

NTF Weekend Notes – 2020 Cheltenham Festival Days 3 & 4

Day 3 - Thursday

1.30 JLT Novices' Chase – Grade 1 Novices' Chase – 2m4f – Soft – 12 ran

1st – SAMCRO

Maybe he had just been struggling to breathe all along...fresh off a wind break here he showed he can battle if he needs to and fired in a career best effort in the process. Interestingly Elliott doesn't send many of his string for a wind-op. Since wind-op have been recorded and made available to the public Elliott has only sent ten to get their wind tinkered with, with two of them winning (Samcro one of them). From the very limited figures his first time win-op chasers are 319P01 (8000 for his hurdlers) and although that is nothing to hang your hat on it's definitely interesting how little he reaches for the operation considering how many horses he has in training.

2nd – MELON

Always the bridesmaid never the bride! Well at G1 level anyway and particularly at Cheltenham (Cheltenham form of 23222). Probably worth throwing some E/W pennies at him at the 2021 Festival, whatever race he decides to run in, he general finds a way to get himself into the places.

4th – MISTER FISHER

A decent enough effort but I do just wonder if he prefers smaller fields (47820 in fields of 12+ compared to 112111 in fields of 11 or less).

6th – MIDNIGHT SHADOW

Was dropped 1lb for this effort to OR 149 and I wonder if they might be able to sneak in a handicap off that mark next season, he's almost certainly a mid-150's horse at best and I suspect he could very well be competitive off his current mark in a decent handicap, possibly something like the BetVictor Gold Cup at Cheltenham in November.

7th – SAINT SONNET

Another that will probably be entering next season on a very winnable mark (OR 147) and again he could be interesting in something like the BetVictor Gold Cup. He significantly outran his odds here and he would have finished closer but for stumbling at the last and he should improve a bundle for this effort, which was only his second start on UK soil.

2.50 Ryanair Chase – Grade 1 Chase – 2m5f – Soft – 8 ran

2nd – SAINT CALVADOS

A serious career best effort here but I wouldn't be convinced he'd be up to replicating it anytime soon. The Ryanair Chase can throw in the odd 'surprise' result on the place from (for whatever reason) and I'd still be somewhat surprised should Saint Calvados manage to grab himself a G1 at some point in the future. Handicaps are now out of the question for him (now rated 171) but I could see him landing a Grade 2 somewhere, with races like the Peterborough Chase (Huntingdon) and Silviniaco Conti Chase (Kempton) surely high on the agenda for him next season. Those both are likely to fall under prime conditions for the horse as well... form in races worth less than 40k = 211111 (5/6) || form in races worth 40k+ = 247334 (0/6, 1p).

3rd – A PLUS TARD

Still not convinced he's a full on G1 player. I know he beat Chacun Poir Soi in a G1 at Leopardstown over Xmas but the Mullins horse almost certainly needed the run that day and I just remain to be convinced that he's a solid G1 player when everyone is fully fit and ready to fire.

5th – DUC DES GENIEVRES

Maybe a bit more life in him than what we've seen this season but not sure he fully stayed the trip (5-5 (0/2) over 2m5f trips). I'd still like to see him in a bigger field and that may just be the key to him (113252 in fields of 12+ compared to 5F2843653 in fields of 9 or less).

3.30 Stayers Hurdle – Grade 1 Hurdle – 3m – Soft – 15 ran

I'm inclined to think this 'weird' result was caused by APPLES JADE blasting off in front at a helter-skelter pace and just pulling most of the field way out of their comfort zones...

1st – LISNAGAR OSCAR

I was disappointed that they aborted his chasing career after two starts and there must be a case to be made that those 'below par' runs were more due to the form of the Curtis yard than the horse's chasing ability. I hope they take another stab at the larger obstacles next season, especially since he's only rated 140 in that sphere (compared to his new Hurdle rating of 161!).

4th – EMITOM

A decent enough effort from the 6yo but I wonder if Cheltenham just doesn't quite play to his strengths (6-4 at Cheltenham compared to 2-1-1-1-1-1 at all other tracks). He still rates as an exciting staying hurdle prospect going forward.

PU – CITY ISLAND

He's simply done nothing in 4 starts since winning the Ballymore Hurdle in 2019 to suggest he's likely to back that effort up. Hard to put much faith in after the season he's just had. On the flip side I suppose it is worth noting that this was his first try beyond 2m5f and he was making some headway until tight for room at two out and then fading up the hill, which could, in theory, have been down to his stamina reserves emptying. He's hard to weigh up in all honesty but if he is to become a force again it's probably unlikely to be over 3m+ trips.

