluently. Although the usual strong pace contributes towards the race being a test, it is still a 2m½f hurdle race and speed is required.

It could be argued that last year's winner *Summerville Boy* didn't jump especially well, with him being far from fluent over the last three flights, most notably two out, but in general terms you want a slick-jumping novice. Last year was also slightly different, in that it was the first time since 1982 that the going was described as 'heavy' when the meeting got underway.

GRADED FORM NOT TO BE UNDERESTIMATED

Two horses went to post in last year's Supreme having already won a Grade 1 over hurdles, those being the winner *Summerville Boy* and third home Mengli Khan. The fact that they were sent off 9/1 and 14/1 respectively again points to earlier season Graded form being slightly underestimated.

Looking back at the past decade, seven of the 10 winners had previously won a Grade 1 or Grade 2 novice hurdle, so strong form in the book seems to be becoming increasingly important. During this period, only 30 horses contested the Supreme with a Grade 1 or Grade 2 in the bag, and backing all runners would have yielded a £21.50 profit to a level-stake £1.

Like last year's winner – who had won the Tolworth Novices' Hurdle on his previous start – *Altior*, *Douvan*, *Vautour*, *Champagne Fever*, *Cinders And Ashes* and *Go Native* had all won at Grade 1 or Grade 2 level before being successful in the Supreme.

Focusing purely on form at the top level, only eight horses have run in the past seven renewals of the Supreme having earlier won a Grade 1 over hurdles, and three of them were successful. Purely backing these Grade 1 winners – admittedly over a smaller-sample time period – would have produced a £13 profit to a level-stake £1.

Looking back a little further, *Noland* also won the Tolworth en route to the Supreme, whilst both *Brave Inca* and *Like-A-Butterfly* arrived at the festival on the back of winning the race formerly

known as the Deloitte Novice Hurdle, which was then run over 2m2f. That contest was still a Grade 2 when *Like-A-Butterfly* won it, but the high-class mare had earlier scored at the top level when winning the Royal Bond.

The point being made here is that a lot of punters – and pundits – look towards the less-exposed hurdlers in the Supreme, but the strongest form should not be ignored. More of this when I talk about the experience of recent winners, but it is not solely Graded winners that warrant respect, with 11 of the last 17 winners having run in a Grade 1 novice hurdle before the Supreme.

BUMPER WINNERS OVER EX-FLAT HORSES

The enigmatic *Labaik* led home a 1-2 for ex-Flat horses, but he was the first Supreme winner since 2007 (*Ebaziyan*) who switched codes, and things reverted to type last year, with a couple of bumper winners fighting out the finish.

Third home – and stablemate of *Labaik* – Mengli Khan and subsequent Galway Hurdle winner Sharjah (8th) fared best of the former Flat horses, but *Summerville Boy* was making it seven winners in the past decade that originally started their career in National Hunt Flat races. Interestingly, all seven winners were successful in that sphere, too.

The other pair of recent Supreme winners that failed to contest a bumper – the Willie Mullins/Rich Ricci duo of *Vautour* and *Douvan* – boasted a jumping pedigree, and both had run a couple of times over hurdles in France, before moving to Ireland.

Had injury not got in the way, dual Champion Hurdle winner *Hurricane Fly* might well have enhanced the record of ex-Flat horses in the Supreme, as he had slammed 2009 winner *Go Native* by 10 lengths in the Grade 1 Future Champions at Leopardstown over Christmas.

Going further back, *Arcalis* successfully changed codes, but since the missed meeting in 2001 – due to the foot-and-mouth outbreak – only three ex-Flat horses have won the Supreme, having earlier seen *Sausalito Bay*, *French Ballerina*, *Shadow Leader* and *Indefence* being successful in the space of five years.

The tide has very much turned of late, however, and 12 of the past 17 winners were successful in bumpers before embarking on their hurdling

careers. Should there be a former Flat horse on your radar for the Supreme, the profile is very much one of a lightly-raced horse, certainly in the case of the aforementioned quartet who won around the turn of the Millennium. Three of that quartet were having just their third start over hurdles in the Supreme, and although Labaik was officially having his sixth, his refusals meant he was also lightly raced as a hurdler.

In the past decade, 80 horses have gone to post in the Supreme, having won a bumper earlier in their career; this excludes 'Jumpers' Bumpers' or French AQPS races. Unsurprisingly, given the numbers involved, the seven winners produced a loss, but when tied in with Graded hurdles winners, it makes much more pleasant reading. Of the 30 horses to have won a Grade 1 or Grade 2 novice hurdle en route to the festival, 18 had won a bumper earlier in their career. Five of the 18 were successful and yielded a profit of £28 to a level-stake £1.

Sticking with the bumper theme, seven of the past 17 winners had contested a Graded bumper at either Cheltenham, Aintree or Punchestown the previous season.

OFFICIAL BHA RATINGS (150+)

Although official ratings can be inflated with novices – particularly novice chasers – these days, only 10 horses had been handed an official BHA rating of 150 or above ahead of running in the last five Supremes, and four of them were successful.

Vautour, *Douvan* and *Altior* were all top-rated with the same mark of 155, whilst the other pair to reach the 150 mark in 2016 – *Min* and *Buveur d'Air* – filled the frame behind *Altior*. There were also a trio on 150 or above to contest last year's race, including the first and second – *Summerville Boy* (150) and *Kalashnikov* (154) – with the over-racing *Getabird* (152) failing to run his race in 11th.

Backing horses with an official rating of 150 or above in the past five years – there weren't any qualifiers in 2017, incidentally – would have yielded a profit of £12.50 to a level-stake £1. Admittedly, this is a small-sample time period – and horses such as *Cue Card* (159) and *My Tent Or Yours* (162) were beaten with lofty ratings – but it provides more weight behind the theory that – certainly in recent years – proven form is worth a lot more than untapped potential.

EXPERIENCE

As touched upon already, some of the ex-Flat horses that were successful arrived at Cheltenham with limited experience, but since

KEY TRENDS

- ★ Horses that had won a Grade 1 or Grade 2 novice hurdle are 7/30 in the last decade
- ★ Horses that had won a Grade 1 or Grade 2 novice hurdle and had earlier won a bumper are 5/18 in the last decade
- ★ Horses with an official rating of 150+ are 4/10 in the last 5 years
- ✓ 7 of the past 17 winners had contested a Graded bumper at one of the previous season's spring festivals
- ✓ 11 of the past 17 winners had contested a Grade 1 novice hurdle earlier in the season (6 had won)
- ✓ Last-time-out winners have won 19 of the last 22 renewals
- ✓ Respect the winner of the Tolworth Novices' Hurdle (2 of the last 3 winners to contest the Supreme were successful)
- ✓ The last 10 winners had run 4 or 5 times over hurdles
- ✗ Ex-Flat horses have – in general – struggled in the last decade
- ✗ Only 2 of the last 16 winners were unbeaten over hurdles
- ✗ Be wary of the Betfair Hurdle winner/form

the victory of *Captain Cee Bee* – who himself had only had two hurdles starts, but had gained further experience on the Flat after running in bumpers – all 10 winners had run at least four times over hurdles; this takes into account the French runs of *Vautour* and *Douvan*, before they joined Willie Mullins.

Therefore, it is becoming increasingly apparent that experience helps, despite the fact that the average field size has dropped in the past decade. We saw fields of 30 and 28, respectively, in 1998 and 2002, then only once in the next 10 years did the field drop to below 18, with the average during this period being 19. We bounced back to that figure last year, after an average of just 14 runners between 2013 and 2017.

Back to the subject in matter, and it appears as though we should be looking for a horse with four or five starts over hurdles under its belt. In addition, the past three winners made their hurdling debut between 10th and 21st October, so were out fairly

early and got plenty of experience in the bag before Christmas.

Eight of last year's 19-strong field had not run four times over hurdles, including market leader Getabird, who arrived at Cheltenham on the back of just two victories, in a maiden hurdle and in the Grade 2 Moscow Flyer Novice Hurdle.

CURRENT FORM

The victory of *Summerville Boy* made it 19 last-time-out winners in the last 22 renewals, and that could arguably read 20 from 22, if taking the last race that *Labaik* actually started. Clearly horses in form have a strong record and, rather surprisingly, only four of the 19 horses that went to post last year had won on their previous start, two of which were Getabird and First Flow – who both fell short on the 'experience' stat, having had two and three starts respectively – which left just the winner and the runner-up, Kalashnikov.

Another point worth noting is that – again a little surprisingly – only two of the last 16 winners were unbeaten over hurdles. We saw three unbeaten winners in a row between 1999 and 2002, but since then only *Captain Cee Bee* and Altior have managed to maintain a 100% record in the build-up to the festival.

