

marten julian's cheltenham open preview



the update

Going: Heavy rain is expected in the Cheltenham area this evening, with more significant showers during the course of Friday afternoon and early Saturday. The rain is expected to ease off on Sunday. The ground is now expected to ride on the soft side of good for the start of the meeting, possibly become softer through the course of the next two days.

I'm not surprised to see support for **Khyber Kim** in Sunday's Greatwood Hurdle following the upbeat report from trainer Nigel Twiston-Davies on page four of today's Racing Post (2.20). The seven-year-old, who was around 20 on Betfair last night, is now down to 15.5 and a top-priced 16'1 with bookmakers, as I write this early on Thursday evening.

James De Vassy, the other horse I like for the Greatwood, is now a stand-out 9'1 with Coral and as short as 7'1 elsewhere (9 with Betfair, equating to 8'1). I expect this progressive four-year-old to start a little less than 7'1 on the day, especially if the ground softens – conditions to which I believe he prove well suited.

The best backed horse for the Greatwood in the last 24 hours has been David Pipe's Ronaldo Des Mottes, cut from around 9'1 to 6'1 with many of the leading firms.

Twiston-Davies says he will be equipping Pigeon Island with blinkers for the first time in more than two years when he tackles Tataniano and Kangaroo Court in the opener on Sunday (1.10).

Stable-companion Ballyfitz has become the major gamble of the Paddy Power Chase, again following positive remarks from the trainer in today's Post.

The nine-year-old, who won the Pertemps Final at the 2008 Festival, was 16'1 a few days ago with Coral, who now offer a top price of 15'2 and as short as 6'1 with other firms, including Ladbrokes. He is very consistent, having won seven races and finished second four times in 15 starts – his last three victories having been here at Cheltenham.

There has been plenty of money for some of his rivals, none more so than Tranquil Sea, who is just 5'1 with Ladbrokes (from 9'1) and 11'2 with Hills (7'1 elsewhere). Tony Martin has engaged the services of Paul Carberry for Northern Alliance while Ruby Walsh, who rode that horse to victory last time out in the Kerry National, will be on either Poquelin or **Tatenen**. With the ground expected to turn soft, Poquelin has been very weak on Betfair – now available at 16.5 - with Tatenen, currently the mount of Christian Williams, proving by far the stronger of the two at 9 (top price of 8'1 with the bookmakers, and 7'1 from 10'1 with Ladbrokes).

With heavy rain expected late on Friday and overnight, I expect conditions to suit my selection Tatenen far more than Poquelin, a horse Paul Nicholls has readily acknowledged is much better on good ground. Soft ground would also count against Leslingtaylor and My Petra, but if the forecast is accurate then backers of Tatenen are entitled to feel on good terms with themselves.

I have received some strong news from a top Irish source for a horse running on Saturday but the trainer told me that the horse would have no chance if ground turned soft. I will let you know more about this on Saturday morning's line, by which time we should have a clearer idea of the going.

I can pass on some late news for Cootehill in the second race tomorrow (1.50). The five-year-old has to concede 3lb to Tito Bustillo, but is reported to still be improving and I'll be surprised if he's not shorter than his current 7 on Betfair by the fall of the flag.

Loosen My Load, who ran a good second in a Grade 3 contest at Tipperary last time, and Some Present, who found the slow pace against him last time at Punchestown, also offer stiff opposition. There is some discrepancy in the prices, with the Racing Post quoting Tito Bustillo third favourite at 7'2 as opposed to his current 3.25 on Betfair.

Sleepy Hollow, a fair 85-rated performer on the Flat and a horse suited to soft ground, is worth keeping an eye on. Hughie Morrison does well with his handful of jumpers and it's interesting that he's elected to select this Grade 2 event for his hurdling debut. Watch for any market strength, however slight.

I am staying with Tito Bustillo, who has the scope to improve from his Chepstow run, but Cootehill will be popular at around 7'1. Keep an eye on Sleepy Hollow, both in the ring and the race itself.

French Opera heads the market at 5'2 for the next, a tricky 2m handicap (2.25), while the Cross Country Chase is dominated by Garde Champetre, at 4'5 in the Post, and Silver Birch, second best at 5'2 (4.4 on Betfair) (3.00). Garde Champetre beat Silver Birch by two lengths when they last met in the La Touche Cup at Punchestown. Following a pipe-opener over hurdles at Thurles last month he will be coming here cherry-ripe.

Garde Champetre is proving rock solid on Betfair this evening, with 1.8 hard to get matched. He will be difficult to beat.

Everything that was offered at 8.8 for **Lord Ragnar** was matched on Betfair when betting opened for the race an hour ago (3.35).

The six-year-old, who carries the colours of last year's winner Andytown, shares the head of the market with Paul Nicholls' Colombard, who comes into the race with a similar profile. Both horses owe their prominent position to potential rather than form. This is no two-horse race, though, with Quelqu'un Comme Toi showing up well last month at Worcester and Mith Hill bringing consistent form into the race.

Nicky Henderson's team is back amongst the winners now and Lord Ragnar has given every indication in recent work that he is superior to this 112 rating. Provided he gets the run of the race – no certainty in a 24-runner conditional jockeys' contest round here – then I expect him to go close.

The best race of the first day is the closing novices' chase, which sees impressive Carlisle winner Knockara Beau trying to concede weight to Ashkazar and **Aigle D'Or**.

This has the makings of a tactical conundrum, because both Ashkazar and Aigle D'Or were smooth-travelling types over hurdles with the latter, especially, seen at his best when produced late. Ashkazar was the highest rated of the three over hurdles – on 155, against Knockara Beau's 145 and Aigle D'Or's 143 – but he has to concede 3lb to David Johnson's horse and 8lb to the Henderson runner so, on official BHA hurdles' figures, there isn't much between them.

The Charlton family are seldom far adrift in their assessment of a horse, and Knockara Beau proved he had a touch of class when running fifth to Mikael d'Haguenet at Cheltenham last March.

Ashkazar is the most solid of the three on Betfair this evening, trading at 2.78, but I'm not entirely convinced that he will be suited to this stiff track, or extended 2m 4f, even though he has twice won at Sandown. I know that Nicky Henderson reckons Aigle D'Or has to be fresh so this is his perfect chance, in receipt of weight, to shine.

Although lacking the chasing experience of his rivals Aigle D'Or, at around 11'4, is the one which makes the most appeal in a fascinating contest. Expect to see Tony McCoy give the horse a patient ride, perhaps not striking the front until after the last.

Finally, I am encouraged by the prospect of soft ground for **Trumpstoo** in the opener on Saturday. Richard Fahey believes the horse is considerably better with cut underfoot.

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