4.10 Brown Plate Hcp Chase – Grade 3 Hcp Chase – 2m5f – Soft – 23 ran

2nd – HAPPY DIVA

Clearly a lover of the Cheltenham fences, with form over them now reading...2-1-2-2-B (still going well when brought-down).

3rd – MISTER WHITAKER

This trip is ideal for him and he now has form over 2m4f-2m5f of... 3514111213 (5/10, 3p - all 5 career wins).

5th – BEN DUNDEE

One that could be interesting to look out for at the start of next season, with form of 11531 (3/5 – all 3 career wins) in the Oct-Nov period.

7th – LOUIS' VAC POUCH

Dropped 2lbs to OR 142 for this run and although he's far from an easy horse to get right he's possibly worth considering under the following... race worth 13k or less | DSLR 120 or less | 12 or less runners | NOT Very Undulating or Galloping tracks = 11111146 (6/8 – all 6 career wins).

13th – VISION DES FLOS

I do think handicaps will be his best opportunity over fences although not one quite as competitive as this and probably not at Cheltenham (track form of 4-6-5-0-0). He was dropped 2lbs to OR 145 for this run and he could be interesting if they find a Listed level or below handicap for him (form at Listed level of 1212623U12).

16th – HIGHWAY ONE O ONE

Dropped 3lbs to OR 140 for this effort and that puts him on a mark he should be competitive from. I'd have his Prime Conditions along the lines of... Class 2 level & below | field of 13 or less = 322121112211 (6/12, 5p – all 6 career wins).

5.30 Kim Muir Hcp Chase – Class 2 Hcp Chase – 3m2.5f – Soft – 23 ran

7th – CHAMPAGNE PLATINUM

Hard to know exactly what connections are up to with this one (he is a JP McManus horse after all!) but he's already had a strange career trajectory after only 7 starts and he's surely better than a 136-rated animal. This was his first try over 3m+ (first try beyond 2m4.5f in fact) and he quite possibly simply didn't stay (he did move well enough into it before flattening out up the hill) so a drop back to 2m4f/5f or even 3m on an easier track could see him take advantage of his mark next season.

8th – CLOTH CAP

Chunked down a very handy 4lbs for this effort to OR 133 and that is definitely a mark he should be able to win off. Soft ground doesn't play to his strengths (form of 64328) and he's well worth looking out for under the following...2m5f+ | Good to Soft or quicker | Handicaps...where he is 311F1 (3/5, 1p - all 3 career wins), the handicapper has been VERY generous in dropping him 4lbs for this run.

11th – LE BREUIL

Nothing has really went for him this season but that could play in his favour long-term. He's dropped from a starting chase mark of 150 down to 143 and that puts him on a very winnable mark for next season, whilst all the time picking up valuable chase experience for what should ultimately prove to be his long-term goal; the Aintree Grand National. A few more chase starts to build experience next season (without quite winning, ideally) and he could be in prime shape come the 2021 National. He did jump round the fences soundly in this season Becher Chase, at a time when the yard were very much struggling.

Day 4 - Friday

2.10 County Hurdle – Grade 3 Handicap Hurdle – 2m1f – Soft – 24 ran

5th – ELUSIVE BELLE

A sound enough effort from a horse who still looks well enough handicapped off OR 137 (1lb raise for this). She maybe doesn't full appreciate climbing the Cheltenham hill (form of 5-0 at track compared to 2-3-1-2-1-2-3-5 away from Cheltenham) although it may just be she doesn't want to be going over quite as long a trip as this (12212 over 2m or shorter compared to 33505 over 2m0.5f+). A

tweak in conditions for the mare should see her winning off her current mark and she could well have a half-decent pot in her somewhere.

7th – THATSY

Ridden very quietly in this and they might just have other plans for the 6yo.

11th – SCARAMANGA

Looks to appreciate better ground (780 on Soft-Heavy compared to 31122 on Good to Soft or quicker) and possibly best on RH tracks (321217 on RH tracks – 80 on LH tracks) and there will be plenty better opportunities for this one elsewhere.

16th – CHRISTOPHER WOOD

No real evidence he's up to Class 1 level (34009 compared to 111 at C3 level & below) and I suspect his class ceiling may be Class 2 level or a significantly weaker G3/Listed handicap than this.

2.50 Albert Bartlett Hurdle – Grade 1 Albert Bartlett Novices' Hurdle – 3m – Soft – 19 ran

2nd – LATEST EXHIBITION

Easy to see this one making a splash over fences next season, being that he's by Oscar out of a Supreme Leader mare although it's well worth noting that a few of those types (Oscar X Supreme Leader) have stayed hurdling with plenty of success (Black Jack Ketchum, At Fishers Cross, etc...) and his options are probably open going forward. Whatever route they choose to go you'd be disappointed should he not keep progressing.