Therefore, do not be afraid to back horses who have been beaten earlier in the campaign and, in fact, last-time-out winners that were beaten earlier in the season have a fine strike rate.

TRAINERS TO NOTE

With five wins to his name – and having saddled three successive winners between 2013 and 2015 – **Willie Mullins** is the obvious starting point for many punters when looking at the Supreme. However, his healthy level-stakes profit (highlighted last year) is mainly down to the big-price victories of *Tourist Attraction* and *Ebazian* and his runners are not overlooked in the market these days.

Since that recent hat-trick of victories – *Champagne Fever*, *Vautour* and *Douvan* – Mullins has saddled three beaten favourites in the shape of Min (15/8), Melon (3/1 joint-favourite) and Getabird (7/4), and nine runners in all during this three-year period. Admittedly, two finished runner-up, but there is a suspicion that the pick of the Mullins runners is automatically installed towards the head of the betting. Looking at it in a more simplistic way, he has saddled three winners and three runners-ups in the past six years, so his leading hope clearly warrants utmost respect. However, we should look closer as to whether the form of that horse warrants his price on the day. Cousin Vinny

was another beaten favourite for the stable back in 2009.

Despite winning the race three times – latterly with Altior – **Nicky Henderson** has also seen some star performers beaten in this race in recent years, with Buveur d'Air, My Tent Or Yours, Darlan, Spirit Son and Sprinter Sacre all only managing to hit the frame. River Wylde, Josses Hill and Vaniteux also placed during this eight-year period, whilst Oscar Whisky could finish only fourth behind *Menorah* in 2010. Again, I am not in any way suggesting that Henderson cannot produce another Supreme winner, but his recent record is a rather frustrating one for followers of the Seven Barrows team.

Going back a little further, Chauvinist and Fleet Street finished third in back-to-back renewals (2003 and 2004), before Amaretto Rose was unable to justify favouritism in 2007 (also finished third) and subsequent Champion Hurdle winner Binocular finished runner-up as a four-year-old the following year. Since 2002, Henderson has saddled 27 runners in the Supreme, with only Altior successful and 10 horses reaching the frame.

Grade 1 winners Klassical Dream and Aramon would appear to be Mullins' leading hopes this year, whilst Nicky Henderson appears to have an embarrassment of riches in the novice hurdle division, with Angels Breath, Mister Fisher and Champagne Platinum all likely runners.

KEY RACES

As already alluded to, Graded race form is becoming increasingly important when finding the winner of the Supreme and the two most recent British-trained winners had both contested the **Sharp Novices' Hurdle** at the Open meeting the previous November. Altior won the Sharp, whilst last year's winner *Summerville Boy* was beaten less than a length in the Grade 2 earlier in the campaign.

Summerville Boy won the Grade 1 **Tolworth Novices' Hurdle** at Sandown and although he was the first to complete the double since *Noland*, L'Ami Serge was the only Tolworth winner to contest the Supreme in the interim; he finished fourth behind *Douvan* in 2015. Therefore, a record of two winners from three runners in the past 11 years is pretty encouraging. It's worth noting that Yorkhill also went on to score at the festival after winning the 2016 Tolworth, while 2017 winner Finian's Oscar missed Cheltenham through injury before winning the Grade 1 Mersey Novices' Hurdle. Backing the Tolworth winner blindly during the past 11 years would have yielded a healthy £14 level-stakes profit to a £1 stake.

Going back a little further, the 2000 renewal might well have provided the winner of all three

novice/juvenile hurdles at the festival (there was no Fred Winter or Albert Bartlett at the time) had Best Mate not took a wide course in the Supreme. He had chased home Royal & SunAlliance winner Monsignor in the Tolworth, with subsequent Triumph winner Snow Drop back in fourth. Given that Kalashnikov also finished runner-up in both races last season, the Tolworth is a race to take very seriously.

Both the Sharp and Tolworth were won this season by the Colin Tizzard-trained Elixir de Nutz. The grey – who was trained by Philip Hobbs as a juvenile last season – is a very slick jumper, so should be well suited by the demands of this race.

Another race that Altior was victorious in en route to Cheltenham was the **32Red Casino Novices' Hurdle** at Kempton on Boxing Day, a race that *Menorah* also won before landing the Supreme. Last year's winner If The Cap Fits missed the remainder of the season, whilst this season's winner Mister Fisher went on to follow up in the Grade 2 Rossington Main at Haydock under a 3lb penalty.

Over in Ireland, the **Royal Bond Novice Hurdle** at Fairyhouse, the **Moscow Flyer Novice Hurdle** at Punchestown, and the **Chanelle Pharma Novice Hurdle** (formerly the Deloitte Novice Hurdle) at Leopardstown's Dublin Racing Festival have all provided two Supreme winners in the past decade. Third in last year's Supreme, Mengli Khan had won the former before chasing home Getabird (beaten favourite) in the Moscow Flyer. Given that Vautour and Douvan had both won the Moscow Flyer en route to the festival, it is perhaps understandable that punters were keen to side with Getabird, who represented the same powerful connections.

Felix Desjy won the Moscow Flyer this year, but probably the most significant of those races was the last-named, which was won by Klassical Dream, who beat stablemate Aramon, himself a Grade 1 winner and third in the Royal Bond. Quick Grabim – another Willie Mullins-trained novice and the winner of the Royal Bond – was ruled out of the festival in mid-January, having suffered a stress-fracture.

Back to England and the previous season's **Weatherbys Champion Bumper** has provided three winners since 2011, with only *Champagne Fever* successful in both. *Al Ferof* (2nd) and *Cinders And Ashes* (5th) had also contested the Champion Bumper the previous March. The aforementioned Felix Desjy finished sixth in last year's renewal.

One race to be slightly wary of, however, is the **Betfair Hurdle** at Newbury. Since 2010, six novices to have won the valuable handicap took their chance in the Supreme and none were successful,

despite Get Me Out Of Here, My Tent Or Yours and Kalashnikov all going very close – all three were sent off first or second favourite, on the back of their Newbury success. Recession Proof finished 5th in 2011 (12/1), Splash Of Ginge was only 15th in 2014 (20/1) and Ballyandy was 4th in 2017 (3/1 JF).

A record of 0/6 – four of which were sent off in the first two of the betting – in the past nine years is rather uninspiring, although they have knocked on the door on three occasions.

Due to the Equine Influenza outbreak, this year's Betfair Hurdle was rescheduled to take place at Ascot, a few days after this Guide went to print.

FOUR-YEAR-OLDS' RECORD

Given that it was recently announced that leading owner JP McManus has purchased the exciting Finesse Hurdle winner Fakir d'Oudairies – and it would now seem a distinct possibility that he will run here, thus avoiding the same connections' Sir Erec in the Triumph – I thought I would touch upon the record of juveniles running in the Supreme.

The last four-year-old winner was *Hors La Loi III* back in 1999 and, although 14 have been beaten since, the record of horses with an actual form chance is better than the bare facts and figures might suggest. Of the 16 four-year-old runners since 1999 (inclusive), no fewer than seven of them were sent off at either 100/1, 150/1 or 200/1, including Khudha, who last year became the first juvenile to run in the race in the last seven renewals.

Only three of the 16 were sent off at single-figures and five were sent off shorter than 20/1. The trio included the 1999 winner and 2008 runner-up Binocular, who also represented McManus. It has to be remembered, that he was sent down the Supreme route to avoid the same owners' Franchhoek, who ended up being beaten in the Triumph, whilst Binocular was beaten by *Captain Cee Bee* in the McManus second silks. During this period, *Hors La Loi III* and Binocular were two of just three juveniles to run in the Supreme on the back of winning a Graded juvenile, with Marsh Warbler the other. The point here being that not too many have lined up with a genuine form chance and it is worth noting that *Hors La Loi III* also won the Grade 2 Finesse at the track on his previous start. He is the last winner of that race to contest the Supreme.

Crucially, when assessing the chances of Fakir d'Oudairies – if he does indeed run here, something which is, of course, not guaranteed – is that he boasts considerable experience from France, and actually beat his elders in a maiden hurdle at Cork in early-January. He would be much more forward than many a four-year-old.

