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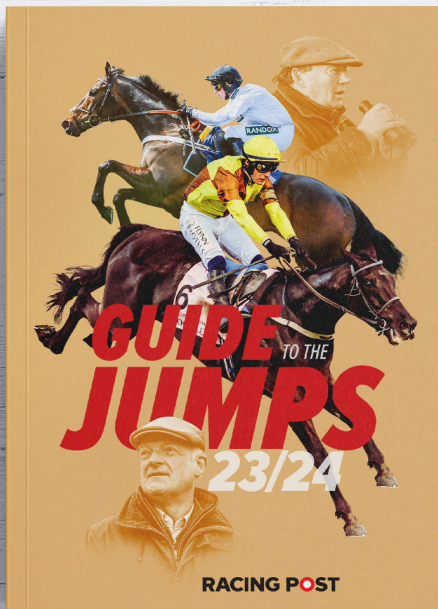
RACING POST



100 WINNERS



JUMPERS TO FOLLOW – 2023-24



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100 WINNERS

JUMPERS TO FOLLOW – 2023–24

Sixty-second year of publication

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100 WINNERS

JUMPERS TO FOLLOW 2023-24

(ages as at 2023)

AFADIL (FR) 4 b g

French Flat winner Afadil looks just the sort to win a good handicap over hurdles in the coming season. Following two comfortable wins on his first two starts for Paul Nicholls at Taunton (soft) in January and at Musselburgh (good) a month later, he progressed steadily in handicaps, starting with a creditable eighth behind Jazzy Matty in the Boodles Juvenile Handicap Hurdle (formerly known as the Fred Winter) and culminating in a return to winning ways at Ayr's Scottish National meeting. The Swinton was mooted as a possible option following that race but he sidestepped the race and connections can look forward to a profitable 2023-24 season with a horse who has a stack of physical scope. He's yet to race over further than 2m but there's a good chance he'll improve for longer trips and, given his age and the fact that he starts the season on a workable mark of 128, it'll be no surprise to see a decent prize or two head his way.

PAUL NICHOLLS

AN EPIC SONG (FR) 6 b g

When An Epic Song won over 2m3f at Punchestown in December 2021 – in the process landing a bit of a gamble – he looked just the sort who could step up to the mark at one of the handicaps at the big spring festivals in 2022. However, he wasn't seen out again until December of that year, when he started at a big price and looked in need of the run in a Fairyhouse handicap back at 2m. It was a similar story over the same trip at the Dublin Festival in February but he stepped up appreciably on both those efforts when a fine second in first-time tongue-tie/cheekpieces in the ultra-competitive Coral Cup at Cheltenham, only a head behind Langer Dan. On the back of that run he started 11/2 second favourite for a similar handicap at Punchestown but he was nearest at the finish in ninth over the shorter trip having been hampered by a faller early doors. He should stay 3m and, whether he keeps to hurdles or goes chasing this season, he looks one to follow. MARTIN BRASSIL

APPLE AWAY (IRE) 6 b m

Ahoy Senor won the Grade 1 Sefton Novices' Hurdle for Lucinda Russell in 2021, a race where he announced his arrival on the big stage by turning over Bravemansgame on what was just his second start over hurdles. Russell repeated the trick in 2023 with Apple Away, another winning Irish pointer, and this mare is another fine prospect for Grade 1 chasing honours this term. She ran seven times in 2022-23, winning four, but she improved for stepping up to around 3m in the second half of the season, winning her last three starts, including that Aintree Grade 1 in April. Russell said afterwards: "I'm so delighted with Apple Away. She's relentless, she just keeps on galloping. Stephen (Mulqueen) did a very good job in kicking early and getting that lead. I wasn't worried at the last this time, she's a total three-miler. When we came into the race we knew that she had a few pounds to find

but the mares' allowance is ideal and she's just got such tenacity and determination which is ideal for this sort of race." That tenacity and determination will also stand her in good stead as she embarks on her chasing career and she's one to keep onside. LUCINDA RUSSELL

ASCENDING (IRE) 4 b g

Although Ascending only won once on the Flat for Clive Cox (over 1m at Goodwood on soft), he was a consistent sort who achieved a peak BHA rating of 82. He also showed plenty of ability in his new career over hurdles for his new team and, although he didn't win in three hurdle starts, he showed more than enough to suggest he can rectify matters in the coming months. Having cost his new owners 100,000gns, he jumped adequately on his hurdling debut at Leopardstown in December, pushing Tekao, the Willie Mullins-trained market leader, all the way to the line, the pair almost four lengths clear of the remainder. After that encouraging display he was stepped up markedly in class but he shaped with promise in Grade 1 events at the Dublin Festival in February and when finishing fifth to Lossiemouth in the Triumph Hurdle at Cheltenham the following month. Whether he tries to win a maiden / novice or goes straight into handicaps remains to be seen, but he's open to a fair bit of improvement given his tender age and his opening handicap mark of 133 looks one that his excellent trainer should be able to exploit. HENRY DE BROMHEAD

