



# The Cheltenham Blueprint

By Nick Pullen

## The Key trends that point to this year's Festival winners

The Championship events at the Cheltenham Festival are the pinnacle of National Hunt racing and each of the Championship races are designed to find the best horses in specific divisions of the jump racing game.

- \* The Champion Hurdle run on the Tuesday is designed to find the best 2 mile hurdler.
- \* The Queen Mother Champion Chase is designed to find the best horse over the bigger obstacles at the minimum distance of 2 miles. The race is run on the Wednesday of the Festival.
- \* On Thursday Cheltenham Stages the World Hurdle designed to find the best Staying Hurdler over a trip of 3 miles. Thursday also plays host to the Ryanair Chase - a race which has become a Championship event for chasers specialising in a trip of 2 miles and 5 furlongs.
- \* Finally, on the Friday of the Festival, we have the Gold Cup - the staying chasers' Championship event run over 3 miles and 2 furlongs.

These races are difficult to read. All the major horses - at least those which are fit - tend to show up, all the major yards are represented and every single runner is trying. The races are invariably run at a red hot pace and this, in combination with the specific demands of the Cheltenham course, means that only horses at the very top of their game, tuned to the moment and in receipt of luck in running can prevail.

So how do we solve these betting puzzles....

It's never 'easy' to solve these races - but fortunately help is at hand - in the form of historical evidence. Over the years specific types of horses, with similar profiles, boasting specific types of characteristics tend to come out on top time and time again in the same races. Conversely, horses who fail to meet the criteria laid down by these longstanding trends tend to fall short.

Trends will not always point you directly to a winner. But they will help you split a field into the horses who fit the winning trends most closely and those who match them least. They can help you toward a betting decision. No horse will meet every trend in every race. But we can take a subjective view and weigh up one thing against another. We can figure out which trends we think are most important against what else we know. We might discard some trends. Where some trends are concerned we might forgive a horse for not meeting the criteria – for whatever reason. The point I'm making is that trends are instructive and can direct and focus the way we look at or get into or go about finding angles on specific races.

Below you'll find my take on the important or significant trends in each of the Festival's Championship races. Hopefully, these will help you set some parameters when you come to split the field and focus on a shortlist of runners closer to race date.

## The Champion Hurdle -

The Grade 1 Champion Hurdle – run over the extended 2 miles on the Old Course and taking in 8 obstacles – is the showpiece event on Day 1 of the Festival. Open to horses aged 4 and over the race offers a total prize fund of £370,000.

When you come to look at the runners there are some strong key trends it will pay to bear in mind:

Recent form is a key pointer – the horses that tend to win the Champion Hurdle more often than not come into the race with a winning performance under their belt last time out. 22 of the last 26 winners of this race conform to the trend. 8 out of the last 10 winners won last time out. That trend doesn't help the case for Zaynar – he lost at Kelso last time out looking beaten for pace. 9 out of the last 10 winners had won at least once during the season. 8 out of the last 10 winners had won a Grade 1 or a Grade 2 hurdle race at some point during the season leading up to the Festival.

Youth trumps age in the Champion – up until recently it was pretty easy to deal with the 5-year-old runners in this race. It was just a simple case of striking a line through their names. But things seem to be changing. Katchit won the race as a 5-year-old (the first 5-year-old to do so since 1985) in 2008. And last year the 5-year-old age group supplied the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> place finishers in the race – Celestial Halo, Binocular and Crack Away Jack. This recent trend suggests that youth isn't the impediment it once was. However, age is still an impediment. Just 3 winners have won the race at age 8 or over since 1951.

Have experienced but don't be too exposed – 9 out of the last 10 winners of the Champion Hurdle had raced at least 9 times but no more than 25.

The market knows the score – the market doesn't often get this race wrong and out-and-out surprises are few and far between. 17 of the last 19 winners were sent off in the 1<sup>st</sup> six in the betting. This is another trend broken by last year's winner, Punjabi. But, taking a longer term view, the percentage call is to confine your interest to horses towards the head of the betting.

Course form is of real significance – 16 of the last 21 winners of the Champion Hurdle had already notched at least one win at Cheltenham before going for the title. Punjabi defied this trend last year but taking a broader look suggests that horses without a win at the course are at a disadvantage.

Previous Festival form counts – 14 of the last 18 winners of the Champion Hurdle had previously finished either 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> in a race at a previous Cheltenham Festival. Looking at a list of just the last 10 winners of the Champion Hurdle there isn't a single one with no form at a previous Festival. 8 of the 10 had already scored a Festival win.

Irish eyes have been smiling – raiders from across the Irish seas have won 7 of the last 11 Champion Hurdles and so the Irish horses merit special consideration. The market evidently fancies the Irish horses to make it 8 titles from the last 12 with Go Native, Solwhit and Dinguib making up the current 1<sup>st</sup> three in the betting.