3rd – FURY ROAD

I get the feeling this lad wants a real slog and although this was a still a real test, I just suspect he'd prefer the mud to be really flying to show his best. I expect they will go chasing with him next season and he should be a force in the novice chase division, particularly on Irish soil.

4th – THYME HILL

Squeezed out a couple of times in the final couple furlongs and that certainly impacted massively on his winning chances but it must be said he did look a smaller and more lighter framed type than those around him and he maybe just ended up 'bullied' out of things. Wouldn't be convinced at this stage that he's quite got the scope to make into a chaser.

8th – HOUSE ISLAND

Outran his huge odds here but realistically he's probably not quite a graded player (9824 at Graded level – 11222 at Listed level & below). He might manage to sneak a Graded handicap off his new mark of OR 140 but it's unlikely (over hurdles anyway) that he any better than a handicapper.

3.30 Gold Cup – Grade 1 Chase – 3m2.5f – Good to Soft – 12 ran

1st – AL BOUM PHOTO

Fair play to the 8yo, he's better than I gave him credit for. The five that finished behind him were all new challengers and the other horses he's already beaten he beat them all very comfortably again here (more comfortably than he had last year) and he's simply a very classy horse. We are never going to see him run much so for next seasons Gold Cup it's probably a case of figuring out if any of the novices from this year are good enough to stop him capturing the hat-trick, as on this evidence he has the beating of the current 3m+ crop.

2nd – SANTINI

Not the clearest of passages when he most needed it but even then I'm not sure he would have beaten Al Boum Photo, the Mullins horse would probably have just kept pulling out more. This was an excellent effort all the same although he's still to land a G1 chase, which is a slight concern given he's going into his third season chasing next term. Hopefully they'll manage a bit more of an aggressive campaign with the horse in 2020/21.

3rd – LOSTINTRANSLATION

Good to see him bounce back after his King George blow-out and the wind-up clearly had the desired impact. I do begin to wonder if he's at his absolute peak in much smaller fields (6 or less runners = P11121326 || 9 or more runners = 3227122) although that's maybe nit-picking for the sake of it.

4th – MONALEE

Always liked this horse but he's just going to be one of those that continues to find at least one too good for him at the very top level...1/11 at G1 level compared to 4/9 at G2 level & below.

5th – DELTA WORK

Mistakes and scrappy jumping cost him here and I just wonder if the horse takes a wee bit of getting to know and Mark Walsh in the saddle for the first time in such a hot race just didn't have the time to gel with the horse. The fact he was still in with some sort of shout at the last tells us the sort of engine he holds within him, but he won't be winning any future Gold Cup's with similar jumping displays.

7th – KEMBOY

Just don't think he appreciates the track and there is no hiding the fact that his most disappointing runs have come at Cheltenham (5-4-U-7, never finishing closer than 9L).

8th – CLAN DES OBEAUX

Probably doesn't appreciate being crowded (6-8-5 in fields of 12+) and easier tracks are much more his thing (6/12 on Flat-Slightly Undulating tracks compared to 1/9 on Undulating-Very Undulating tracks).

9th – BRISTOL DE MAI

Now 0/6 at Cheltenham and would need others to significantly under-perform before he's winning at the track. He's also now 0/11 in March-Oct (9/19 in other months) and these were just not his conditions.

10th – CHRIS'S DREAM

Now 0/4, 0p at G1 level and he simply isn't up to taking on the very best.

11th – ELEGANT ESCAPE

0/9 at G1 level and he simply makes up the numbers in these races.

FELL – PRESENTING PERCY

He is just not good enough to be winning Grade 1's (1/8 at G1 level compared to 9/15 at G2 level & below).

4.50 Grand Annual – Grade 3 Handicap Chase – 2m0.5f – Good to Soft – 18 ran

1st – CHOSEN MATE

They way he cut through the field with absolute ease suggests he was a long way ahead of the handicapper here and is probably a graded runner (non-handicaps) going forward.

5th – THEINVAL

These were probably Prime Conditions for the 10yo – March-May | OR 144 or less | NOT seasonal debut = 5142423111 (4/10, 4p) – but he couldn't match the battalion of well-handicapped Irish horses ahead of him. May have to wait until another year before he meets with prime conditions again, albeit he has won out with those conditions as well.

11th – TWO TAFFS

Never really had him as a Graded player, not in a race this competitive, and his Prime Conditions seem to be... Listed level & below | 2m1f – 2m5.5f = 221322111 (4/9, 5p – all 4 career wins) – although he may be worth considering in a 'weak' G3 handicap.