AURORA VEGA (IRE) 5 b m

A daughter of Quevega and a sister to quadruple Grade 1-winner Facile Vega (who is also by Walk In The Park), Aurora Vega made her racecourse debut in an ordinary 2m2f Sligo bumper in June where she easily justified odds of 1/5 by running out a comfortable 12-length winner, having taken it up 2f out. Her rider Patrick Mullins said afterwards: "Aurora Vega is like her mother,

quite small and short but she's a strong barrel of a mare. She's not the flashiest at home but I think she's probably better than her work and I think there's more there in the tank, she's one that will keep giving." She won again in late August, beating a field of inferior rivals as she liked at Killarney at odds of 1/7 and, as at Sligo, she never had to come out of a canter. It's early days with her of course, but she could prove to be an ideal type for the Mares' Novices' Hurdle on the Thursday of the Cheltenham Festival, for which she is currently available at 14/1. That race has only existed since 2016 and Willie Mullins has already won it five times so he certainly knows what it takes. WILLIE MULLINS

AUTUMN RETURN (IRE) 6 b m

A 3m Irish point winner in early 2022 and a bumper winner on her first start for Ruth Jefferson (after changing hands for £55,000) in April of that year, Autumn Return got her hurdling career off to a perfect start that autumn by winning a mares' novices' hurdle over 2m 125y at Market Rasen. Among the beaten horses were Mullenburg and Kingston Sunflower, both of whom would go and win three races on the spin subsequently. She ran creditably under a penalty at Wetherby a month later, finishing fourth of eleven behind Hall Lane and that race has worked out fairly well with six of the beaten horses all winning at least one race afterwards. Autumn Return was outclassed behind Luccia in a Listed race at Newbury in November but 2m on good ground was probably not her thing and she bounced back to winning form on soft ground at Catterick at the end of December, beating Bents Hollow, who is a decent yardstick, by 4l despite carrying a 7lb penalty. She finished second on her handicap debut at Newcastle one month later, where she probably matched her Catterick performance but she already looked in need of a stiffer test when finishing fourth behind Bonttay in a decent handicap hurdle over

2m at Kelso on soft ground in late March. Upped to 2m4f at Perth on her final start of the season a month later, she won another mares' handicap in good style. She is rated 115 after that and she looks capable of adding to her tally over 2m4f+ in the early part of the season but, given her pointing background, she also has the option of chasing and she looks sure to win races in that discipline.
RUTH JEFFERSON

BALLYBURN (IRE) 5 b g

Given the stamina in Ballyburn's pedigree it's highly encouraging that he was able to win both his starts in bumpers over 2m earlier this year. This 3m point winner, who started second favourite, created a fine impression (despite pulling hard) when successful on his rules debut at Punchestown in February, beating fancied runners from the Gordon Elliott and Eddie O'Grady yards. He stepped up on that form back at the same venue during their Festival week in April, racing with the choke out again but powering clear in the closing stages to beat two previous winners, Dancing City and Slade Steel, by upwards of six lengths. He'll likely need further to show his very best once he goes over hurdles and as such, at this stage looks much more a Ballymore type (7/1 favourite at the time of writing) than he does a Supreme Novice one. His wins were achieved on yielding and good to yielding and, although his longer term future obviously lies over fences, he is a really exciting prospect for the season ahead. WILLIE MULLINS

BERTIE B 5 b g

Clive Boulton-Brooks is a Herefordshire-based point-to-point trainer but he also has a decent strike-rate under rules and in Bertie B he has an inmate who should pay his way over hurdles this term. Out of a half-sister to Agnese, a bumper winner who was the dam of Lieutenant Colonel, a Grade 1-winning hurdler in Ireland, Bertie

B won a Bangor bumper in April 2022, but he didn't cut much ice in his first two hurdles starts in late 2022 and early 2023. However, he very much caught the eye at 66/1 in a 2m6f event at Hereford in late January, where he finished fifth of twelve behind Atlanta Brave without being given too hard a time by his rider. He then ran in a handicap the following month over 2m4f at Huntingdon and he again acquitted himself with credit, finishing a close third of eleven behind Blue Shark, who was completing a five-timer. There were two subsequent winners in behind so the form looks strong. Bertie B was raised 3lb by the handicapper despite only finishing third but his new mark of 105 looks workable and he should get going in this discipline sooner rather than later.