ROLL OF HONOUR

Year	Form	Winner	Age	Weight	OR	SP	Trainer	Runners	Last race (No. of days)
2018	12231	Summerville Boy	6	11-7	150	9/1	T George	19	1st Gr.1 Tolworth Hurdle (66)
2017	11RR6	Labaik	6	11-7	144	25/1	G Elliott (IRE)	14	6th Naas Nov. Hurdle (16)
2016	61111	Altior	6	11-7	155	4/1	N Henderson	14	1st Kempton Nov. Hurdle (80)
2015	2111	Douvan	5	11-7	155	2/1F	W Mullins (IRE)	12	1st Gr.2 Moscow Flyer Nov. Hurdle (59)
2014	111	Vautour	5	11-7	155	7/2JF	W Mullins (IRE)	18	1st Gr.1 Chanelle Parma Hurdle (30)
2013	1231	Champagne Fever	6	11-7	148	5/1	W Mullins (IRE)	12	1st Gr.1 Chanelle Parma Hurdle (31)
2012	2111	Cinders And Ashes	5	11-7	142	10/1	D McCain	19	1st Haydock Nov. Hurdle (52)
2011	F311	Al Ferof	6	11-7	142	10/1	P Nicholls	15	1st Newbury Nov. Hurdle (31)
2010	11212	Menorah	5	11-7	147	12/1	P Hobbs	18	2nd Ascot Nov. Hurdle (24)
2009	12121	Go Native	6	11-7	139	12/1	N Meade (IRE)	20	1st Gr.2 Johnstown Nov. Hurdle (16)

LEADING TEN-YEAR GUIDES

Weatherbys Champion Bumper 3 (*Al Ferof* 2nd, *Cinders And Ashes* 5th, *Champagne Fever* 1st)

Royal Bond Novice Hurdle 2 (*Champagne Fever* 2nd, *Labaik* ref. to race)

Chanelle Pharma Novices' Hurdle 2 (*Champagne Fever* 1st, *Vautour* 1st)

Moscow Flyer Novice Hurdle 2 (*Vautour* 1st, *Douvan* 1st)

32Red Casino Novices' Hurdle 2 (*Menorah* 1st, *Altior* 1st)

Attheraces.com Champion INH Flat Race 2 (*Champagne Fever* 1st, *Altior* 6th)

Sky Bet Supreme Trial Novices' Hurdle (Sharp Novices' Hurdle) 2 (*Altior* 1st, *Summerville Boy* 2nd)


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Rory Delargy - Day One

BANKER OR BUST - BUVEUR D'AIR

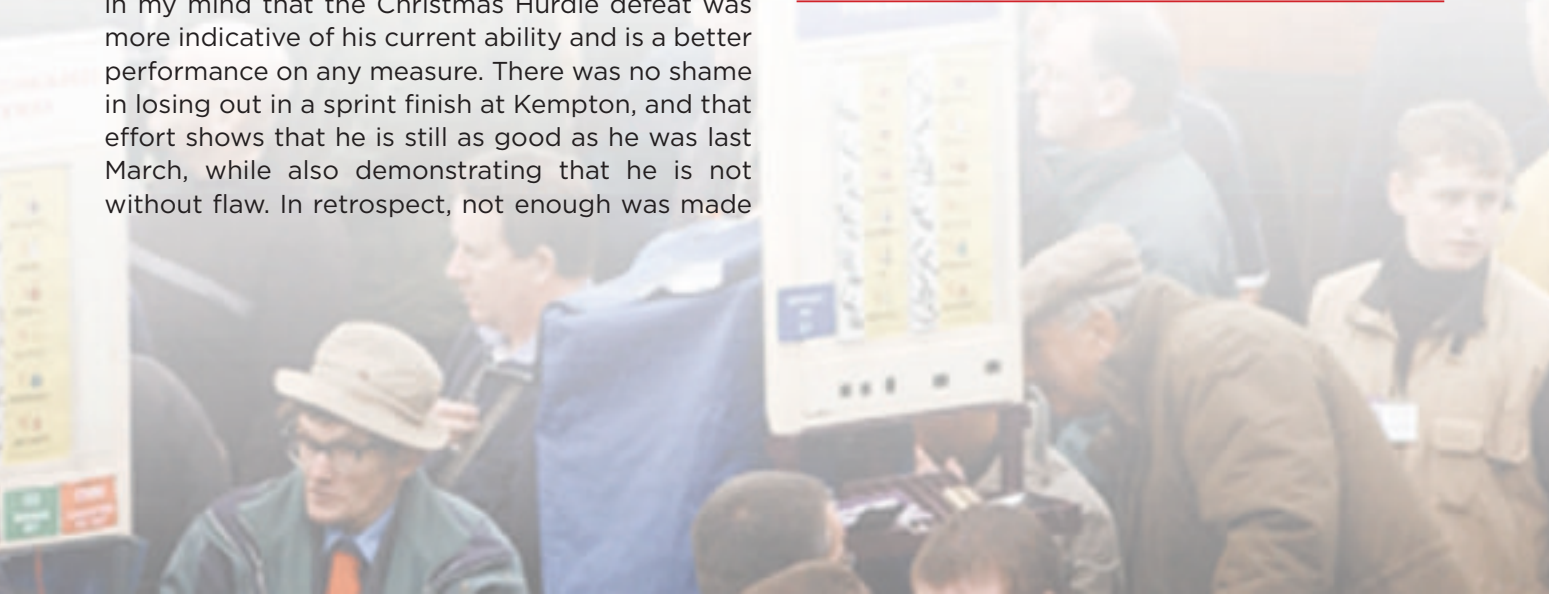
Buveur D'Air is bidding to join such illustrious names as Hatton's Grace, Sir Ken, Persian War, See You Then and Istabraq as he aims for his third consecutive Champion Hurdle on Tuesday, and he has been a warm order for the race since slamming Samcro at Newcastle in the Fighting Fifth. At the time that performance was hailed as exceptional by both the British Handicapper, who awarded him a performance rating of 172, and by Timeform who waxed lyrical about his win, describing it as "a truly sublime winning reappearance...as impressive a display as any mustered by a hurdler at the top level this century". It's no wonder he was backed into odds-on as a result, but subsequent defeat for Samcro in the Ryanair Hurdle took some of the sheen away from the win, while neither Vision des Flos nor Summerville Boy, third and fourth at Newcastle, did much for the form when out of the places in the International Hurdle at Cheltenham. Viewed another way, Samcro's subsequent run can be forgiven due to the discovery of a lung infection, and the others were comprehensively beaten, which arguably negates the value of their subsequent defeats. An impressive winner of the Champion in 2017, Buveur D'Air rather scrambled home from Melon last year, and how you view his chances in his treble bid effectively comes down to whether you take a view that the Fighting Fifth represented a career best from him, or whether that run is potentially flattering. I tend to take the latter view, especially as it fits better with the overall pattern of his form in the past year, and it's interesting that Timeform have subsequently downgraded his performance, a luxury the BHA Handicapper cannot afford.

He's run twice since then, with a shock defeat at Kempton preceding a comfortable win in the Contenders Hurdle at Sandown. Of those, many will take his latest win as a sign that he is ready to deliver again, but there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the Christmas Hurdle defeat was more indicative of his current ability and is a better performance on any measure. There was no shame in losing out in a sprint finish at Kempton, and that effort shows that he is still as good as he was last March, while also demonstrating that he is not without flaw. In retrospect, not enough was made

of ground conditions at Kempton, and the fact that he was run down by a quicker animal after getting first run is a reminder that he doesn't really possess a killer turn of foot at this stage of his career, something evidenced in the Champion itself last March when Melon briefly threatened to overhaul him on the Cheltenham run-in. Buveur D'Air is essentially a stayer at the two miles these days, and Champion Hurdlers tend to develop stamina at the expense of speed as they age. He's arguably at his best with ease underfoot (his trainer certainly thinks so) with both defeats over hurdles coming on good ground, and the prospect of a quick surface at Cheltenham is something which has not been factored fully into his price.

The above deals with what level Buveur D'Air is likely to run to on the day, but the strength of the opposition is the other important piece of the puzzle, and while it has looked for much of the year that the field would be no better than 12 months ago, the emergence of Apple's Jade as a likely runner, and the possibility of Laurina joining the party, makes this look a much tougher task than served up by Melon and Mick Jazz last spring. Apple's Jade in particular looks a big threat, and it's easy to argue that her performances this season, when winning four Graded hurdles by a combined total of 73 lengths makes her the correct favourite. I couldn't disagree, albeit I've long viewed the race through Jade-coloured glasses. Some experts have suggested that Laurina, a facile winner at last year's Festival, could be the best Willie Mullins has trained, while Sharjah is another player from the Mullins camp after winning the Morgiana and Ryanair Hurdles this season. We can't forget Christmas Hurdle winner Verdana Blue, who gained no tactical advantage in beating her stablemate at Kempton (quite the opposite, you could argue) and odds of around 7/4 look rather unattractive for the defending champ.

BUST



Ben Linfoot - Day One

Can Buveur D'Air see off some quality mares and etch his name into Cheltenham folklore with a third consecutive win in the Unibet Champion Hurdle?

Hatton's Grace, Sir Ken, Persian War, See You Then, Istabraq... Buveur D'Air? It's an elite club, the 'three-time Champion Hurdle Winner Club', featuring those five greats of the game and all of that quality quintet achieved the feat in three consecutive years.