Fitness has been important in the past – all of the last 10 winners of the Champion Hurdle came into the race 51 days or less since having their last prep run for the race. This is a stat that doesn't help the case for backers of Go Native, Khyber Kim or Starluck which will have been off the track 80, 94 and 80 days respectively come the 16<sup>th</sup> March.

Key race trends – Go Native has two big stats to turn over if he is to take the title. He won the Supreme Novices' Hurdle at last year's Festival – but no reigning winner of that event has gone on to win the following year's Champion Hurdle since 1971. He also won the Christmas Hurdle at Kempton – a race which has produced just one Champion Hurdle winner from the last 19 runners. The most instructive trial races for the Champion Hurdle in recent years have been the Irish Champion Hurdle run at Leopardstown in January and the Festival Hurdle run at the same course in December. Solwhit won both this season. Previous Champion Hurdle runners merit special attention and a shortcut to finding this year's winner of the Champion Hurdle might be to look at which horses ran in last year's renewal. 6 of the last 10 winners of the race had appeared in the field the year before.

Ratings have proven instructive – 9 out of the last 10 winners had scored a Racing Post Rating of at least 157 before going for the Champion. 8 out of 10 had already scored a Top speed figure of 152.

## The Champion Chase –

The Grade 1 Champion Chase – run over 2 miles on the Old Course and taking in 12 fences – is the showpiece event on Day 2 of the Festival. The race is open to horses aged 5 and over and offers a total prize fund of £320,000.

As with all the Championship events at the Festival there are some significant trends to bear in mind when you come to sort out the runners in this race:

Key race trends – 9 of the last 11 Arkle Trophy winners were 1st or 2nd in the Champion Chase the following year. On the basis of that stat alone Forpadydeplasterer, last year's Arkle winner, is a serious player in this year's Champion Chase. It's no bad stat for Kalahari King either – it's not unknown for horses finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> in the previous year's Arkle to go on and win the Champion Chase the following year. The Tingle Creek is a serial provider of the Champion Chase winner – 7 of the last 10 winners contested the Sandown race earlier in the season. Twist Magic ran away with it this season. The Game Spirit Chase at Newbury is another race to produce recent winners. Master Minded won this year's renewal.

The market is on the button – as a general rule the outsiders in the betting don't tend to disprove the odds. Of the last 28 winners 26 of them were sent off at single figure SPs. Of the last 11 winners 10 have been sent off at prices of 5/1 or shorter. Historically, the Champion Chase market has been a great guide for splitting the field.

Ratings are a key pointer – 7 of the last 8 Champion Chasers rated 160+ by the official handicapper.

Last time out: 8 of the last 10 winners had won a Graded event in their run immediately before the Champion Chase. 7 out of the last 10 had won a Grade 1 event at some stage prior to going to contesting the Champion Chase.

Good Festival form is a plus point – Over the last 25 years 19 winners have taken the Champion Chase on the back of wins or place finishes at a previous Festival. 8 of the last 10 winners already had Festival experience before winning the Champion Chase. And of the other 2 one of them had a non-Festival course win under his belt.

Go for youth over experience – There's only been a single winner over the age of 10 since 1997. Youthful horses hold the edge here but a little experience is necessary too. 9 of the last 10 winners had contested at least 8 chases before coming out on top here.

A seasonal win is a must – each of the last 10 winners had won at least once in that current season.

A fresh horse is a good horse – none of the last 10 winners of this event had run more than 4 times during the season running up to the Festival.

Proven stamina is no bad thing – as is the case with most Festival races, the Champion Chase is run at a red hot pace. And to win off that unusually strong pace demands a degree of stamina. To win this 2 mile Chase you might have to stay a bit further – and the stats bear the idea out. Every single one of the last 10 winners had already demonstrated before their Champion Chase victory that they could go a little further – winning over 2 mile 1 furlong and beyond.

French-bred animals merit respect – horses bred in France have walked away with the Champion Chase crown in 5 of the last 9 renewals..

## The World Hurdle –

The Grade 1 World Hurdle (previously the Stayers) is run over 3 miles on the New Course and takes in 12 obstacles. It represents the Championship event for staying hurdlers and is one of the Showpiece events of Day 3 of the Festival. The race is open to horses aged 4 and older and is worth £260,000 in prize money.

As with all the Championship events at the Festival there are some significant trends to bear in mind when you come to sort out the runners in this race:

What the age trends tell us – though the last eight 5-year-old runners have produced 4 place finishes in this event, no 5 year-old has ever won the World Hurdle – a race that has been a fixture at the Festival since 1972. 9 of the last 10 winners were younger than 9. The percentage call is to look for horses aged 6 to 8. All of the last 10 winners had run at least 6 times over hurdles before triumphing here. None had run more than 17 times over hurdles.

