

GORDON ARMISTEAD'S RACING DIARY – JAN 2026

Thursday December 11th Warwick

The big race of the day the listed Lady Godiva just had the three runners. Diva Luna at 1/4 ran out an easy winner with just the one worrying jump at the fifth. She will evidently be taking on the geldings next time up.

The Pauling stable got the double up with Old Clayesmorian in the bumper who was very green early in the race but ran in well in the straight. He and runner up Cheap Sandwiches were the two from the parade ring with the winner being more a chasing prospect for the future. He was a big price today so probably surprised connections.

Friday December 12th Cheltenham

Eight of the ten runners in the two-mile one novice hurdle were last time out winners so the way Old Park Star won was very impressive. He was a bigger model than most of the field and just powered clear from the home turn. He looked like he will certainly stay another half mile. The other one from the paddock Our Boy Stan barely jumped a hurdle while the mare Kingston Queen will do better back against her own sex and up again in trip.

Only three in the two four novice chase and Sixmilebridge gave the penalty and a good beating to his rivals. Runner up Califet En Vol has been talked up but has now disappointed twice running.

The proven star on show today was L'Homme Presse under top weight in the staying handicap chase. He looked fit but at halfway the prospects looked poor as he dropped out of the pack. Eventually he ran on for second which in the context of the stables form was a decent effort. He is coming up eleven and maybe cheek pieces will be needed soon. The winner Blaze the Way had been well plotted for this. A good run behind graded novices at three miles before three runs at around two miles. He was seven pounds above his Irish mark and was put up thirteen over there after this.

Saturday December 13th Cheltenham

Minella Study ran out a fine winner of the three-year-old hurdle after always being prominent. Let's hope he can be competitive later in the season. The runner up Winston Junior pulled hard for the whole race and had to be switched approaching the last jump. If he learns to settle there will be better to come.

You are wrong more often than you are right at this game and the novice handicap chase at Carlisle in early November I thought would work out has not. All the first six have now run and been beaten with Carlisle winner The Jukebox Kid completing the set in the three-mile novice handicap here. He appeared not to get home and hopefully one or two of the six will do better as the season goes on. The winner here Zertakt looks one for marathon trips.

The big part of Glengouly's season was in getting his rating down from the 139 he was on his first run for Faye Bramley in May to 119 when he showed his first form for the season. It wasn't the greatest renewal of the December Gold Cup and he will be back in the 130's after this. Vincenzo will go up again for getting beaten. Jagwar again made one bad and some other fiddly mistakes. Jonjo Jr again got the horse in a messy position two out and the horse couldn't get him out of it off a rating of 148 as he did off ratings in the 120's and 130's last season.

The three-mile graded novice hurdle was run at a crawl. It was a strange ride on the leader Conman John a proven stayer and he was out speeded from the last. Winner Carlenrig and runner up They Call Me Hugo together with the beaten favourite will head to the Albert Bartlett. Sixth home here was the Skelton second string Red Cadillac a super looking beast who has won his point and bumper but still looked a bit clueless here. We will see how he progresses.

Saturday December 20th Haydock

Finally a winner from the Carlisle novice handicap chase. Grand Geste finished second that day and was only running over fences for the third time here. He looked the likeliest winner when I did the race the night before but the 9/2 on offer looked short enough. The 11/4 in the morning and the 15/8 on the off made no appeal but all prices would have been good as he hacked up. He was already up nine from the Carlisle run and will surely be up ten for this.

The Peter Marsh was mentioned as a target but if Royal Pagaille runs he would be a few pounds wrong there.

With Bill Joyce bursting the two four novice chase went easily to Lario. He will be in handicaps next and while this was not a great event he looked like he will be better over fences.

Friday December 26th Aintree

After last year's fog the total opposite with sunshine but the result was the same and a meeting ruined by the weather.

Any thought of transferring the King George here must have died a death with all the jumps in the straight missed out for four of the six races.

Whether Mydaddypaddy scared away some of the horses that were supposedly being aimed at the Formby I don't know but the field was certainly disappointing. Mydaddypaddy didn't live up to his status as Supreme Hurdle favourite. On his first time off the bridle he found nothing when asked to go passed Idaho Sun as they went around the last hurdle. He evidently goes straight to the festival and you couldn't support him on this showing. Idaho Sun sixth in the Champion Bumper last season will be a contender come March.

Saturday December 27th Leopardstown

Dual Grade 1 and County Hurdle winner Kargese has always looked like she would make a chaser and stepped up on her first effort making all and jumping well to take the two mile one beginners. She Had seen of St James's Gate when he fell and eventual runner up Lovely Hurling could never go the pace. It will be interesting to see where she goes. Lovely Hurling will need a trip.