Buveur D'Air will bid to become the sixth member of that club in exactly the same way as his forefathers on the first day of this year's Festival, perhaps the next step on his way to having a bar at Cheltenham named after him, or even a Chepstow novice hurdle.

Such honours are not ready to be bestowed upon him just yet, though.

Just as his stock had risen to its highest point, sparking a bunch of 'he's never got the credit he's deserved' platitudes, following a sumptuous eight-length on-the-bridle victory over Samcro in the Fighting Fifth Hurdle, he went and ruined all that when losing out to stablemate Verdana Blue in the Christmas Hurdle at Kempton.

A flight-flattening mistake three out cost him dear, as while he didn't lose any ground on the field at that point it might well have taken plenty out of him. If not that, something, in any case, prevented him from showing his best form.

And so it was to a confidence-boosting prep in the Contenders Hurdle at Sandown on February 3 where he completed his pre-Festival schedule. It's a tried-and-tested route now, for Nicky Henderson and Buveur D'Air, this year's cruise at 1/5 echoing those at 1/4 and 1/16 the previous two years.

If we didn't learn much there perhaps it's time to look at this year's Champion Hurdle rivals and compare them to the opposition in the last two renewals to assess the size of Buveur D'Air's task this time around.

The class of 2017 have largely evanesced, with My Tent Or Yours and The New One retiring and others like Footpad and Sceau Royal now plying their trade over fences.

He beat My Tent by four-and-a-half lengths, just like Annie Power had the year before, while his winning time was identical to Faugheen's going two years back, so, considering those two bits of evidence, his first Champion Hurdle triumph looked on-par with recent renewals.

Which is important, as last year, well, it's hard to be so confident about that form.

Run in ground officially 'Heavy' (but 'Soft' according to Timeform), he beat Melon, a horse that hasn't won subsequently, in gritty fashion by a neck, with Mick Jazz, a horse that hasn't raced since, in third, and Identity Thief, a horse that is no longer with us, in fourth.

Buveur D'Air should be given credit for grinding a win out of that race despite adversity and his Christmas Hurdle defeat at Kempton can easily be passed off as a blip, too.

But this year the Champion Hurdle opposition has some fresh blood. At least one star mare, getting the 7lb sex allowance, is going to line up against him and maybe there will be two.

Apple's Jade, just 25 minutes before Buveur D'Air completed his Contenders Hurdle assignment on that first Saturday in February, lit up the Dublin Racing Festival with a sublime performance in the BHP Insurance Irish Champion Hurdle.

Having won Grade Ones over three miles and 2m4f on her previous two starts, the big question mark hanging over her was whether she could transfer her ability to the minimum trip.

A 16-length romp from the previous year's winner, Supasundae, provided the emphatic answer.

It took Gordon Elliott about 22 hours to confirm the intention to run her in the Champion Hurdle, but it was worth waiting for. She's a hugely exciting addition to the day one feature and if Buveur D'Air can give her 7lb and win, then he deserves all the accolades that history tells us come with being a three-time Champion Hurdler.

And then there's Laurina. Unbeaten since arriving at Willie Mullins', she doesn't have the form in the book but she does have stacks of undoubted potential, even if her odds (a best of 9/2 at the time of writing) have all of the hype and stable confidence already factored in.

It is with hope she ends up in the Champion Hurdle rather than the Mares'. Connections have certainly heavily hinted such a route for a good while, although that was before Apple's Jade laid her claims down at the DRF.

As for Buveur D'Air, his super slick and quick hurdling could well be seen as both a strength and a weakness, depending on which way you view things, but the quality of the opposition is just as important a factor when assessing the champion's hat-trick chances.

Unlike last season and to an extent the year before that as well, it doesn't look an ordinary year - thanks to a couple of exciting mares from Ireland.



“My 20-Year Memory”

COLE HARDEN - 2015

“Cole Harden had a tendency of lugging left at his hurdles which had forced him onto the slower ground on the inside rail in his two prep runs at Cheltenham in January earlier that season. On the quicker ground that prevailed in March the inside rail, was no longer a disadvantage; consequently he comprehensively turned the form around with three horses that had finished well in front of him just two months earlier. His price of 33/1 added to the thrill and Warren Greatrex’s emotional celebration was the icing on the cake. Just one wonderful moment amongst many in the last 20 years.....”

ANDY GIBSON - PROFESSIONAL PUNTER, RACE ANALYST & PUNDIT

3.30 Sun Racing Stayers' Hurdle

(Grade 1) 3m – New Course



OVERVIEW

The feature on day three, the Stayers' Hurdle has gone the way of Willie Mullins for the past two seasons, in a race in which the Irish had struggled, numerically, since the mid-90s. Despite the trip, the race has been won by horses with high-class form over shorter and it has also produced several multiple winners. Consequently, some of the trends/statistics for this race are somewhat lopsided.

MULTIPLE WINNERS

It is hard to talk about the Stayers' Hurdle without the name of *Big Buck's* springing to mind, with Paul Nicholls' son of Cadoudal winning the race for four successive seasons between 2009 and 2012. Interestingly, had he not unseated Sam Thomas in the 2008 Hennessy Gold Cup (as it was then), we might never have got to have seen the best staying hurdler in the past decade tackle this race. He reverted to hurdles to win a handicap at Cheltenham on New Year's Day, before beating Punchestowns in the Cleeve Hurdle, and the rest, as they say, is history. He dominated the division until injury intervened and, despite appearing an out-and-out stayer, he did have a turn of foot and, crucially, was a class apart. Class often stands out in this division, which is often made up of slower/older horses.

Inglis Drever and *Baracouda* were other multiple winners this century, with the latter probably the only one of the three for which the Stayers' Hurdle would have been the likely target at the start of the season during which he won his first. The brilliant French hurdler had proven himself a leading stayer when winning the Long Walk in December 2000 on his British debut and also won the replacement race at Sandown the following April, following the loss of the Cheltenham Festival to the foot-and-mouth outbreak.

Inglis Drever was a very smart novice hurdler and was being campaigned down the Champion Hurdle route in his first season out of novice company, finishing runner-up in the Fighting Fifth and Bula, before winning Haydock's Champion Hurdle Trial and the Kingwell at Wincanton. He was then stepped up in distance by a mile and ran out a three-length winner from a then 10-year-old *Baracouda*. It was only after this point that Howard Johnson campaigned him as a staying hurdler and he,

too, would go on to dominate the division during his prime.

It can, therefore, be that a Stayers' Hurdle horse enters the picture as the season unfolds, but it is also a race – and a division – that can be dominated by a top-class hurdler. We have seen several winners over the years – rather like *Inglis Drever* – stepping up in distance for the first time in the Stayers' Hurdle, having earlier shown very smart form over shorter. It could be that their respective connections believe them not to be quick enough to win the Champion Hurdle, so opt for this route.

NEED FOR SPEED

As touched upon above, there is a need for speed in the Stayers' despite the distance. I think the New Course over hurdles opens itself up to a speedy individual, with such a long distance from the third-last hurdle to home; this allows strong-travelling horses to manoeuvre themselves into position. Ruby Walsh rides this course unbelievably well, and it would seem that Paul Townend isn't bad either, as he produced *Penhill* beautifully to win both this race last year and the 2017 Albert Bartlett.

Last year's winner had, of course, won over 3m previously, but six of the past 20 winners were having their first run over 3m. Considering the fact that six renewals during this period were won by previous winners, it is a fair strike-rate, even if *My Way De Solzen* had won over an extended 2m7f. *Princeful* had finished fourth over 2m6f on his previous start, whereas the other quartet had previously raced over no further than 2m5f.

The most recent pair of winners to fall into this category would be *Solwhit* and *More Of That*, who both won over an intermediate trip on their previous start. The former had finished sixth in the 2010 Champion Hurdle and was tried as a stayer following a lengthy lay-off between January 2011 and December 2012. He is a prime example of an older horse stepping up in trip to see if it opens up further opportunities and, although The New One was unable to replicate this last year, top-class hurdles form over the minimum trip should always be respected. Bacardys was the other trying 3m for the first time in last year's renewal – on the back of an aborted novice chase campaign – and he was running a sound race when falling at the last.

Nichols Canyon would have further added to this statistic, had he not run in the 2016 Iroquois Hurdle in America. He was a high-class 2m hurdler, winning the 2015 Morgiana Hurdle and Ryanair Hurdle, before finishing third behind stable companion Annie Power in the 2016 Champion Hurdle. Prior to winning his Stayers' a couple of years ago, he had again won the Morgiana, finished runner-up in the Ryanair over Christmas, and was a faller two out in the Irish Champion Hurdle.

EX-FLAT HORSES

Since 1999, eight of the 19 winners were ex-Flat horses. This octet includes the past two winners and, in addition to this, *Solwhit* might not have begun his racing life on the level, but he did develop into a very useful dual-purpose performer.

