

Marken Julian

Cheltenham SUPPLEMENT



Day One

Tuesday 15 March

Going: *The ground for the first day is expected to ride generally good to soft, with good patches. The forecast for the next few days is for dry conditions, with cloud cover, and temperatures of around 10 degrees, so there is the prospect of watering towards the end of the week.*

1.30: Sky Bet Supreme Novices' Hurdle (Grade 1)

Min has been weak in the market over the last 36 hours or so, with 9/4 readily available and bookmakers expected to offer a variety of price boosts or concessions on this and later races.

One of the better offers is from Paddy Power who, I believe, are offering to refund the stake on any race at Cheltenham if the favourite wins. My advice is to shop around for the best offer before placing your bet assuming, of course, that the various options are available to you.

I am encouraged to see that Buveur D'Air, my ** bet from the Bulletin Book, has proved fairly solid in the market in the last couple of days. The five-year-old had been weak last week and over the weekend, but he is now 7.8 on Betfair and a top price of 13/2 with the bookmakers. Nicky Henderson will be hoping that the ground retains some moisture for him as he prefers cut underfoot. I loved the way he travelled and quickened to win at Newbury in November and he finished almost three lengths ahead of Altior when they ran behind Barthers Hill in a Listed bumper at Newbury last season.

There have been mixed reports about Min, with one contact telling me that there are concerns about what the horse may find off the bridle if that should be required. I am not taken by the way he carries his head and believe he may be vulnerable. On form he has run to a mark of 140, which is 15lb lower than Altior.

Altior is very solid and has the best speed figure in the race. We know that he can battle but he takes quite a hold. The likely strong pace will help settle him. Supasundae is a little overpriced at 15.5 on Betfair while 2014 Festival Bumper winner Silver Concorde commands respect.

I need to bring your attention to Holly Bush Henry, who is rated on a BHA mark of 142 which is higher than many of those at shorter prices. He also has the second best speed figure in the race and has a better chance than his 100/1 on Betfair Sportsbook price suggests.

The ground should still have enough ease underfoot to suit Buveur D'Air. Min could be a different class but he is unproven in a battle. Altior looks very solid and if there is going to be a shock then it may come from Supasundae or, at very long odds, Holly Bush Henry.



2.10: Racing Post Arkle Challenge Trophy

Douvan, no bigger than 2/5 with the bookmakers and 1.39 on Betfair, renders this a non-betting event. He has jumped well, putting himself right when required, and has great class. Accidents can happen, and a superiority of 6lb over his nearest rival The Game Changer could be negated by an error or two, but he is very hard to fault and will be hard to beat. Douvan was 10lb or more clear of these rivals over hurdles and it is hard to make out a case against him.

I am not sure that I can nominate his main danger. The Game Changer is admirably consistent and is best suited to the good ground. Vaniteux was on the brink of the top level over hurdles but appears to keep something back for himself. Sizing John was beaten a long way by Douvan over Christmas. Fox Norton is held by Vaniteux and the other two have plenty to find.

This is a race best enjoyed without financial involvement.

2.50: Ultima Handicap Chase

I can pass on a late message for Doing Fine, who has not won since beating Carole's Destrier by a neck at Ffos Las in October, 2014. He has not been seen since pulling up at Wincanton in November and is very hard to fancy on the book, but he has halved in price on Betfair in the last few hours and ran well enough in the National Hunt Chase last March.

Carole's Destrier, who has had a breathing operation since winning over 3m 5f in December, gets the trip well. He has to defy a career high mark, but is very tough and Neil Mulholland is particularly pleased with him at the moment. Holywell is the best handicapped horse in the race on 153 – 10lb below his mark this time a year ago, when he ran fourth to Coneygree in the Gold Cup.

Out Sam is progressive but, with just three runs over fences, he lacks the experience of these rivals. Kruzhlilin, up 10lb for winning at Kempton, has the Grand National as his main spring target. Morning Assembly handles good ground but may prefer the mud. He is, though, very consistent having won five times and made the frame in all 12 of his completed outings.

Regal Encore has shaped with eye-catching promise on occasions, both over hurdles and as a chaser, but he has pulled up twice since winning at Plumpton in December. It would not surprise me to see him run well here as there is a big race in him.

Theatre Guide ran a stormer last time at Kempton but has been raised 11lb to 150. This may be a little beyond him. Beg To Differ is progressive but doesn't jump well. Band Of Blood is coming to hand. Dr Richard Newland does very well with horses with his profile.

I get the feeling there may be some shrewd money around for this race. The market support for Doing Fine intrigues me, while I am expecting Regal Encore to put on a show. Band Of Blood is coming to hand while Carole's Destrier was my selection in the Bulletin Book and he should run his race. I am sticking with him, but respect Doing Fine and Regal Encore.

3.30: Stan James Champion Hurdle

The market strength in the last couple of days has been behind The New One, for whom the ground is coming right. Annie Power is proving relatively weak, at 5/2 in places and bigger than that on Betfair. Identity Thief, at a drifting 7/1, is also proving friendless but My Tent Or Yours is surprisingly steady given his lengthy absence from the track.

The professional backers probably take the view that two miles at championship pace may expose Annie Power's occasional slipshod hurdling technique. Ruby Walsh will want to exploit the mare's proven stamina but at the same time not ask too much of her in the early stages of the race. The mare has made a mistake or fallen at the last on six of her 13 victories so she could be vulnerable at this exalted level.