Solness took his third Grade 1 two-mile chase at the course making most again and seeing off Marine Nationale. The runner up nearly got rid of Sean Flanagan at the second fence losing several lengths so was definitely unlucky. Both will be back for the DRF. Majborough started favourite and jumped much better but he looked one paced from two out and looks like he needs to step up in trip.

Having been surprised by Talk The Talk at Fairyhouse he again surprised me in the two-mile Grade 1 novice hurdle. Skylight Hustle looked to be the winner when he went on before the last but Sam Ewing pulled Talk the Talk out and they jumped the last more or less together. Talk the Talk seemingly having the momentum looked sure to win however a stride after the jump he came down and Skylight Hustle sped away to take the race easily. I do not think there would have been much to choose between them at the line and both should be in the mix come the spring festivals. Back in fourth Le Divin Enfant who made most of the running should also have a future, maybe over a bit further and eventually over fences.

In the two-mile handicap hurdle Jack Kennedy showed the difference a top jockey can make. Bowensonfire has a string of placed efforts and is not the most cooperative of individuals. With his head to one side approaching the last Kennedy was not taking no for an answer as he made up his partner's mind.

The three-year-old maiden hurdle had four runners under 10/1 and three of them completely blew out. The two who fought out the finish Hardy Stuff and Ole Ole had both already had two goes so the form is probably just ordinary. The one of the favourites to run well was the e Roger Varian trained Munsif who looked awful in the parade ring but ran with promise in third.

The two-and-a-half-mile bumper has been won by some top-class performers but it was run at a crawl and Generous Risk held up in last for most of the journey was given plenty to do from turning in. He could only manage third place but I fancy he will turn out the best of the bunch going forward.

Sunday December 28th Leopardstown

Some decent sorts in the four-year-old two-and-a-half-mile maiden hurdle. Lazare De Star was always prominent and went away from the pack going to the last for an impressive win. He looks one to step up to graded company soon. Runner up Le Moulin Rouge kept on well and was clear of the third and can win a maiden. Royal Gladiator was outpaced from halfway but kept on for fourth and will need three miles. Jet to Monte Carlo led until just before the

last before fading. He looked a good sort in the parade ring but looked like he would improve for time so might have a future,

Only one mattered in the two mile five beginners chase from some way out. Cocktail Divin made all jumping very well winning by twenty lengths. They weren't the worse bunch behind and he will be taking on the best novices next time out.

The Grade 1 staying hurdle turned into a procession as Teahupoo strolled clear from the last from his owner mate Bob Olinger. The pair will be nine and eleven come March so you would expect there to be some younger competition but they will have to be good. Ballyburn was very disappointing and was beaten just after two out. He looked not to stay and where he goes after this is a big question. Also disappointing was The Yellow Clay who has now had three poor efforts in a row.

Just after the second last fence in the Savills Chase the noise of the crowd started to grow louder as Galopin Des Champs went to the front and it looked like he would retain his unbeaten record here. It was not to be as the lack of his usual warm up race told after the last. Winner Affordale Fury who made just about all fought back and ran out a good winner. He was 33/1 the night before so he was not an unexpected winner for some. He was a good staying novice hurdler but after an injury following just two novice chases it took him a few runs to get back to that standard and now greatly surpass it. I had him down as a likely National contender but he will be heading to Cheltenham now after a probable rematch with most of these at the DRF. Behind him the Grand National pair I Am Maximus and Grangeclare Native ran about to their official ratings as did Lecky Watson. Fastorslow ran below his best while Monty's Star again ran like he needs an extreme trip and he will be on my short list for Aintree. Gold Cup winner Inothewayurthinkin was just poor. He didn't look anything like fit in the parade ring so the run was no surprise.

One amazing fact about the runners in this race is that four of them ran in the same Grade 1 novice hurdle at Naas in January 2023 when Champ Kiely won and Affordale Fury was thirty lengths back in sixth.

The Pertemps qualifier was a surprisingly weak affair and none of the qualifiers would normally get into the final. Winner Duke Silver might get there with another win and provided jockey Hugh Horgan with his first win over jumps on only his second ride.

Bumper winner Bentraghhill went to the top of the Champion Bumper market after a comfortable win. He wasn't the greatest on looks but had far too much speed for his rivals who were probably not a great bunch.

Monday December 29th Leopardstown

Two maiden hurdles on the card. The first an Academy for three-year-olds over two miles two only concerned three runners. The well-bred Kilbarry Lizzy took them along from favourite Hygge and she had just seen him off when Lyches Knock came from well of the pace to nab her on the line. This looked a minimum trip for the winner while the other two especially Hygge will be better back at two miles.

Frankie John took the two-mile four older horses maiden on his third hurdle start. He had been placed in the first two without looking like winning either so this was probably just an ordinary race. Runner up Jalon D'oudairies was second in the 2024 Champion Bumper but missed last season. He should find a maiden.