Just looking solely at the past six years to begin with – since the reign of the mighty *Big Buck's* came to an end – we have seen 17 horses run in the Stayers' Hurdle that had earlier run on the Flat at some point. Three were successful (there wasn't a runner in the 2016 renewal) and backing all ex-Flat performers during this period would have yielded a healthy profit of £16.50 to a level-stake £1. However, several of these horses only actually ran on the Flat in France before going hurdling, so if we filter this down to horses who ran purely on the level in either England or Ireland, the record is three winners from 11 runners and two of those – Jezki and Tiger Roll – only ran in a maiden.

The three winners – *Solwhit*, *Nichols Canyon* and *Penhill* – all achieved a high level of form on the Flat. The former won the November Handicap at Leopardstown off 86 in 2008, *Nichols Canyon* won a brace of Listed races for John Gosden before joining Willie Mullins, and *Penhill* had won a Haydock handicap off 95 before switching from Luca Cumani to Mullins. So, it is clear that a fairly smart ex-Flat performer is required and not just any horse who switches code.

Inglis Drever was another similar type, in that he, too, achieved a high level of form on the Flat, before leaving Newmarket to go hurdling. He won three handicaps during his final season on the Flat (2013), twice on the July Course (latterly over 1m7f, hinting at the prospect that he would become a stayer, off 86) and went on to contest the Cesarewitch off a mark of 96.

Dual-winner *Baracouda* started his career in France on the level and *Anzum* ran eight times on the level before going hurdling, although he was only a mid-60s-rated maiden when switching codes. So, during the past 20 years, nine of the 19 winners had previously run on the Flat.

KEY TRENDS

- ★ 3 of the last 6 winners ran on the Flat (rated 90 or higher) from just 17 runners *in all, 9 of the last 19 winners had run on the Flat*
- ★ 11 of the last 23 winners were second-season hurdlers
- ★ 14 of the last 22 winners had won no more than 7 times over hurdles
- ★ 14 of the last 22 winners had won or placed at a previous Festival
- ★ 26 of the last 29 winners were aged between 6 and 8
- ✓ Respect last year's winner
- ✓ Respect top-class hurdles form over shorter
- ✓ Respect smart middle-distance handicap Flat form (80s+)
- ✓ 5 of the last 20 winners had not run beyond 2m6f previously
- ✓ Hold-up horses suited by the nature of the New course over hurdles
- ✓ Willie Mullins has won the last two renewals
- ✗ Be wary of Albert Bartlett form, despite Penhill's victory
- ✗ Be wary of horses beaten in the Stayers' Hurdle previously
- ✗ No 5-year-old has won
- ✗ Be wary of horses aged 10 or older

Looking back just a couple of years before that, *Karshi* was another ex-Flat performer to win and he, too, was having his first start at 3m. Another to hail from Newmarket (James Fanshawe), Henrietta Knight's Stayers' Hurdle winner had been over no further than 2m5f – in the previous season's Ballymore – as a hurdler and he also achieved a good level of form on the Flat. On his final outing for Fanshawe, he finished fourth off 86 in a 1m4f Haydock handicap, so this again tells us what kind of horse – ability-wise – is required.

SECOND-SEASON/LIGHTLY-RACED HURDLERS

Last year, *Penhill* became the 11th second-season hurdler to win the Stayers' since 1997 and, again following the *Big Buck's* era, he became the fourth second-season winner in the last five years. Again, rather like some of the other trends, I think this is a notable percentage, given the multiple/returning winners during this period.

Dorans Pride and *Karshi* got the ball rolling in the 90s, before *Bacchanal*, *Iris's Gift*, *Inglis Drever* and *My Way De Solzen* continued the theme into this century. *Inglis Drever* and *Big Buck's* then won the next six renewals between them, before *More Of That* picked up the trend once again. *Cole Harden* and *Thistlecrack* followed suit, so it is evident that the Stayers' Hurdle is a good race for second-season hurdlers.

Since 1996, 14 of the 22 winners had won no more than seven times over hurdles. Again, this highlights the second-season hurdlers, but also adds into the mix the likes of *Cyborgo*, *Big Buck's* and *Nichols Canyon*. The former was runner-up to *Dorans Pride* as a second-season hurdler in 1995 and went one place better 12 months later, on what was his next outing. My point here is that if there is a horse to beat a multiple 'Champion' in this division, it is likely to be a lightly-raced horse, still very much on an upward curve.

FESTIVAL FORM

Since 1996, 14 of the 22 winners had either previously won or placed at a Cheltenham Festival. Obviously, this trend includes six previous winners of the race, but it is still a very healthy statistic. The likes of *Karshi*, *Princeful*, *Inglis Drever* and *Nichols Canyon* had all placed in either the Supreme or Ballymore the previous season, while, of course, *Penhill* had won the previous season's Albert Bartlett. He was actually breaking a very poor record for that race when successful 12 months ago and, although we can remain open-minded, I wouldn't be surprised if this was just an anomaly. Generally speaking, the Albert Bartlett is full of embryonic chasing types, many of which will head straight over fences the following season. *Penhill* wasn't your standard winner of that race in that respect, as he has plenty of pace and, indeed, Paisley Park – this year's favourite at the time of writing – finished only 13th in last year's Albert Bartlett. There were extenuating circumstances for that performance and he, too, certainly isn't short of speed. Since his run in that race, he has proven himself to be a high-class staying hurdler.

Nichols Canyon and *Solwhit* had both run in a Champion Hurdle prior to winning the Stayers', and, although we have seen numerous returning winners in recent years, no horse has been beaten in the Stayers' and then gone on to win the race since *Iris's Gift* in 2004. In fairness to Jonjo O'Neill's big grey – who had finished fifth in the Champion Bumper a couple of years earlier – he was a novice when chasing home *Baracouda* 12 months earlier and the third runner-up in the space of eight years to win the following season. *Cyborgo* and *Anzum* both went one place better than they had 12 months earlier.

So, we've not seen a beaten horse return and win in the past 14 years, and Unowhatimeanharry – also a previous Albert Bartlett winner, who was sent off odds-on in 2017 – and Lil Rockerfeller 12 months ago – were the latest victims. They had filled the frame behind *Nichols Canyon*, but could finish only 10th and 13th respectively last year. That doesn't bode too well for the likes of Wholestone or Sam Spinner, although the latter probably wasn't given the best possible chance by the rather sedate gallop he set.

Two recent winners – *More Of That* and *Thistlecrack* – didn't boast Cheltenham Festival form, but both had won at the track last time out. The former was having just his fourth career start when successfully stepping out of handicap company to win the Relkeel Hurdle at the December meeting, and the latter won the Cleeve Hurdle in impressive fashion on trials day. *Big Buck's* had contested the novices' handicap chase in 2008 (finished 7th), but he, too, showed a liking for the hurdles track prior to his first win, by landing a handicap on New Year's Day and the Cleeve later the same month.

Strong course form seems essential.

PACE OF THE RACE

As I touched upon briefly above, Sam Spinner dictated matters at a surprisingly slow pace last year, which was probably detrimental to his chance of winning. There is an angle to think that front-runners such as him need to make this a thorough test, possibly exposing any stamina doubts of those classier types who might be stepping up in trip for the first time. Whilst this is feasible, many of the great winners of this have come from off the pace (not many made all; only *Cole Harden* in recent years) and the nature of the track – as described earlier – also favours hold-up horses, in my opinion.

AGE IS A BARRIER

Not surprisingly, the Stayers' Hurdle isn't really a race for five-year-olds, but it isn't a race for double-digit winners either. The last horse to win at the age of 10 or older was *Crimson Embers*, who won as an 11-year-old in 1986. Since then, only a couple have even gone close and both Unowhatimeanharry and The New One added their name to the long list of losers 12 months ago.

In fact, apart from *Galmoy*, *Inglis Drever* and *Big Buck's* – who were all winning the race for a second or third time – only *Solwhit* has been successful at the age of nine. This again goes to show that if a great stayer isn't going to win back-to-back renewals, we really ought to be looking for a younger horse with fewer miles on the clock.

Since 1989, 26 of the 29 winners were aged between six and eight.

Penhill is only eight and he remains very lightly raced, mainly due to his fragility, while stable-mate Faugheen is 11 now, so it would be some ask, despite his obvious class.

CONNECTIONS TO NOTE

Paul Nicholls currently tops the leading trainer's list for the Stayers' Hurdle, although all four of his wins were gained by *Big Buck's*. Nicky Henderson has two victories to his name – *Rustle* and *Bacchanal* – although since his most recent success, I think only really Punchestowns appeared to be a genuine contender.

