

Sunday February 1st Leopardstown

Not the weekend that was planned as we knew that the Saturday card was off before we landed at Dublin. Better news for Sunday as the course passed the early morning inspection. The first of the Grade 1's was the two miles five and a half novice chase. The shortest favourite for Cheltenham Final Demand was long odds on in a four runner field. He never really looked happy and as he made mistakes down the back straight stable mate Kaid d'Authie soon had his measure. Looking back to the results of his races last spring they don't read as well now as they did then so maybe he was over hyped. His win at Limerick was just alright. We will see. I liked Kaid d'Authie as an individual as soon as I saw him before he won his maiden hurdle at Christmas 2024. He is a big unit who looks like he will go any distance, but it is not surprising he has needed the cheek pieces to liven up his attitude. I think he needs it on the slow side and am not sure he is a Cheltenham horse. Runner up Western Fold has already won a Galway Plate and has a placing in an open Grade 1. He could well find a two mile four Grade 1 novice coming his way on decent ground in the spring. A very competitive grade 1 two mile novice hurdle and the first three home all look to have a future. Paddock pick was King Rasko Grey who for some reason drifted in the betting. He and Ballyfad (a typical big Gigginstown chasing sort) set only a fair pace and seemed to have it between them turning in. Not for the first (or second) time Talk The Talk surprised me by managing to show some pace in sticky ground and get up more or less on the line. The second and third can go up in trip and their targets for Cheltenham will no doubt be up in the air until nearer the time. The winner will no doubt try and come with a late run in the Supreme. Down the field I liked Starting Fifteen who had come on looks wise since he should have beaten Talk The Talk at Limerick. He pulled too hard here but has been given a handicap mark of 135 afterwards which could be interesting.

The top class Majborough stood up in the Dublin Chase and he looked like he meant business right from the first fence. The cheek pieces seemed to concentrate his mind and he soon had all of his rivals in trouble. Marine Nationale was being chased along by the third fence but never quit the chase on ground he wouldn't have liked. If this Majborough turns up at Cheltenham he will be difficult to beat but the Champion Chase is never that straightforward. It would be a surprise if Energumene was asked to carry on as the speed has gone.

After the International Hurdle I took a long look at the anti-post market for the Champion Hurdle. My thoughts were Lossiemouth to the mare's hurdle. The New Lion not good enough, Constitution Hill a likely non runner. That left Golden Ace and Brighterdaysahead. The 9.8 on Betfair for the latter was too big so it was pleasing to see her run out a decisive winner of the Irish Champion. She looked in super nick beforehand which couldn't be said about Lossiemouth who looked dull and lethargic in the parade ring.

The mares Bumper produced Bambino Fever last season but nothing like her in the race this year. The ground was well churned up and getting really sticky for a slow motion finish. The jockey of Royal Hillsborough dropped his hands before the winning line and lost the race and two horses were pulled up in the last furlong. Brosna Shine and Araminta were the ones from the parade ring. I didn't think there was much to take from the handicaps. In the two five chase the leaders mostly stopped two out apart from Kim Roque who held on to the last before stopping and the closers when on to contest the win. In the two mile handicap hurdle it was the opposite with the two leaders ending up being placed as only Bowensonfire and the supposed handicap rick I Started a Joke got to them.

Monday February 2nd Leopardstown

Having failed to find any way to stay (at less than a very extortionate price) for the rearranged Saturday card it was a seat in front of the TV.

I can't believe Doctor Steinberg was near the top of Willie Mullins pecking order for his novice hurdlers this season. He looked on the slow side in bumpers and was only third favourite of the three that mattered in his maiden hurdle at Galway. He won that comfortably and has not looked

back. The Nathaniel Lacy was going to be a good test on ground that was drying and hard work to get through. He took a keen hold, was always prominent and went away in the straight for an easy win. It looks like three miles will be no trouble and the Albert Bartlett looks the obvious target. Behind him Riskaway travelled well but didn't get home and could be the sort for a handicap come the spring.

It was not a surprise to anyone that Narcisco Has reversed with Mange Tout in the Juvenile Grade 1. He made all and was never in danger. Not surprisingly he is favourite for the Triumph Hurdle but the 6/4 looks very skinny to me and it is not that clear cut. I watched runner up Selma De Vary's win at Auteuil when doing the form for this race and she sliced through the maiden field from last with ease to win hard held. It was heavy even by Auteuil standards. My notes don't mention her from when I saw her in a Grade 3 last May and it is impossible to get any idea of her size from the TV.

The Irish Arkle was a cracking race even if only the two were ever in it. I had thought the betting was too lopsided with Romeo Coolio at 4/9 and Kargese really put it up to him jumping the better. Romeo Coolio really wants two and a half miles, but the owners want him to run at Cheltenham so he will be in the Arkle. Kargese will be there and we know she likes Cheltenham.

A super field for the Gold Cup much stronger than the Savills at Christmas with the National horses well beaten here while Affordale Fury pulled up lame. After looking a short runner at the trip last season Fact To File had no problems this time. It was evidently the owner's decision not to have him in the Gold Cup at Cheltenham so we will see what happens on that front. He has Jonbon for the Ryanair and there is no way Inothewayurthinkin will be involved. Gaelic Warrior pulled for most of the trip and it did him no favours here while Galopin Des Champs travelled well for along way but was found wanting from two out. Somehow Jango Baie is favourite for the Gold Cup of those that are in it which is surely wrong.

Of those behind Champ Keily travelled well for a long way but didn't get home while Monty's Star was far more prominent than usual but hadn't the class to be involved in the finish.

Inothewayurthinkin was niggled from early on. He isn't running like a horse that was bottomed by his Gold Cup win but more like there is a physical problem. Maybe something will come out in the wash.

Not surprisingly the bumper did not cause a ripple in the Champion Bumper market.

Notes compiled by Gordon Armistead.