

marten julian's cheltenham open preview



Cheltenham Open Meeting Online Preview

Going: *The ground on the Old Course is described as good, good to soft in places, while the Cross Country course is good, with good to firm places. Heavy rain is forecast for the Cheltenham area on Friday and Saturday, with light showers on Sunday. This preview is written on the assumption that the ground will ride on the softer side of good.*

The horse that I am most looking forward to seeing in action over the three days of the Open Meeting is **Reve de Sivola**, who will run in the Grade 2 Cleanevent Novices' Hurdle on Sunday (3.30).

Of the 15 horses entered at the five-day stage for this race, Reve de Sivola has the highest BHA figure on 145 – 10lb clear of Rebel Du Maquis and 11lb ahead of Irish raider Glenstal Abbey. Unfortunately this means the four-year-old is likely to start at the head, or near the head, of the market but up pitched in against rivals from the yards of Paul Nicholls and Alan King he could still start at a reasonable price.

Reve de Sivola indicated last season that two miles was insufficient a test for him, notably when staying on strongly here into third behind Simarian on his second start at this meeting last year. He was again doing his best work late in the day when third to Walkon in the Finale Hurdle at Chepstow and second to the same horse back here in February. He was far from disgraced in the Triumph Hurdle, finishing sixth after stumbling on the bend after the second last.

The son of *Assessor* confirmed he was ready for the step up in trip when comfortably beating Frascati Park by nine lengths in the Grade 2 Persian War Novices' Hurdle at Chepstow in October, easing down after the last to win with something in hand.

The 2m 5f trip around this stiffer track should suit him even better. My one concern is that he can be inclined to get close to the odd hurdle – he hit the third last at Chepstow and seldom gets round without a mishap somewhere along the line – but there is no doubting his talent and in Nick Williams he is in the charge of, in my view, the most underrated handler in the country.

Of the others Bobby Ewing could prove a threat. The four-year-old won an Irish point-to-point in May and hacked up by eight lengths in an extended 2m 4f novices' hurdle at Uttoxeter last month. He is rated highly by Nigel Twiston-Davies and this is a meeting where the stable traditionally does well.

Rebel Du Maquis, who finished runner-up on one start over hurdles and twice over fences from three outings in France, ran out a clear-cut 17-lengths winner on his hurdling debut for Paul Nicholls at Exeter last month. He is hard to assess on the basis of that run, although his BHA mark of 135 leaves him 7lb behind Reve de Sivola after the allowance is taken into account.

Chamirey, who ran 12 times over hurdles and fences in France without winning, again reached the frame when second, beaten 17 lengths, in a 3m novices' event for Alan King last month. He seems to have limitations, while Glenstal Abbey has proved consistent but is more exposed than Reve de Sivola.

Quentin Collonges looked an improved performer when winning on his return by 34 lengths but Reve de Sivola has his trip, ground and a track which we know suits him. He is reported to have come on appreciably from his seasonal debut and I'll be disappointed if he doesn't go very close. As stated, my slight concern is his hurdling. He can ill afford to forfeit ground against this class of opponent.

If Alan King runs Lidar in the closing Listed bumper he will start at short odds (4.00). The trainer thinks the world of the son of Take Risks, who is already attracting support for the Supreme Novices' Hurdle, but the one I suggest you take a second look at it **Lush Life**.

Nicky Henderson's son of Indian Danehill wasn't cheap, costing his owner £90,000 as a store, but the money may not have been misguided given the way he won on his racecourse debut at Kempton in April. Hopelessly green for much of the race, his raw talent enabled him to put in a challenge before pulling three and a quarter lengths clear of Fidelis who, despite starting at 33'1, is well regarded by trainer Ben de Haan.

There are numerous others to consider here, many of them winners, but Lush Life is rated one of the most exciting prospects in his powerful yard and the plan is to give him this one more run in a bumper before considering a switch to hurdles. Lidar and, at long odds, Chain Of Command are the two to note against him.

As you may be aware from my Dark Horses Jumps Guide, I have high hopes this season for **Tataniano (1.10)**.

I've not seen a novice jumps hurdles as well since the days of Mysilv, so it was with eager anticipation that I watched for his chasing debut at Exeter in October. In the main he jumped well, though perhaps not with quite the degree of panache I saw from him over the smaller obstacles.