Willie Mullins saddled 18 runners between 2004 and 2015 – including Annie Power who finished runner-up in 2014 – before finally getting off the mark two years ago. Back-to-back wins in the race might well change his approach, especially given the pair boasted a similar profile, and, as ever, his runners have to be respected. Overall, his record reads 2 winners from 25 runners.

Jonjo O'Neill has also saddled a couple of winners this century – *Iris's Gift* and *More Of That* – but from a much smaller sample of runners. However, he doesn't have any horses entered this year.

In terms of owners, **Andrea & Graham Wylie** obviously saw their beige-and-black silks carried to success on three occasions by *Inglis Drever* and they won a fourth Stayers' Hurdle with *Nichols Canyon*. Obviously, again, a multiple winner unbalances the statistics somewhat, but they have only had eight runners in the race, so boast a 50% strike rate. In the past eight years, only in 2017 – when they also ran *Shaneshill* – have they had a runner, so again they are selective, but clearly like to have a runner in the race if deemed good enough.

KEY RACES

Given that the genuine Grade 1 staying hurdlers don't have too many options, there are three rather obvious key guides to this race earlier in the season.

First up is the **Long Distance Hurdle**, staged at Newbury's Winter Festival. This contest has thrown up seven winners between 2007 and 2016. This year's race was won, for a second time, by Unowhatimeanharry.

Ascot's **Long Walk Hurdle** just before Christmas has produced four Stayers' Hurdle winners in the past decade, and on trials day at Cheltenham, the **Cleeve Hurdle**, which used to be run over 2m5f, has also been a key pointer to the Stayers', with six winners using that contest as a springboard to festival success in the past 12 years. *Inglis Drever* finished runner-up under a penalty before his second Stayers' crown, but on the whole, you want to focus on the winner of these Grade 1 events as the form in this division stands up. *Cole Harden* was beaten in both the Long Distance Hurdle and the Cleeve, but it is unusual and all other winners referenced to in terms of these three races were successful.

Both the Long Walk and Cleeve were won this season by Paisley Park, who is clearly on a sharp upward curve. He has won all four starts this term and, after providing both Emma Lavelle and Aidan Coleman with a first Grade 1 success at Ascot, he was an impressive 12-length winner of the Cleeve on trials day.

As touched upon in the 'Festival Form' subsection, the previous season's **Ballymore Novices' Hurdle** has proven a decent guide, with three winners since 2005 contesting that event 12 months earlier. Recently, *Cole Harden* and *Nichols Canyon* hailed from that race, whilst the former also ran in the **Sefton Novices' Hurdle** at Aintree, where he finished runner-up. A year later, this was the race in which *Thistlecrack* announced himself as a potential high-class stayer.

Runner-up in last year's Ballymore, *Black Op* now seems likely to be aimed at the Stayers, after reverting to hurdles in the Cleeve, when he finished 14 lengths off Paisley Park in third.

ROLL OF HONOUR

Year	Form	Winner	Age	Weight	OR	SP	Trainer	Runners	Last race (No. of days)
2018		Penhill	7	11-10	153	12/1	W Mullins (IRE)	15	2nd Gr.1 Punchestown Nov. Hurdle (324)
2017	312F	Nichols Canyon	7	11-10	161	10/1	W Mullins (IRE)	12	fell Gr.1 Irish Champion Hurdle (46)
2016	2111	Thistlecrack	8	11-10	168	EvensF	C Tizzard	12	1st Gr.2 Cleeve Hurdle (47)
2015	1234	Cole Harden	6	11-10	158	14/1	W Greatrex	16	4th Gr.2 Cleeve Hurdle (47)
2014	111	More of That	6	11-10	160	15/2	J O'Neill	10	1st Gr.2 Relkeel Hurdle (89)
2013	21	Solwhit	9	11-10	154	17/2	C Byrnes (IRE)	13	1st Gr.3 Limestone Lad Hurdle (54)
2012	111	Big Buck's	9	11-10	174	5/6F	P Nicholls	11	1st Gr.2 Cleeve Hurdle (47)
2011	11	Big Buck's	8	11-10	174	10/11F	P Nicholls	13	1st Gr.1 Long Walk Hurdle (78)
2010	11	Big Buck's	7	11-10	174	5/6F	P Nicholls	14	1st Gr.1 Long Walk Hurdle (79)
2009	U11	Big Buck's	6	11-10	170	6/1	P Nicholls	14	1st Gr.2 Cleeve Hurdle (47)

LEADING TEN-YEAR GUIDES

Long Distance Hurdle 5 (*Big Buck's* 1st, 1st & 1st, *Cole Harden* 2nd, *Thistlecrack* 1st)

Cleeve Hurdle 4 (*Big Buck's* 1st & 1st, *Cole Harden* 4th, *Thistlecrack* 1st)

Long Walk Hurdle 4 (*Big Buck's* 1st, 1st & 1st (2011), *Thistlecrack* 1st)

Stayers' Hurdle 3 (*Big Buck's* 1st, 1st & 1st)

Liverpool Stayers' Hurdle 3 (*Big Buck's* 1st, 1st & 1st)

Sefton Novices' Hurdle 2 (*Cole Harden* 2nd, *Thistlecrack* 1st)

Ballymore Novices' Hurdle 2 (*Cole Harden* 7th, *Nichols Canyon* 3rd)

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Ed Quigley - Day Three

JLT Novices' Chase

Should all the main players make their respective gigs, then the Arkle and the RSA Chase look like they will be brimming with quality, and even though they may not end up with huge field sizes, they will have strength in depth. The make-up of JLT has a much more muddled look to it, and therefore I think it will pay to concentrate on those confirmed to be heading straight to the race and with some smart form in the locker.

One of the horses that fits the bill is the Colin Tizzard-trained **LOSTINTRANSLATION**. The imposing seven-year-old has shown a smart level of form since tackling fences, including when winning over course and distance to land the Grade 2 Dipper Chase on New Year's Day. He showed great tenacity as he powered up the Cheltenham hill to see off the strong-travelling **Defi Du Seuil**, pulling away by over a length by the line. Admittedly, Lostintranslation was in receipt of 3lb from the Philip Hobbs representative, but it was the attitude of his performance and his liking for the venue which really impressed me. Defi Du Seuil reversed the form last time out in Grade 1 action at Sandown when I thought the Esher venue didn't play to the strengths of Tizzard's galloping sort, and a mistake at a crucial time two fences from home disrupted his rhythm when he was going nicely a couple of lengths up. If you see the two of them in the paddock, it is chalk and cheese, and I think the 'nippier' Defi Du Seuil excelled due to the course more than anything. By and large, Lostintranslation's jumping has been improving, and he should enjoy returning to this scenery. The form of his two chase starts when finishing behind **La Bague Au Roi** looks excellent in context now, as the Warren Greatrex-trained mare has gone on to land two Grade 1s. Stamina is his forte, he will be ridden prominently, and the New Course suits. In a race with question marks about many of the runners, he is one with far less to answer.

The aforementioned La Bague Au Roi is likely to swerve Cheltenham to wait for Aintree. She hasn't always performed to her best on the undulations of Cheltenham, so it appears sensible to wait

for the flat track of Aintree. According to Paul Nicholls, **Topofthegame**, who ran La Bague Au Roi close at Kempton, will be heading to the RSA, and **Le Richebourg** is almost certainly Arkle-bound along with Kalashnikov. Throw in the plans that **Delta Work** and **Vinndication** are heading for the RSA, and the list of doubtful participants goes on, underlining the potential for this race to cut up significantly. Of those at bigger prices, **Hardline**, who was third in the Flogas, would be a contender if there was a bit of juice in the ground and he gets his act together in the jumping department. He is probably a hard horse to place but it's unlikely we have seen the best of him yet. **Winter Escape** burst blood vessels in the Flogas last time out which has cast a doubt over his participation at the Festival, and finally, **Drovers Lane**, who won nicely over C&D at Cheltenham's December meeting, would make the shortlist but does have the option of heading to the RSA instead.

Advice

Lostintranslation 2pts win, 9/2

Sun Racing Stayers' Hurdle

Paisley Park has plotted a path of meteoric success this season for the Emma Lavelle team, and deserves to be favourite. Starting the season officially rated 140, the horse is now up to 168, thanks to four straight wins, including in Grade 1 company at Ascot before Christmas and then with an impressive display when landing the Cleeve Hurdle at Cheltenham in January. It could well be the case that his extra gears under the bonnet after he hits his customary flat spot mean he has too much ammunition for his rivals, but I'm not sure he will have everything totally his own way. In third that day was the Tom George-trained **BLACK OP**, and whilst it is hard to envisage him bridging the 14-length gap from last time out, I think a cogent case can be made for him to get significantly closer this time around.

Firstly, like many markets for this year's Festival, many horses have to have a question mark over whether they will actually make the gig, but in the case of Black Op he will be heading straight to the race, and at 14/1 I think is price his more than fair.



