



Written on Monday 5 January 2026

Hello!

It's been a funny sort of week, with New Year's Day serving up a wealth of competitive cards on Thursday while we were still clinging to the tail end of the Festive action earlier in the week.

In Ireland, **Frankie John** finally managed to get his head in front over hurdles in the maiden over the extended 2m 4f at Leopardstown. Denis Hogan's grey won a Galway bumper in the summer and this was clearly a step forward from his first three runs over hurdles, which included a solid third in Grade 3 company last time. He's proving a reliable type, his jumping is improving, and he gives the impression he'll stay further in time.

Walks In June also made a good impression in the novices' handicap hurdle. Henry de Bromhead's team started Christmas struggling for form but that soon turned, and this gelding won off 124, jumping well and staying on nicely to beat the J P McManus-owned Fierce Handay by just shy of three lengths. Connections are already plotting a path to the Cheltenham Festival.

In the next, **Wodhooh** had no issues dealing with her four rivals in the Grade 3 mares' hurdle, while **Lossiemouth** produced a gutsy display to beat **Brighterdaysahead** by a length. The margin suggests a tight finish, but she always looked in control once the runner-up challenged after the last.

At Newbury, the Supreme Novices' Hurdle market shifted again as **Act Of Innocence** was beaten by Paul Nicholls' three-year-old **Minella Yoga**, who was making his first start for the yard after winning a bumper for John Nallen last month. The Triumph looks the obvious destination for the winner, but the runner-up had to concede 20lbs, and pushing him out to 50/1 for the curtain-raiser in March feels harsh.

Later on, **Old Cowboy** justified strong market support in the handicap chase, travelling smoothly and winning by four lengths. He'll stay further and looked right at home on the good ground.

No Drama This End enhanced his already glowing reputation with a determined victory in the Grade 1 Challow Hurdle, making all and keeping on gamely to repel Klimt Madrik and Tiptoptim. It was more workmanlike than flashy but it showed his tactical versatility and all roads surely lead to the Turners in March, for which he is top priced 4/1.

Klimt Madrik remains one to keep onside both in the short and longer term. A proper

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chasing type from the family of the lovely staying chaser Lord du Mesnil, he was delivered late by Kevin Brogan and would likely have been seen to even better effect on softer ground. He's still raw, so this effort was encouraging and I wonder if connections may have a look at either the Albert Bartlett or the Sefton at Aintree.

Up at Kelso, **Country Code** continued his upward curve for Ruth Jefferson, winning the novices' hurdle under a penalty by five and a half lengths. Straightforward and uncomplicated, he's likely to head to the Grade 2 River Don at Doncaster, with the Albert Bartlett also under consideration.

In the next, **They Want Me** lowered the colours of **They're Chancers**. Donald McCain's five-year-old had finished a distant runner-up to Idaho Sun at Bangor but took a clear step forward here. Nicky Richards' bumper winner meanwhile was uneasy in the market and spent too long in the air over his hurdles. He should improve and is worth sticking with.

At Doncaster, **Get On George** continued the fine run for Joel Parkinson and Sue Smith, winning with authority over the extended 2m 3f. He already has a mark of 122, which could go up on Tuesday and he may head to the EBF Novices' Handicap Hurdle Final at Sandown in March, as could the runner-up, **Draco Malfoy** and the third, **Tiddesley Wood**.

Over at Leopardstown, **Wendrock** surely entered plenty of notebooks after a never-nearer fifth in the Listed handicap hurdle behind Champagne Kid. Gordon Elliott's gelding has only a maiden hurdle win to his name but finished sixth in last season's Fred Winter and shaped with real encouragement on his first try over the extended 2m 4f. Nowhere to be seen jumping the second last, he then threaded a passage through on the inside rail, winged the last and finished full of running, beaten just under seven lengths off 130. He's very much one to keep onside.

On Tuesday, **Douglas Hyde** again had to settle for second, the fourth time in six starts, but he relished the step up to the extended 3m and stayed on strongly, only to be denied by Kiss My Face who got first run and flew the last. That was Douglas Hyde's first start in a handicap off a mark of 105 and surely it won't be long until he finds an opening.

It was a real shame to lose Brixson in the next. He looked to have **Captain Hugo**'s measure at the last before a fatal fall that also injured Danny McMenamin left Philip Hobbs & Johnson White's gelding well clear. Captain Hugo eventually finished two and a half lengths clear of **Wolf Walker**, who again shaped well after catching the eye behind Soomaroy at Hereford. He'll be interesting when switched to handicaps and stepped up in trip.

On New Year's Eve, the standout was **Millstatt Abbey**, an impressive bumper winner who

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galloped to a nine-and-a-half-length success over Rainbow Tara. Noel Williams' Rules debutant had finished second in an April point-to-point, and it'll be interesting to see where she heads next.

The Grade 2 Nickle Coin at Aintree is an option, though the Listed bumper at Newbury next month could also appeal.