Paul Nicholls took this race with Tatenen and I would like to think this five-year-old will follow suit, quite possibly going on to even greater things in the Arkle Trophy here in March. I have already backed Tataniano for the Arkle on Betfair – he is around 12.5 now – but if he can win this, depending on who turns up against him, then his price will be cut to single figures.

My main concern is that a well-connected source close to the Nicholls yard told me recently that, in his opinion, the horse "wasn't good enough" to win an Arkle. My view is that we should hold judgement until he runs on Saturday. He certainly didn't do anything wrong at Exeter, and his superb jumping should stand him in good stead around here.

Nicky Richards thinks the world of Noble Alan, but this is not the place to bring a novice chaser which fell on its previous outing. Five Dream, a stable-companion of Tataniano, needed to be ridden out to win at Fontwell and Aintree. He lacks the class of Tataniano and has an alternative entry here on Friday (4.40).

Nicky Henderson can choose between French Opera, a winner over 2m 3f at Ascot (also entered 2.25 here on Friday) and Dave's Dream. Of the two I most respect the latter, who has always been held in high regard by his trainer and showed that his opinion was justified when landing the Imperial Cup by a wide margin from a mark of 130. I expect him to prove an above-average novice chaser without being, on this first run over fences, good enough to upset Tataniano.

The strongest threat in the market to the favourite will probably be Kangaroo Court. Emma Lavelle has a strong line to the top novice chasing form, with Crack Away Jack currently heading the ante-post betting for the Arkle.

Kangaroo Court is more of a stayer than his stable companion, as he proved when winning here last time over two and a half miles. There is also the suspicion that he is best suited to good fast ground (three of his victories have been on good ground, with one on good to firm). Pigeon Island is admirably game and consistent but lacks the scope of some of the others here. Bergo is progressing but each of his four victories has been on good to firm ground.

This has the makings of an essential link-race to the Arkle. We won't get rich backing Tataniano, but I committed myself to his cause some weeks ago and intend to bulk up my ante-post bet for him before he runs. Coral stand along in offering 12 with, as I say, 12.5 on Betfair.

I am looking forward to seeing whether Well Chief can make up any of the seven lengths deficit with Master Minded from last season's Queen Mother Champion Chase in the Connaught Chase, the second race on Sunday (1.45). Reports from the Pipe yard about David Johnson's 10-year-old have been very upbeat but this is a race best enjoyed as a spectacle.

I recommend two horses for the Greatwood Hurdle (2.20).

The first is **James de Vassy**, who was a selection for my PCS clients when he won at 11'1 on his seasonal debut at Chepstow last month. Trained, like Reve de Sivola, by Nick Williams, the four-year-old caught my eye in a major way on his third and final qualifying mark for a handicap at Warwick last February. Indeed, I was surprised that the officials didn't take a close look at the performance, and it was on the strength of that run that I put him at the head of my horses to follow this season.

Unfortunately he ran before my Dark Horses Jumps Guide was published, so after he had won and so become exposed I elected to omit him from the list. As a consequence of that victory, which was achieved from a mark of 124 (including 4lb out of the handicap), he now has to run from a 9lb higher mark (133) but I strongly suspect that his wily handler wanted him to win there so that he would get into the handicap proper for this £100,000 prize.

James de Vassy won't mind any rain which falls, having landed a substantial punt in the mud on his racecourse debut. With just four runs to his name, he has the scope and potential to progress beyond this mark. You will do well to get 9'1 (Coral and Hills) because he is already almost a point shorter than that on Betfair.

Harry Tricker could be well treated with a 5lb penalty and Ronaldo Des Mottes is expected to prove superior to his 134 mark. Salute Him would command more respect but for finishing tailed off when last seen on the Flat at Newmarket and fellow Irish raider Raise Your Heart, an easy winner last time at Cork, is preferred.

Squadron has the tenacious battling qualities suited to a race of this type but the one I suggest you keep a close eye on with a view to a saving bet is **Khyber Kim**.

This once useful ex-Flat performer has always hinted at better to come but he's evidently not been an easy horse to train and is even harder to win with. Having said that, he won on his hurdling debut two years ago and ran his best race of the season on his return to action at Newbury last November, finishing a close second to Helens Vision from a 3lb lower mark than here. Also, he is just the sort of horse Nigel Twiston-Davies likes to get ready for this meeting and an entry for the Fighting Fifth suggests connections believe he may prove better than handicap grade.