Black Op was having his first start returning to hurdles, coupled with his first crack at 3m under Rules, and he should have learnt a great deal from that experience. The race was run at an end-to-end gallop, and Black Op travelled well and was on the front end for a long way, before just looking to get a bit tired as they hit the hill - to his credit, he rallied fairly well to finish third. For his first start at 3m, he may have travelled a little too freely towards the head of affairs which probably saw his stamina ebb away. Approaching two flights from the finish, Black Op was still leading whilst Paisley Park was being niggled along back in the pack. It could just be the case that 3m at Cheltenham stretches the pure stamina of Black Op, but he is unexposed, versatile in regard to ground, and should have more to offer. If the race turned into a bit of a dash for home after a slow tempo, that would be much more in favour towards the Tom George representative. Tactically, I think much more of a waiting game will be employed this time around, and I think he will be ridden to try and pick off runners in the closing stages, as opposed to trying to fend them off from the bottom of the hill. The end result may well end up the same, but I would be surprised if he didn't narrow the margin of defeat from his previous encounter, and whatever can get close to Paisley Park is not going to be far away from the place money. The Cleeve Hurdle is often a fair trial and probably holds many of the pointers for the big one on Thursday.

One horse who wasn't in the Cleeve, and who has only been seen once since landing this twelve months ago is **Penhill**, who will be heading to the race first time out to defend his crown. Obviously, it is taken on trust that Willie Mullins can produce him to be on top of his game, but that ploy worked fine last season and connections will be hoping so once again. I think last year's renewal, which was run at crawl, may well have flattered him to some extent, as he utilised his turn of foot in the latter stages to good effect. It is no guarantee he will get that scenario once again or circumstances that play into his hands. At the Punchestown Festival, he was put in his place by **Faugheen**, and it would be a fairytale result for connections and just fans of racing in general if the 2015 Champion Hurdle winner could roll back the years, but at the age of 11, and arriving here on the back of a crashing fall, I would find it hard to

be enthusiastic about 'The Machine'. Horses of his age have a poor strike rate at the Festival. If there were a couple of jokers in the pack, then the Gordon Elliott-trained pair of **Farclas** and **Cracking Smart** would be far from forlorn hopes at big prices. The former won last season's Triumph Hurdle in gritty fashion, and despite not being in sparkling form this term, I am convinced he is crying out for a step up in distance. Cracking Smart, on the other hand, has confirmed stamina in the locker but has to show the old fires still burn on the comeback trail after injury. He had a harsh reintroduction after 355 days on the sidelines, when beaten over 100 lengths at Leopardstown during the Christmas period in the Grade 1 which Apple's Jade won and Faugheen fell. He would have needed that outing badly, is still unexposed, has Grade 1 form in the locker, and posted his most impressive performance to date when winning a Listed hurdle over 3m, so has little question marks in regard to the trip.

Advice

Black Op 1pt e/w, 14/1

Nothing else on the Thursday massively appeals from a betting perspective at this stage.

If **Charbel** returns to the form he showed earlier in the season, then he would be a major player in the Ryanair Chase, but it is possible he could skip Cheltenham and wait for Aintree. Likewise, on spring ground I wouldn't be at all surprised to see the Nicky Henderson-trained **Lust For Glory** come back to form in the Mares Novices' Hurdle. She didn't appear to be too happy on testing ground at Newbury last time out when runner up to **Posh Trish**.

The handicaps look a minefield at this stage but keep your eyes on **Keeper Hill** in the Pertemps Final if the rains stay away. He was a Grade 2 winner as a novice chaser many moons ago and is now reinventing himself over the smaller obstacles. He hated the ground at Sandown last time out but won in good style on his penultimate start. He has some decent form at the track in his portfolio and could come alive granted a sound surface.

Odds courtesy of Sky Bet, quoted on a Non-Runner, No Bet basis



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2.50 Betway Bowl Chase

Grade 1, 3m 210y



OVERVIEW

The Cheltenham Gold Cup, as you might expect, has proven to be the best guide to the Betway Bowl over the years, a race which was itself handed Grade 1 status in 2010. The King George has also been a good pointer in recent years and, although we often see a small field assembled for one of the feature events on the opening day of the meeting, it is usually a select line-up. It is also a race in which horses often return year by year to contest, with four horses – *Wayward Lad*, *Docklands Express*, *First Gold* and, most recently, *Silviniaco Conti* – winning the race twice.

THE CHELTENHAM GOLD CUP

Last year's winner *Might Bite* continued the fine record of Bowl winners who had contested the Cheltenham Gold Cup the previous month. It is now 24 of the 35 winners who had taken their chance in the big one at the Cheltenham Festival, although he bettered the recent record of those who went close in the Gold Cup. Often those who had endured a hard race at Cheltenham – those who went close – notoriously struggle in this event, but Nicky Henderson's runner was able to go one place better than he had at the festival.

Often the Gold Cup takes an awful lot out of a horse and in recent years the likes of Denman (twice), Kauto Star and Imperial Commander have been beaten in this, on the back of huge runs in the Gold Cup, whilst *Exotic Dancer* did the same as *Might Bite* back in 2007, winning this on the back of finishing runner-up in the Gold Cup. This again proves that it can be done; however, it is worth noting that on both occasions there was a four-week gap between Cheltenham and Aintree, so both *Exotic Dancer* and *Might Bite* had an extra week's recovery time. In the case of the aforementioned trio being beaten – make that four when you consider the fact that Denman was beaten twice – there was only a three-week gap between Cheltenham and Aintree, so this race came just 20 days after the Gold Cup. Maybe that is telling and it is worth noting that the gap is back down to three weeks this year.

Cue Card won this on the back of falling in the Gold Cup – when seemingly still holding every chance three out – just 20 days earlier, although you could say that the Gold Cup horses really push themselves in that final quarter-mile up the hill at Cheltenham.

In brief, pay close attention to the runners in this who contested the Gold Cup, but despite the victory of *Might Bite* last year, still be cautious of those who go very close and appear to have a hard race. Generally in recent seasons, those who finished further down the field have done well in the Bowl, and remember that shorter turnaround this year.

PREVIOUS FORM IN THE BOWL

As touched upon in the 'Overview' this is a race in which horses can repeat their form, with four horses winning the race twice. Two of those dual-winners recorded back-to-back victories in the Bowl and *Cue Card* was probably a shade unfortunate not to add his name to that list in 2017, when he appeared to be sent for a home a long way out.

Last year's winner *Might Bite* had won the Mildmay Novices' Chase at the meeting 12 months earlier, so it is clear that previous Aintree form is a bonus. Likewise, *Silviniaco Conti* had won the Mildmay in 2012, before finishing third in the Bowl the following season. He then returned to Aintree to win the next two runnings of the race.

Prior to last year, four of the previous seven winners had run in the race before, so respect those coming back and having another crack at the Bowl.

KINGS OF KEMPTON

The other race to focus on would have to be the **King George VI Chase** at Kempton on Boxing Day, which has also proven to be a very good guide to this. In Britain, the King George and the Gold Cup are the obvious races for these Grade 1 staying chases, so it makes sense that these races provide key form guides to the Bowl, but Kempton is a similar track to Aintree, despite the obvious difference in it being right-handed. You need to be able to jump and travel at speed around both tracks, holding a position throughout, and both courses – certainly over fences – suit horses who like to race up with the pace. This was highlighted in last year's Aintree and Punchestown Festivals Guide – respect Kempton form in general at the Grand National meeting.

Might Bite completed the King George-Bowl double last season, becoming the 12th winner in the last 21 runnings to have finished in the first four of the Boxing Day showpiece. Four of the past five winners of this had won the King George earlier in the campaign, whilst the likes of *See More*

Business, *Florida Pearl* and *First Gold* are other recent examples of horses completing the double in the same season.

This season's King George winner Clan des Obeaux finished third in last year's Bowl, whilst runner-up Thistlecrack is two-from-two at the track and at the meeting; yet to race at Aintree over fences, he won the Sefton Novices' Hurdle in 2015 and the Liverpool Stayers' Hurdle 12 months later. His stablemate and third home at Kempton – last year's Gold Cup winner Native River – also boasts a 100% record at this fixture, having won the Mildmay Novices' Chase in 2016.

OTHER KEY RACES

The only other Grade 1 staying chase in the British calendar, Haydock's **Betfair Chase** has also thrown up four winners of this in the past eight years. Only two of the quartet were successful at the other Merseyside track, which gives hope to the likes of Thistlecrack, Clan des Obeaux and Might Bite, who were all beaten behind Bristol de Mai, who finished runner-up in last year's Bowl.