New Year's Day brought competitive action across the country.

At Musselburgh, I gave **Didntgotwenty** another chance in the novices' handicap chase over the extended 2m 4f as he seemed to have plenty in his favour and was equipped with first-time cheekpieces, but he again came up short. He doesn't appear to stay three miles but lacks the tactical pace for intermediate trips, leaving connections short of options.

Later, **Breizh River** returned to something like his best in the feature chase for Tristan Davidson, having lost his way for Paul Robson. Once a useful novice chaser, he had dropped from 135 to 115, so he was entitled to go well if the spark could be reignited.

The Kalooki Kid shaped as though the run was needed after a break since early November and likely has the Scottish Champion Chase in his sights, a race he won last season over the same course and distance.

For the same yard, **Smokinginthedark** ran well in the 0-135 handicap hurdle, making good headway and showing battling qualities to finish a clear second behind the talented Fasol. Although rated 100 on the Flat, **Fasol** has taken time to put it together over hurdles, but back-to-back wins under Olive Nicholls suggest he's getting the hang of things. A return to Scotland next month looks likely.

At Tramore, **Ile Atlantique** ran well despite being no match for **Heart Wood** in the Grade 3 chase over 2m 7f, a race long associated with Al Boum Photo's Gold Cup preparations. This was his first try at the trip and he travelled kindly and jumped well after a frustrating end to last season. It may open some doors, and valuable spring handicaps could be on the agenda.

At Fairyhouse, **With Nolimit** impressed in the concluding bumper for Gordon Elliott. Only fourth at Navan last month, he made all here and found plenty to win by just over a length. Connections don't seem keen on the Champion Bumper, but a switch to hurdles before being put away for next season is possible.

At Cheltenham, **Step Ahead** showed a willing attitude, staying on strongly up the hill to deny Just Golden by a neck. **Neon Dream** shaped well in third on his Rules debut for Alan King. Still in contention at the last, he faded late to be beaten just under four lengths but this was a

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fully respectable start.

In the novices' chase, the good ground suited **Miami Magic**, who jumped well and scampered clear of **Regent's Stroll**, while **Knight Of Allen** shaped like one to keep onside when returned to handicap company.

Kabral du Mathan then threw his hat into the Stayers' Hurdle ring with a scintillating display in the Relkeel Hurdle for Dan Skelton, travelling strongly and powering clear after the last. Connections were keen to temper expectations for March, mindful that he's still young and not guaranteed to stay the extended 3m against battle-hardened rivals.

On Friday we had a quiet day with only Ayr on the agenda, but it still turned into an interesting

little card with a few horses worth keeping in mind. **Kings Champion** was the first to make an impression, taking a clear step forward from his Market Rasen debut and strolling home by 12 lengths. Olly Murphy's charge looked to relish every yard of the extended 2m 4f and he could easily develop into an intriguing prospect for the second half of the season.

Sleedagh chased him home and again shaped like a one-paced type over hurdles. He's the sort who might find his level in a staying novices' handicap hurdle before switching to fences next term.

In the 2m maiden hurdle, **Sanilam** finally rewarded his supporters. He'd been well backed on his previous two starts and it was the same story here as he was sent off 11/4. With his experience to draw on and the quicker ground very much in his favour, he quickened away smartly from **Wilstar** and **Like Minded**, both of whom shaped well enough to suggest they'll be winning races of their own.

Later on, **So Many Roads** made the most of his lenient mark to win the 0-100 handicap hurdle for the second time in three years, having also been placed in it 12 months ago. Donald Whillans' nine-year-old travelled strongly and jumped well for the most part, but he still had to dig in on the run-in as Velvet Vulcan made him pull out a bit extra.

The yard didn't have to wait long for another winner, as **Cowboy Cooper** followed up in the next. He'd been hinting that he was running into form and took another step forward here, travelling sweetly and pulling clear to win by six and a half lengths in what looked a competitive field.

The most taking winner of the day, though, was arguably **Milcree**, who returned from a 622-day absence to make a winning chasing debut from a mark of 115. Nicky Richards' eight-

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year-old looked nicely treated on his hurdling form, but the question was whether he'd be sharp enough after such a long layoff. As it turned out, he was more than ready.

The son of Milan jumped very well, cruised into contention exiting the back straight and always had matters under control once heads turned for home, eventually finishing just over four lengths clear of **Karafon**, who had competed at Grade 1 level over hurdles when trained by Willie Mullins.

The handicapper will have his say, but Milcree looks every inch a staying chaser for the yard and can easily make up for lost time.

Looking ahead...

This week we could be in for a quiet spell with freezing temperatures affecting most parts of the country. We've already lost Lingfield and Ludlow on Monday, while on Tuesday the only jumps fixture at Musselburgh has also succumbed to the elements. Leicester on Wednesday has to survive a Monday morning inspection, and the rest of the tracks through the week are currently frozen in places.