Walk in June won when I was at Limerick and followed up here in the two-mile four novice handicap. The extra trip suited him well and he could go in again before going chasing next season. This race is becoming a favourite of mine with a second big priced winner on the bounce,

Lossiemouth made it thirteen wins from sixteen starts seeing off Brighterdaysahead in the December Hurdle. The race changed at halfway when Anzadam took charge of Patrick Mullins and stormed into a lead of several lengths. He wasn't going to last home but gave Lossiemouth a lead until going to the last. We will have the debate about whether she should go for the Champion Hurdle again this year and we can only wait and see how that plays out. The pair will be back for the DRF.

The field for the bumper looked a decent lot. The first two in the betting Bud Fox and Gomez Adams were well beaten as Keep Him Company needed all of the trip to get home in front.

He was the same at Fairyhouse and is going to stay well when he goes jumping. Bud Fox was particularly disappointing. The Cromwell yard had appeared to come out of the major dip in form during November but it seems they are still not quite right.

It was a great meeting for the Elliot yard. In previous years it has all gone wrong for the stable in the spring as the Mullins juggernaut won more or less everything. It will be interesting to see if he can keep up the momentum in the new year.

Tuesday December 30th Haydock

No one could begrudge the Parkinson/ Smith stable winning with Paddy O'Mahler in the staying novice handicap chase. The stable lost the promising hurdler Brixson in the first and then that horse's half-brother Tara Hills gave away the second race with a dreadful mistake at the last.

The junior national hunt novice hurdle looked an ordinary enough affair. Diamond Jim well beaten in a listed hurdle easily took the race but he will have to go into handicaps in the future.

Thursday January 1st Cheltenham

Probably not a great two-mile four maiden hurdle to start things off. Winner Step Ahead will stay further and will make a chaser.

I liked Regent Stroll when he won the big sales bumper at Newbury but he has been hard work for the Nicholls yard since then. The run in the grade 1 at Aintree showed the ability was there but his first chase was a mess as he reverted to pulling far too hard. He was settled here but the end result was disappointing as Miami Magic found plenty from the last to win the two-mile four novice chase.

Kabral Du Mathan again showed a good turn of foot to take the Relkeel Hurdle. The way he races doesn't yell out stayers hurdle and I would be surprised if he goes that way.

Glengouly completely flopped trying to follow up from December not getting the same easy lead. The field wasn't great and Matata's easy win shouldn't be taken seriously.

Saturday January 17th Haydock

Old Park Star who was so impressive at Cheltenham made short work of the field in the Rossington Main. Making all he had it won some way out and went into favouritism for the Supreme Novice Hurdle. That could well change after the DRF but he is certainly a serious contender. Having been transferred from the Nicholls yard he is not a typical Nicky Henderson horse having more size about him and he will make a chaser in time. His chief market rival Hurricane Pat didn't impress in the parade ring. Smaller than the favourite he looked a bit weak. Having chased the winner he was well outpaced from two hurdles out. Third placed Soldier Reeves was never in the race being held up in last place early on. It will be interesting which handicap Dan Skelton picks out for him in the spring.

The Peter Marsh turned into a sprint and the two doubtful stayers had too much speed at the end. Imperial Saint had turned in two moderate efforts so far this season but plenty seemed to know better was expected today. The National was talked about as a target but that seems fantasy. Richmond Lake has tried the trip plenty of times without looking like he stays it and Brian Hughes gave him a super ride but he came up short again. The handicapper seems to have finally caught up with Konfusion and he won't be taking up his Gold Cup entry. Neither will Myretown who's jumping again let him down. Johnnywho had been talked up as a National contender but jumped poorly and is probably not one to trust too much. This was surely a swansong for Royal Pagaille. He has been a super performer.

Friday January 23rd Warwick

The Junior National Hunt Hurdles have been better in the UK this season. We might have seen the best horse to run in one as Feel Gut made all here. In the Donnelly colours for Nicky Henderson, he made all and apart from launching himself at the second last he jumped well if a bit big. The flat form is nothing special and we will see how he progresses. Third home Mecene tried to go with him and probably paid for that as he faded close home. He can certainly win one of these,

The two-mile three mare's novice hurdle had a big field and while plenty were no hoppers there were a few who were better than average. They were led home by the two who were carrying penalties. Jackie Hobbs who had been a bit disappointing in a listed race at

Haydock returned to winning form but may have been lucky. Betty's Daisy tried to make all but a mistake at the third last lost her the lead. Having gone on again she ran down the last and lost her momentum. Both will we worth a try back up at listed level and Betty's Daisy has the size to make a chaser in time.

Excelero looked good when he won here in the autumn and he again tried to make all in the two-mile novice handicap chase. As soon as they got to him he turned it in tamely as he had at Ascot and seemingly he isn't one to battle.