The **Charlie Hall Chase** at Wetherby is another race with a decent record when it comes to the Bowl, with that also being staged on a flat left-handed track. It has thrown up three winners in the past eight years, with only one horse – *Cue Card* – completing the double. Going back to the 2004-05 season, *Grey Abbey* also won both races, whilst both *Silviniaco Conti* and *Our Vic* won the Charlie Hall the season before they won the Bowl (for the first time in the instance of the first-named).

Between 2009 and 2013, Newbury's **Ladbroke's Trophy** (formerly the Hennessy Gold Cup) provided a trio of winners, with *Madison du Berlais* winning both events. *What A Friend* chased home stablemate Denman in the valuable handicap, whilst *First Lieutenant* finished in third. The last-named pairing were second-season chasers, as is this year's Newbury second Elegant Escape, who would be the most likely to attempt to bridge the gap into Grade 1 company. The subsequent Welsh Grand National winner finished third in last year's Mildmay and seventh in the previous season's Sefton, so has form at this fixture.

However, it does seem as though – in recent seasons – that the Bowl is now going the way of the proven Grade 1 performers and the focus should really be on the Gold Cup, King George and – to a slightly lesser extent – the Betfair Chase.

Over in Ireland, the Grade 1 **Savills Chase** (formerly the Lexus Chase, then more recently the Leopardstown Christmas Chase) has provided a

KEY TRENDS

- ★ 24 of the past 35 winners had run in the Gold Cup
- ★ 4 of the past 5 winners had won that season's King George
- ✓ 4 of the past 5 winners were officially top-rated
- ✓ 12 of the past 21 winners had finished in the first four of the King George
- ✓ 4 of the past 8 winners had run in the Bowl previously
- ✓ 7 of the past 9 winners were favourite (3) or second-favourite (4)
- ✗ Despite last year's result, still be cautious of those who went close in the Gold Cup
- ✗ Be wary of hold-up performers
- ✗ Only 1 last-time-out winner in the past decade (2010)

trio of recent winners. Both Irish-trained winners – *Follow The Plan* and *First Lieutenant* – contested that race en route to Aintree, with neither successful, while *What A Friend* was able to win both events. To be fair to First Lieutenant, he only went down by a head to Tidal Bay, and this year's race was won in taking fashion by the Willie Mullins-trained Kemboy, who made a race-winning move with a circuit to run. The placed horses – Monalee and Road To Respect – would also warrant utmost respect if considered for this, as I've long thought the former would be well suited to the Mildmay course, given his running style, and the latter appreciates decent ground.

THE IRISH CHALLENGE

The Punchestown Gold Cup offers the Irish staying chasers the chance of an end-of-season Grade 1 prize and the longer gap between Cheltenham and the Punchestown Festival is probably something else that ensures we don't get too many horses travelling over for this. Willie Mullins has only won the race once – with *Florida Pearl* in 2002 – and, since then, only two Irish-trained horses have won. Last season's battle between Mullins and Elliott for the Irish Trainer's title ensured that both leading handlers wanted to be represented with as many runners as possible at both Fairyhouse (Easter meeting) and Punchestown, which was probably to the detriment of Aintree.

Only one Irish-trained horse took their chance in last year's Bowl, that being Sub Lieutenant, who finished only fifth for Henry de Bromhead – who we know likes to support this meeting – and Gigginstown House Stud. The leading owners – who won the race with *First Lieutenant* – have been represented in five or the past six renewals and, given their continued growth, they are likely to continue to target this race, in order to keep some of their staying chasers apart.

Overall, the Irish have won two Bowls in the past seven years, from only 10 runners.

MARKET FORCES AND RATINGS

Seven of the past nine winners were sent off either favourite – three of the last four winners headed the market – or second-favourite. In addition to this, four of the last five winners were officially top-rated on BHA Ratings, so the winners – in general – haven't been too difficult to find. Had *Cue Card* prevailed in his bid to land a second successive Bowl in 2017 – and I believe he should have won – it would have been four straight winning favourites and five consecutive winners who arrived at Aintree as the top-rated runner. It would seem that the cream is now beginning to rise to the top in this race.

TACTICS

Generally speaking, it can pay to race prominently in races over fences on the Mildmay Course and that is no different in this event. We see plenty of relatively small-field graded chases at this meeting and horses who jump well can often dominate from the front. Pay healthy respect to front-runners and/or those who like to race up with the speed.

TRAINERS TO NOTE

The leading trainer (four wins) in the Bowl is **Paul Nicholls**, although he has also saddled a few who have been beaten at short-odds, including five favourites. Only once during these 19 years has he failed to have a runner, and his record – which is mixed overall – stands at four winners, two seconds and two thirds. All four of his winners started at 5/2 or under and his leading hope this year would appear to be last year's third and this season's King George winner, *Clan des Obeaux*.

David Pipe is the only other current trainer with more than one win on the board – his victories coming in 2008 and 2009 – whilst his Dad also saddled the winners back in 1991, 2004 and 2006. Four winners from the same stable in the space of six years was a fine effort, and more recently both *Dynaste* (2014) and *Ballynagour* (2015) finished runner-up, and he's only saddled one runner since.

ROLL OF HONOUR

Year	Form	Winner	Age	Weight	SP	Trainer	Runners	Last race (No. of days)
2018	112	Might Bite	9	11-7	4/5F	N Henderson	8	2nd Gr.1 Cheltenham Gold Cup (27)
2017	5241U	Tea For Two	8	11-7	10/1	N Williams	7	u.r. Gr.1 Cheltenham Gold Cup (20)
2016	4111F	Cue Card	10	11-7	6/5F	C Tizzard	9	fell Gr.1 Cheltenham Gold Cup (20)
2015	5117	Silviniaco Conti	9	11-7	7/4F	P Nicholls	7	7th Gr.1 Cheltenham Gold Cup (27)
2014	314	Silviniaco Conti	8	11-7	9/4	P Nicholls	6	4th Gr.1 Cheltenham Gold Cup (20)
2013	42322	First Lieutenant	8	11-7	7/2	M Morris (IRE)	8	2nd Gr.1 Ryanair Chase (22)
2012	6244	Follow The Plan	9	11-7	50/1	O McKiernan (IRE)	11	4th Listed Gowran Handicap Chase (23)
2011	1443	Nacarat	10	11-7	7/2	T George	6	3rd Gr.3 BetBright Handicap Chase (41)
2010	21	What A Friend	7	11-7	5/2	P Nicholls	5	1st Gr.1 Lexus Chase (99)
2009	6118	Madison du Berlais	8	11-10	12/1	D Pipe	10	8th Gr.1 Cheltenham Gold Cup (21)

LEADING TEN-YEAR GUIDES

King George VI Chase 6 (*Nacarat* 4th, *Silviniaco Conti* 1st, 1st, *Cue Card* 1st, *Tea For Two* 4th, *Might Bite* 1st)

Cheltenham Gold Cup 6 (*Madison du Berlais* 8th, *Silviniaco Conti* 7th & 4th, *Cue Card* fell, *Tea For Two* u.r., *Might Bite* 1st)

Aintree Bowl 4 (*Nacarat* 3rd, *Follow The Plan* 3rd, *Silviniaco Conti* 3rd & 1st)

Betfair Chase 4 (*Nacarat* 4th, *Silviniaco Conti* 1st & 3rd, *Cue Card* 1st)

Savills Chase 3 (*What A Friend* 1st, *Follow The Plan* 6th, *First Lieutenant* 2nd)

Hennessy Gold Cup 3 (*Madison du Berlais* 1st, *What A Friend* 2nd, *First Lieutenant* 3rd)

Charlie Hall Chase 3 (*Nacarat* 1st, *Silviniaco Conti* 5th, *Cue Card* 1st)

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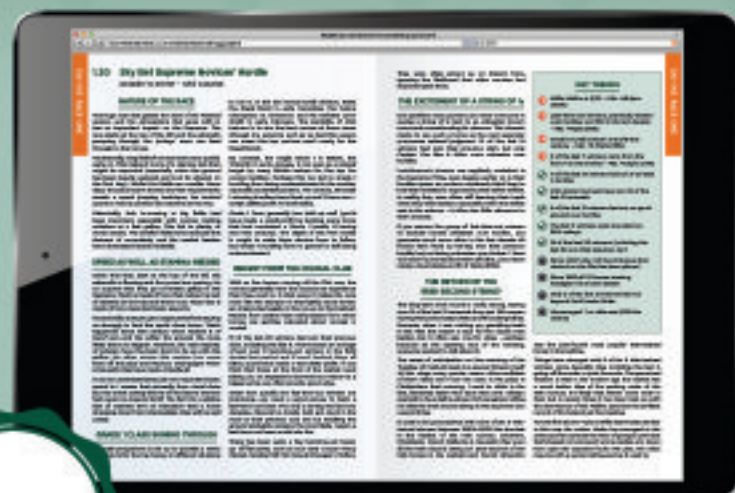
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