If Leicester somehow manages to go ahead, there's a fairly decent novices' hurdle over the extended 2m 4f in which **Giantsgrove** would probably take all the beating (2.45). He was declared for the Grade 1 Challow Hurdle at Newbury but was taken out due to the ground being too quick. Third to Gatineau Park on his hurdling debut at Lingfield, he can build on that here and should appreciate the stiffer finish.

Trial By Jury is a lovely horse for Ben Pauling and looks the main danger. He created a great impression on his Rules debut at Newbury before Christmas when chasing home Kripticjim and can take a step forward for the experience. Like Giantsgrove, he'll be better next season with a fence in front of him, but there are definitely races to be won over hurdles first. **Ubatuba** is penalised for his course and distance success last month, where he beat Shotgun Rider by 16 lengths. This is deeper, but he made a strong first impression.

On Thursday at Catterick, **Onefournine** is respected in the opening maiden hurdle after staying on nicely at Leicester on her Rules debut for Jonjo and A J O'Neill, while **Cushendall** is an interesting stable debutant for Alan King, having won a bumper for Stuart Crawford in the spring (12.40).

Later on, **Fresh Perspective** and **Legendary Luke** look progressive types, especially the latter, who showed a lovely attitude to win his sole start between the flags and then relished the step up in trip on his hurdling debut at Ffos Las after running respectably in a bumper at



Worcester (2.10).

At Taunton, I'm looking forward to seeing **Baron Noir** again after he won cosily at Uttoxeter on his second start over hurdles (1.00). He chased home the useful Cristal d'Estruval on debut at Warwick and shaped as though a step up in trip would suit when staying on well to beat Bobby's Nelson. **Lisbane Park** is another with a bright future and wasn't disgraced when fourth in the novices' hurdle won by Old Park Star at Cheltenham, while Nicky Henderson's **Macshadow des Crai** is interesting, receiving upwards of a stone from his elders and bringing strong French bumper form.

On Friday at Huntingdon, **A Chara** is one I'm keen to see again after running well in defeat behind Strong Run at Southwell. She can build on that promise, though she may not fully shine until stepping into handicaps (1.20). **Onefournine** is also entered here.

We then have a very strong novices' hurdle in which **Le Beau Madrik** — a good winner at Newcastle on Fighting Fifth day — could take on **Baron Noir**, **Race To Base** (third to Captain Hugo and Taurus Bay at Aintree), and **Bossman Jack** (third behind Baron Noir and Cristal d'Estruval at Warwick) (1.50). **This For Real** and **Kel du Large** are also worth consideration, especially the latter after an excellent fifth in a competitive handicap hurdle at Cheltenham. A top-four finish here would qualify a horse for the EBF Novices' Handicap Hurdle Final at Sandown in March.

Over at Exeter, **Limerick Star** is one to note in the maiden hurdle over the extended 2m for Philip Hobbs and Johnson White (1.30). He was second to the now 141-rated Moon Rocket in a point for Sean Thomas Doyle in April 2024, but hasn't been seen since. Bred to be useful, he can hopefully make up for lost time. The yard also has **Aguelid** entered; he finished an eye-catching third over this course and distance behind Harry Lowes in November and looks sure to improve. **Pourquoi Pas Papa** also shaped well behind Macktoad in a juvenile hurdle at Sandown and gets plenty of weight from his elders.

Tommy The Tank, **Wicked Thoughts** and **Silver Thorn** were due to clash at Wincanton on Saturday before the meeting was abandoned. They could now meet in the novices' handicap chase over 3m (2.00). This looks a deeper race, but I'll be keeping a close eye on **Tommy The Tank** despite him pulling up on his chase and seasonal bow at Sandown. I still think he has more to offer, and good ground will suit.

Finally, at Southwell it'll be interesting to see whether there's money for **Rule Me In** (1.10). He was the subject of serious support at Windsor — backed from 14/1 into 6/4 — but a couple of costly early jumping errors ruined his chance, and he eventually finished a well-



beaten third. That was from a mark of 105, but the handicapper has eased him 3lb to 102, which feels generous as it was the blunders, not the rating, that beat him.

Le Beau Madrik, **Legendary Luke**, **A Chara** and **Macshadow des Crai** all have entries in the novices' hurdle over the extended 2m 4f (2.10), while in the concluding handicap hurdle over 3m I'll be keeping **Princesse Milania** onside (3.40).

She won well over this sort of trip at Plumpton for Olly Murphy off a mark of 83, then scored at the first attempt for these connections at Wetherby over 2m 5f off 90. A good third at Catterick followed, though her jockey felt the track was too sharp, and she then ran well in a deeper race at Aintree on softer than ideal ground. She's a pound higher now on 97, but she's a progressive mare with a good attitude.

I'll be back in touch again next week.

Best wishes,

Jodie