

2019 Cheltenham Festival

Cheltenham - British Racing - Tuesday (Post 9:30 a.m.)

1st - Sky Bet Supreme Novices' Hurdle (Grade 1)

KLASSICAL DREAM runs here rather than in the Ballymore and can get Willie Mullins and Ruby Walsh off to a flyer. The five-year-old made a big impression when landing a Leopardstown maiden hurdle on Boxing Day and took giant strides forward to edge out stablemate Aramon in Grade 1 company at the Dublin Racing Festival. Recent rainfall won't hamper his chance, having performed well on very soft ground in France, and the money has come for him since the declaration stage. Aramon is rock-solid, having won his own Grade 1 at Leopardstown over the Christmas period, and it will be hard to keep him out of the frame. Tolworth hero Elixir De Nutz is three from four this season, winning twice at this venue, while Fakir D'Oudairies bolted up in Grade 2 company at the January meeting here and is interesting as the only four-year-old in the line-up.
10-3-6-18

2nd - Racing Post Arkle Challenge Trophy Novices' Chase (Grade 1)

Lalor is arguably the one to beat on the form of his Grade 2 C&D victory in November, but he then posted a laboured effort on soft ground at Sandown and now has a few questions to answer, particularly with the rain arriving. The Irish challenge is led by Hardline, a versatile performer who has been running consistently well all season, and runaway Gowran scorer Duc Des Genievres, but GLEN FORSA looks the most solid option. The seven-year-old has improved with each visit to the racecourse, he jumps and stays (won from an extended 1m5f to an extended 2m7f) and handles all types of ground. Jonathan Burke, who is three from three aboard the Mick Channon-trained gelding, should be able to grab a handy position and the pair are expected to be flying up the famous hill. Kalashnikov and Paloma Blue, second and fourth respectively in last season's Supreme Novices' Hurdle, have bags of ability but neither is yet to convince in the jumping department over fences. 4-8-6-10

3 rd - Ultima Handicap Chase (Grade 3)

With the ground easing, it may be worth siding with COO STAR SIVOLA to make it back-to-back victories in this contest off just a 3lb higher mark. Nick Williams' seven-year-old made the frame in two previous visits to the Festival before making it third-time lucky with a neck success last season, and this is likely to have been the target again. Vintage Clouds was back in third 12 months ago and is respected on his first outing since wind surgery, while Beware The Bear (fourth) and Singlefarmpayment (fifth) are others from the 2018 renewal seeking to better that result. It was hard not to be encouraged by Give Me A Copper's Sandown reappearance and he is held in high regard by Paul Nicholls, with former Gold Cup second Minella Rocco another towards the top of the market hailing from a yard that has won this three times in the last 10 years. Calipto looked to have a bit in hand at Ascot, while Crucial Role got back on track with a comfortable victory at Uttoxeter. 16-12-15-4

4 th - Unibet Champion Hurdle Challenge Trophy (Grade 1)

BUVEUR D'AIR arguably faces his toughest task to date as he tries to join the list of greats to have won three Champion Hurdles, attempting to give 7lb to a couple of top-class mares. Apple's Jade has been imperious throughout her four-race unbeaten season to date, winning by a combined 73 lengths, and proved the drop back to two miles was no issue when dominating the Irish Champion Hurdle field. Laurina hasn't put a foot wrong since joining Willie Mullins and looks to have a bit of star quality about her, while stablemate Sharjah is a dual Grade 1 winner this term and has to be respected. However, despite not being at his best when turned over by stablemate Verdana Blue in the Christmas Hurdle, the reigning champion was as good as ever when disposing of Samcro in the Fighting Fifth before that and the usual slick jumping of Nicky Henderson's eight-year-old could be the deciding factor.

2-8-9-6

5th - OLBG Mares' Hurdle (Grade 1)

This should be all about last year's winner **BENIE DES DIEUX**, who showed plenty of class when beating Apple's Jade twice last season and represents a trainer who has won nine of the last 10 renewals. It is a slight concern that we haven't seen the eight-year-old yet this season, but Willie Mullins can ready one for this on reappearance, and the star mare doesn't appear to face the stiffest of competition. **Limini** was third in this two years ago, while **Stormy Ireland** ran well for a long way behind **Laurina** at **Punchestown**. **Lady Buttons** comes here rather than the **Champion Chase** but might be better over 2m, with **Roksana** preferred at a price to challenge for podium honours. 2-10-9-13

6 th - Close Brothers Novices' Handicap Chase (Listed)

Riders Onthe Storm has been supported in the ante-post betting in the last few weeks, while **A Plus Tard** ran a big race when second in a **Grade 3** at **Punchestown** and could still be underestimated off a mark of 144.