Golden Son came from France with a reputation but soon began to disappoint. He got his first win in two years in the hunter chase (aided when favourite Jet Plane came down) and Aintree could be an option.

Saturday January 24th Cheltenham

Trials day was to last a bit longer than expected and descended into a bit of a farce but more of that later,

It started with the two four novice handicap chase that has a good record of producing festival winners. It probably wasn't as classy as in previous years but winner Jordans Cross is probably unlucky not to be four from four this season. He will have risen the best part of twenty pounds in the ratings after this and will no doubt go for the novice handicap chase at the festival. He might be outpaced there as he looks like three miles will be his trip in the future. Runner up Quebecois was better here and might have won if Freddie Gingell hadn't got in a tangle changing his whip on the run in. The jockey could do with a good win as he hasn't really got going this season. Third home Scorsese took them along and this was a step forward for him as well. Califet En Vol was again short in the betting but again checked out tamely. He must show plenty at home but doesn't on the track.

It looked a good field for the Triumph Hurdle Trial to tie up some form lines with a second division Irish challenger thrown in. Maestro Conti and Minella Yoga stood out in the parade ring with both looking more like future chasers than four-year-old hurdlers. One Horse Town took them along at just a fair pace and stuck on well with only Maestro Conti getting to him. The winner pulled quite hard throughout but had plenty left from the last and showed a turn of speed. Minella Yoga stayed on well for third. The Irish runner Hardy Stuff was surprisingly short in the betting with the form of his Leopardstown win already having been let down. He also pulled hard but was well beaten in the end.

Minella Study's win here in December is looking good and we will see how he goes at Musselburgh on their trials weekend.

Jagwar was short enough for the two-mile four handicap chase and while I wanted to take him on it was hard to find one to do it with. Jagwar was ridden closer to the pace than usual and looked the winner two out but he couldn't (or wouldn't?) go passed Donnacha. The winner did me some good turns over hurdles but he is not a big one and has tended to make mistakes over fences. Here he jumped impeccably just behind the leader and would not be denied. Jagwar had been touted as a Ryanair outsider but that won't be his target. He will go up another few pounds for this and maybe go up in trip.

The one betting race of the day proved to be the cross country. I backed Favori De Champdou here in December when he fell at the hidden water jump and then watched him win at Leopardstown at 66/1. None of the others here would win a £100K handicap chase and even under top weight 14/1 was far too big. What the handicapper will make of it for March we will see as he won with many pounds in hand.

Just the four in the Cotswold Chase all with questions to answer. Favourite Grey Dawning went along in third and I never got the impression he was going to be involved in the finish. A mistake two out finished any chance he had, and the Gold Cup trip will still be a question come March. With Venetia's horses just about all running poorly it was hard to know what we would get from L'Homme Presse. In the end he probably ran right up to his best making most and battling well giving the winner six pounds. Spillane's Tower after two underwhelming hurdle runs looked very fit for this. He loomed up to L'Homme Presse two out and maybe won easier than the three parts of a length. He needs it at least soft so the ground will dictate where he goes but he showed he got this trip well.

At the time of writing there seems every hope that Sir Gino will at least make a recovery from his injury even if he doesn't race again. I hadn't seen him since Aintree 2024, and he has grown into a big powerful animal who looks far more a chaser than hurdler. The main challenger here The New Lion who I hadn't seen before is much more a hurdle type. The race told us nothing about his Champion Hurdle chances as it developed into a two-furlong sprint. I am not sure there is anything in that race that will make it a test of stamina and I would be taking him on.

Impose Toi was the new name on the graded stayers hurdle front in the UK, but he had no answer to Ma Shantou from the last. He was giving the winner six pounds but stopped very abruptly after the last. Ma Shantou was rated only 144 before this and what happened at Haydock in November is one of the mysteries of the season. He still has plenty to find to take on Teahupoo.

Just how lucky the runners in these two hurdle races were we will never know after a hole was found in the centre of the course in the straight. The announcement that was made of a delay was totally inadequate. The horses kept walking around the parade ring with their rugs back on, then the jockeys disappeared back into the weighing room and everyone assumed that the last race was off. We made our way towards the exit but the horses were still in the parade ring so we hung around another ten minutes before another announcement that again told us nothing. As it began to go dark another announcement just said the delay would go on and we called it a day. It isn't hard. Just tell people what the problem was and what is happening, but racecourse managements never seem to learn. On looks there were some really good sorts. Fortune Timmy, Taurus Bay, and The Blue Room all caught the eye. Act of Innocence who ended up not running looked weak behind the saddle. Watching the replay when I got home there is no way to say how dark it was when the race was run. The cameras always make it look much better than it is. The photo finish print however showed that it was totally ridiculous to run the race and it should have been off the minute the hole was discovered. Just the six weeks to get things right for the festival.