I am convinced there is a big race to be won with Khyber Kim, who acts on soft ground, and at around 20'1 he qualifies as the each-way bet behind James de Vassy.

If the rain arrives in time I would expect **Trumpstoo** to run better than his odds may imply in the opener on Saturday (12.50).

Richard Fahey's son of Perfect Soul was something of an underachiever on the Flat last summer, not progressing from his promising two-year-old season, but the key to him is the ground. Indeed, he has done well to win and run a good second, both times at Wetherby, on ground riding good and good to firm. A sounder jumper at home than he's so far shown on the track, the likely strong pace he will get here and, hopefully, better ground could show him in a far better light. I certainly expect him to reverse Wetherby form with Nicky Nutjob.

Barizan's five victories have all been on fast going while Paul Nicholls can choose between Jump City and Royal Mix, both recruits from the French flat campaign. Pistolet Noir would not have been entered for this Grade 2 unless Nick Williams thought him up to the task, but I am happy to stick with my local news for Trumpstoo.

The ground will have a significant bearing on the Paddy Power Gold Cup, with Poquelin rated an unlikely starter if the going turns soft. Such conditions would suit stable-companion Tatenen, while others to consider are Akilak and the well-fancied Irish raider Tranquil Sea.

This time a year ago we were all getting quite excited about Tatenen, with the hope that he would progress into an Arkle Trophy horse. Things started well, with victories at Aintree and here on this day, but he then had a hard race in Ireland before disappointing when falling in the Arkle and subsequently getting beaten at Aintree and Punchestown. First time may be the right time to catch Tatenen, especially as he is now stepped up to a trip his trainer has always believed he requires.

Stable-companion Chapoturgeon landed some decent bets here in the Jewson from a mark of 135. He has again been specially prepared to run well for his owner David Johnson but now rated on 153, and against hardened handicappers, he faces a far stiffer task than in March. Watch My Back, from the resurgent Ferdy Murphy team, could feature if the ground stays good and Tony Martin's Northern Alliance, who won over three miles last time at Listowel, may also figure but in the belief that we didn't see the best of Tatenen last season, and that the ground will be riding on the soft side, he is my tentative selection.

The two to note in the Jardine Lloyd Thompson Handicap Hurdle are **Earth Planet** and **Silverburn (3.10)**.

The former ran just once last season, beaten here at odds-on, before having to be retired through injury. Rated 136, he is bred to relish this step up to three miles. Silverburn, a full brother to Denman, was slightly disappointing for Paul Nicholls, trainer of Earth Planet, but his new handler Evan Williams has been fairly upbeat recently about the horse's form. Both command respect, especially if the subject of market support.

Philip Rothwell's **Vinnes Friend**, Nicky Henderson's **Lord Ragnar** and **St Killian's Run** are the three to note in the closing novices' handicap hurdle (3.45).

The first named landed a mighty touch for connections at Wexford in October but this is a much tougher contest. Lord Ragnar (also entered on Friday 3.35), has been brought along steadily, while St Killian's Run has left the impression that he has been trained with handicaps in mind.

Of the three I like St Killian's Run, who wasn't knocked about on his recent return to action at Chepstow, but I hope Lord Ragnar goes for the race on Friday instead. If he runs here then he would qualify as a saving bet.

Tito Bustillo should go close in the Sharp Novices' Hurdle on the first day (1.50).

The four-year-old had been on top bloodstock agent Anthony Bromley's 'hit list' for a while before he eventually managed to acquire him from France this summer. There was much to like about the way he won on his hurdling debut at Chepstow and I expect him to handle this step up in class.

I hope that Nicky Henderson selects the 0-120 conditional jockeys' handicap hurdle for **Lord Ragnar** rather than the closing race on Saturday (3.35).

The same owner/trainer combination won this last year with Andytown, and this son of King's Theatre shaped well enough at times last season – notably at Newbury on his final start - to suggest he may be better than this opening mark of 112. His work this autumn has left his trainer with the impression he can win a race of this nature before switching to fences.

I am not tempted to get involved in the closing novices' chase, with Ashkazar's experience from Stratford possibly standing him in good stead against the promising Aigle d'Or. The former had the higher rating over hurdles, but neither horse is straightforward.

Please note that I will be posting a brief update to this Online Preview tomorrow, with any late news and the confirmed runners for Friday's card.

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