The Irish and the French – The Irish have had a very strong hand in plenty of races in recent times at the Festival – but not in this event. There's been no Irish-trained winner of the race for 15 years. French-bred horses have won 4 of the last 8 renewals. In the 4 years the French bred horses were beaten to 1<sup>st</sup> place they produced the 2<sup>nd</sup> placed horse. In this race last year 4 of the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 home were bred in France.

Shorter prices tell a story – 8 out of the last 9 winning horses went off at 8/1 or less. 7 out of the last 8 went off at 6/1 or less. The last 18 winners and placed horses have come from the top 5 in the betting at the off. The market is a decent guide.

A demonstration of form is a good sign – each of the last 10 winners advertised their form and well-being for this event by registering either a win or a 2<sup>nd</sup> place finish last time out. All of the last 22 winners finished in the first 4 in their last race before heading to the Festival.

A demonstration of class – of the last 10 winners 9 had previously advertised their credentials for this race and had already scored a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> placed finish in a Grade 1 hurdling event before heading to the World Hurdle.

Experience at the Festival – this has proven a key characteristic of winners of this event in recent years – 9 of the last 10 had run at a previous Festival.

Key race trends – 4 of the last 9 World Hurdle winners had finished 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Cleeve Hurdle at Cheltenham earlier in the year. Tidal Bay won this season's renewal with Time For Rupert finishing 2<sup>nd</sup>.

## The Ryanair Chase –

The Ryanair Chase has been a Grade 1 event since 2008 and is run over 2 miles and 5 furlongs on Cheltenham's New Course. The field negotiate 17 fences on the way round. The race is open to horses aged 5 and over. The race carries a prize fund of £250,000.

The Ryanair chase is a recent introduction to the Festival fixture and we only have trends from 5 previous renewals to work with. But there are some significant signals it will pay to bear in mind when you have a look at this race.

Course form is a big plus – The 5 winners of this race to date had won at Cheltenham prior to contesting the Ryanair Chase. In addition, 4 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> placed horses had also recorded a win at Cheltenham. The key races are the Paddy Power Gold Cup and the BoyleSports.com Gold Cup. 4 of the 5 winners ran competitively in the Paddy Power. 3 of the 5 ran well in the BoyleSports. These trends bode well for supporters of Tranquil Sea and Poquelin. Two winners of the Ryanair Chase had finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in the race the previous year. This is good news for supporters of Voy Por Ustedes.

The market has been instructive – all 5 winners of this race were sent off at prices shorter than 6/1 and appeared in the first 3 in the betting. 6 of the 10 placed horses appeared in the 1<sup>st</sup> 4 in the betting.

What the ratings tell us – all 5 winners were rated higher than 151 by the official handicapper.

Trainers warming to the race – some of the bigger yards have really taken to this race and are already establishing a knack of producing competitive runners. Paul Nicholls has 2 winners and a placed horse from 8 runners. David Pipe has produced a winner and a placed horse from 3 runners. And Nicky Henderson's 4 runners in the race to date have produced a winner and a placed horse.

## The Cheltenham Gold Cup –

The Grade 1 Cheltenham Gold Cup is run over 3 miles 2 and ½ furlongs on the New Course and presents runners with 22 obstacles to be negotiated. The race is open to horses aged 5 and over. The most valuable non-handicap event in Britain, the Gold Cup offers a prize fund of £475,000.

As with all the Championship events at the Festival there are some significant trends to bear in mind when you come to sort out the runners in this race:

Strong age trends – 15 of the last 16 winners were aged between 7 and 9. Just 1 winner from the last 16 has been older than 9. That stat stands against the 10-year-olds Kauto Star and Denman.

On the ratings – Of the last 9 winners 8 were rated 166 or higher – a good stat for supporters of Kauto Star, Denman, Imperial Commander and Madison Du Berlais.

A Grade 1 win ticks a box – the last 10 winners of the Gold Cup had already recorded wins in Grade 1 fields. All 10 had recorded a Graded chase win earlier that season. A win over 3 miles is also a plus point coming into the race. 8 of the last ten winners had won at that distance going into the Gold Cup.

Key race trends – the most reliable clue in recent years has been the King George VI Chase at Kempton on Boxing Day. The race has provided 7 of the last 9 Gold Cup winners and was won in imperious fashion this season by Kauto Star.

Festival form is a clue – 10 of the last 12 winners had won or placed at a previous Festival.

Last time out form – a decent showing last time out is a good indicator. 20 of the last 22 winners finished in the first 4 in their last run before going to the Festival. All of the last ten winners had raced more at least twice and no more than times during the season running up to the Festival. The last 8 Gold Cup winners went into the race off a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> place finish last time out.

Young pretenders - of the last 18 winners 9 were relatively new-on-the-scene second-season chasers. 9 out of the last 10 winners had raced over fences more than 6 times. 9 out of the last 10 winners had raced less than 13.

Another savvy market – as is the case with all these Championship races, the Gold Cup market is reliably informed. Winners don't tend to get to the race unsupported. The last 9 winners of the race were sent off in the first 3 in the betting.

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