Movewiththetimes has likely been trained with this race in mind this campaign, with **Tower Bridge** much better over fences last time and he won't mind the likely ground conditions. Preference, though, is for **HIGHWAY ONE O ONE**, who has a big weight but was second behind **JLT fancy Kildisart** here and looks very uncomplicated. The seven-year-old remains unexposed over this trip. 1-7-14-4

7 th - National Hunt Challenge Cup Amateur Riders' Novices' Chase (Grade 2)

DISCORAMA, was giving **Ballyward** plenty to think about when falling at the last at **Naas** and should get this marathon trip. In contrast, **Gun Digger** has only tackled around 2m4f so far this season and has to be a stamina doubt. **Ok Corral** is the class act in the race and it is worth noting that **Derek O'Connor** has prior experience on board the nine-year-old having ridden him to victory at **Warwick**. He isn't a surefire stayer over this trip, though, and could be worth taking on. **Ballyward** represents last year's winning trainer/jockey combination and took **Grade 3** honours at **Naas**, while **Impulsive Star** is consistent and should run his usual solid race. . 5-13-1-7

Simon Rowlands - Tuesday, Cheltenham

Simon has three selections plus analysis online for the opening day of the Cheltenham Festival

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Ah, the opening day of the Cheltenham Festival: there are few occasions in the whole of horseracing to rival it! The countdown started 12 months ago, the moment the last horse crossed the line on the last race of the last day of the Festival in 2018.

Numerous dreams have been built, and some have been dashed, along the way. The famous “Cheltenham Roar” that accompanies the start of the action on Tuesday is part joy, part relief and part nervous anxiety about what is about to unfold. Bring it on.

The Festival starts with a bang and manages to get better. The highlight of the first day is, of course, the Unibet-sponsored Champion Hurdle, due off at 3:30 over an extended two miles, for which 10 runners have been declared.

The race has been won by many greats of the sport and in the last two years by Buveur D’Air, who was a good winner in 2017 if not so much in 2018 when beating Melon by just a neck.

The gelding was mightily impressive in beating Samcro in the Fighting Fifth Hurdle at Newcastle on his seasonal reappearance, but then lost to his stable-companion Verdana Blue (who reopposes but is likely to be less suited by the ground here) then had an easy task at Sandown.

At his best, there is no quibbling with Buveur D’Air’s status as a champion, perhaps even as a triple champion, but he may well have to be better than ever to prevail now.

Up against him, he has a mare of rare quality, to whom he has to concede weight, in **APPLE’S JADE**, winner of her four races this season by a total of 73 lengths, including the Irish Champion Hurdle at Leopardstown last time by 16 from smart rivals including the aforementioned Melon in a distant fourth.

You could try to pick holes in Apple’s Jade’s form, if you really wanted to, but I wouldn’t recommend it. The independent measure of the stopwatch says she is very good indeed, not once but a few times over.

That Leopardstown win showed she could turn a two-mile race into a decent test by setting a good gallop and running her rivals into submission. That may be necessary here for Buveur D’Air is not the only one of her rivals with a real turn of foot if this somehow ends up being tactical.

Arguably the only chink in Apple’s Jade’s armour is her tendency to come into season and run the odd dull race. It happened at the Festival 12 months ago: it would be cruel indeed were it to happen again now.

The other main player is another mare in Laurina, who trotted up in a lesser race at the Festival last year and who has a reputation as big as her sizeable frame. This is her first attempt at the big time proper, and overall she has looked as if she will benefit from a bit further than this trip.

Sharjah has impressed in three wins from his last four starts but beat some of the same horses Apple's Jade beat by far less than she did in the process. Espoir D'allen has lost only once in his life and could be ridden to pounce late, especially if the early pace is strong.

But neither of those has the class of Apple's Jade at her best. This race is hers to lose if she is in the kind of form she was when last seen. She should be favourite, even against one as good as Buveur D'Air.

Next year's Champion Hurdler may be in the field for the Sky Bet Supreme Novices' Hurdle, the traditional curtain-raiser at 1:30. Buveur D'Air himself ran in it in 2016 and got beat.

This year's race is typically strong, but I can find little edge at the odds, with Angels Breath narrowly the best on sectional figures but still slightly lacking in experience, and Al Dancer and Fakir d'Oudairies one of several snapping at his heels.

A more inviting betting prospect is the Racing Post Arkle Chase at 2:10, which is not easy to unravel but in which Glen Forsa and Lalor look too short as joint-favourites.

On the clock, **Duc Des Genievres** could be very good indeed: he came out quite a bit better than the smart Monalee on times and sectionals combined when making all easily from decent opposition at Gowran last time.

The worry is that was at two and a half miles and this is at two, while Duc Des Genievres faces significant other front-runners now in Ornuu, Knocknanuss and Us And Them. Jockey Paul Townsend would be advised to take a lead and let his mount's superior stamina come into play late on.

What's for sure is that Duc Des Genievres looked an extremely accomplished jumper that day, and that the rain-softened ground should help him. Ultimately, his odds make the risk worth it.

The 24-runner Ultima Handicap Chase at 2:50 is one of several rock-hard handicaps over the four days, with Mister Whitaker and Coo Star Sivola having more going for them than most, being returning winners from last year's Festival and having age on their side.

The OLBG Mares' Hurdle at 4:10 is only a bit more manageable, with 15 runners having been declared. But the presence of last year's winner, Benie Des Dieux, means the betting is lopsided despite her not having been seen since shortly after. She will have to be pretty close to her smart best to follow up.

I like the look of **ROKSANA** as an each-way alternative. She managed to run the very talented Santini to a length and a half at Aintree last year and shaped well enough when third to Buveur D'Air, no less, last month. This intermediate distance of around two and a half miles could prove ideal.

SIMON'S BEST BETS :

Race 2 ARKLE NOVICES CHASE # 3 DUC DE GENIEVRES

Race 4 UNIBET CHAMPION HURDLE # 8 APPLE'S JADE

Race 5 OLBG MARES' HURDLE # 13 ROKSANA