Nichols Canyon was my selection in the Dark Horses Jumps Guide and I am happy to still be with him. He has won six races at Grade 1 level and was a Group-class performer on the Flat. This is a very tough horse whose poor run in January may be attributed to his hard race at Leopardstown over Christmas. He is a thoroughly reliable sort.

I have written enough times about My Tent Or Yours. Never have I seen a horse pull so hard at this level yet still manage to prove competitive at the finish of his race. He is a remarkable talent but the concern is that having not run for almost two years he will be very fresh. Despite his quirks he has finished in the first two in all but one of his 14 starts (third on the other occasion). He may settle better for Barry Geraghty than he did for Tony McCoy.

The New One should have won this race two years ago, for a variety of reasons, and last season he had back and foot problems in the weeks before this race. His record of 21 first-three places from 23 starts, stands up to the closest inspection and he may be racing on his ideal ground for the first time here in a while. Some will say he has had his chances, which is fair point, but in such an open year he has to be a major player.

The ground may not be soft enough for Top Notch even though he is overpriced on a line through his Fighting Fifth form with Identity Thief. Nico de Boinville could bring out the best in Peace And Co. The horse is tricky, but Nico has a special way with this type of horse and he takes the mount for the first time. I gather that Hargam is working very well at present. He is not very big but the drying ground will be in his favour.

Sempre Medici has struggled in Grade 1 company before but he is improving. Lil Rockerfeller thoroughly deserves his place in the field, now within 6lb of the top-rated here. Camping Ground, remarkably, has the highest rating in the race (before taking Annie Power's allowance into account). His form in last year's Imperial Cup reads exceptionally well, as does his 11-lengths defeat of Lil Rockerfeller here on New Year's Day. Sign Of A Victory is useful but has a lot to find.

If the ground were riding easier I would be keen on Top Notch. I still think he will run well, but Nichols Canyon is very reliable and we know he will put his head down and battle up the hill. Of the others I am promoting Peace And Co up my list in the belief that Nico de Boinville could make the difference. My Tent Or Yours will probably still be pulling double on the turn for home while Ruby Walsh has to decide whether he is going to make the running on Annie Power or give her a chance to settle. The New One is sure to be involved as well. To conclude, I like Nichols Canyon with next best Peace And Co and Top Notch.



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4.30: OLBG Mares' Hurdle

Although Vroum Vroum Mag heads the market, rightly, at a top price of 11/10 there are still 19 rivals prepared to take her on. Of these, the three that most interest me are Bitofapuzzle, The Govaness and Tara Point.

Regarding the last named, her owner Robin Geffen told me over the weekend that the mare had been working very well with, among others, Modus and although not seen on the track since winning a Listed race at Taunton in December, 2014, she is very well and expected to go close. She had won both her bumper races before and run third to Vyta Du Roc in a Grade 2 hurdle at Sandown.

The Govaness ran Polly Peachum to a head at Sandown in January but was then over 13 lengths behind Vroum Vroum Mag at Ascot. There is better to come from her.

I expected Bitofapuzzle to take high rank over fences this season but after impressing on her debut at Exeter in December she unseated at Thurles and then pulled up in heavy ground at Wetherby. It's never easy to switch back to hurdling from chasing, especially for a relatively inexperienced horse at this level, but Bitofapuzzle ran a blinder in this race last year and I expect another good effort.

Of the others the consistent Polly Peachum is sure to run her usual game race while Aurore D'Estruval has been primed for this. Lily Waugh has risen 21lb in her last four runs and is progressive.

Vroum Vroum Mag is hard to assess but the Graded races she has won have been mainly relatively soft events over fences. This will be her hardest task to date by far. Bitofapuzzle is a great favourite of mine and I respect my news for Tara Point who, at 16/1 and 22/1 respectively represent each-way value.

4.50: The National Hunt Chase

Minella Rocco ran his best race over fences last time when coming home strongly behind Vyta Du Roc at Ascot. This longer trip should suit him but he still has something to learn about jumping. Noble Endeavor, second in the Martin Pipe last season, prefers soft ground but is sure to keep galloping through to the finish.

My assistant Jodie Standing is keen on Southfield Royale, who will be ridden by Nina Carberry. Native River takes a drop in grade but Derek O'Connor has switched from him to Minella Rocco. Vicente is overpriced at 16/1 while Local Show is bred to thrive over this trip.

I do not hold a strong view on this race.

5.30: Close Brothers Novices' Handicap Chase

Ian Williams has decided to allow Ballyalton to carry top weight here rather than tackle alternative races in this week. The nine-year-old, who ran second to Faugheen in the 2014 Neptune Hurdle, has struggled over fences but he has the class to figure here if things work out for him.

Aloomomo has been trained specially for this race. He had enough in hand to cover the 11lb he has been raised for his nine-lengths success at Newbury in November and he will have come on from his pipe-opener over hurdles at Ascot last month. Double Shuffle has been kept fresh for this since winning at Ludlow in December. Now just 4lb higher, he has the look of a plot and I respect his chance.

Willow's Saviour needs to settle better around a track as stiff as this. Emma Lavelle has been out of form recently but Javert impressed me at Chepstow and Doncaster before Christmas and the yard had a winner at Sandown. I know from a source close to the yard that Javert has been working well and that this has been the plan for a while now. Bouvreuil is inconsistent but has the ability to win this on a going day.

Javert was my favoured choice in the Bulletin Book and I am happy to stay with him, especially following the yard's good winner at Sandown on Saturday. Double Shuffle bothers me.

Cheltenham Update Line

If you want to keep in touch with Marten's latest thoughts on Cheltenham ring him on:

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Selections given in the first minute

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