CLIVE BOULTBEE-BROOKS

BLAZING KHAL (IRE) 7 b g

This gelding won his first three races over hurdles in late 2021, including two Grade 2 contests at Cheltenham over 2m5f and 3m and, following the second of those two wins in December 2021, he was installed as the warm ante-post favourite for the Albert Bartlett Novices' Hurdle at the Cheltenham Festival, which Charles Byrnes also won with future RSA Chase winner Weapons Amnesty in 2009. However, a setback forced Blazing Khal to miss that engagement and ultimately he was forced off the track for fourteen months, with Byrnes admitting that it took longer to get him right than had been expected. His eagerly-awaited comeback came in the Grade 2 Boyne Hurdle at Navan in mid-February and he didn't disappoint, running out a 3l winner from Meet And Greet with the likes of Beacon Edge, Sire Du Berlais and Saint Sam further behind. With improvement expected after such a long absence, he was immediately installed as one of the favourites for the Stayers' Hurdle at Cheltenham a month later. However, he suffered a cut to a fetlock while winning the Boyne and his preparation was therefore

interrupted again, with Byrnes only declaring him fit to run at Prestbury Park about a week before the Stayers' Hurdle. He acquitted himself well in the race, finishing sixth behind Sire Du Berlais after getting tired in the closing stages but one feels that it might have been a different story had his preparation gone more smoothly. Before his comeback, Byrnes had been toying with a switch to fences for the 7yo and perhaps now is the time to make that change, as he still has time on his side. He's a 33/1 shot for the Cheltenham Gold Cup, which is perhaps a bit fanciful, but the 20/1 on offer for the Brown Advisory Novices Chase (formerly known as the RSA chase) looks like a fair price, provided that he stays fit and healthy. CHARLES BYRNES

BOWENSPARK (IRE) 5 b g

Henry Daly, just like his old guv'nor Captain Tim Forster, tends to excel with late-developing staying types and he has one that falls firmly into that category in Bowenspark, who deserves plenty of credit for being able to win twice and gain Graded-placed status in bumpers in his first season. The 5yo, who carries the colours of the late Trevor Hemmings, did well to win on his first two starts at Uttoxeter and Warwick (both races threw up subsequent winners) at the end of 2022 and, although he was unable to add to his tally, he shaped promisingly in Listed company at Newbury in February and in a good-quality Grade 2 at Aintree on his final start, despite the muddling gallop for much of the journey being against him. He will be suited by at least 2m4f once he goes over obstacles and, although chasing will eventually be his game, it'll be a surprise if he doesn't acquit himself with credit in some of the better hurdle races this time round. HENRY DALY

BRANDY MCQUEEN (IRE) 6 b g

Harriet Graham wouldn't exactly be a household name for those who are based more towards the south of

the country but this clerk-of-the-course cum racehorse trainer has proved herself a capable operator in both spheres. Smart staying chaser Aye Right has blown the trumpet for both herself and co-trainer Gary Rutherford in recent times and, although Brandy McQueen has a long way to go before he gets to that level, he'll be interesting if sent over fences in the current campaign. The 6yo held his form well in a busy season in 2022-23, winning back-to-back races in May 2022 and repeating that feat at Musselburgh in the early part of this year, before finishing a highly respectable seventh to Good Time Jonny in the Pertemps Final at the Cheltenham Festival. He'd probably had enough for the season when disappointing at Ayr on his final start but he's bred to jump a fence, he seems to handle most ground and he'll be of interest in staying handicap chases. HARRIET GRAHAM & GARY RUTHERFORD

BRIGHTERDAYSAHEAD (FR) 4 b f

An aptly-named half-sister to the yard's ill-fated triple Grade 1 winner Mighty Potter, Brighterdaysahead won a 2m1f Gowran Park bumper in February by 13l and, while it wasn't the strongest race with her two main market rivals failing to produce their true running, she could do no more than win in the manner she did. Her next outing would tell us more and she didn't disappoint as she ran out a 4l winner of an 18-runner Fairyhouse contest over 2m in early April, with a couple of the beaten horses running well subsequently to uphold the form. That victory came just half an hour after Mighty Potter lost his life when taking a heavy fall in the Grade 1 chase on the same card and Gordon Elliott obviously had mixed emotions afterwards: "Everyone is very upset after Mighty Potter but on a brighter note this is a seriously good mare. It's bittersweet, but Brighterdaysahead is a mare we can look forward to over the summer. That'll be her for the season now and you won't see her again until

next spring.” She’s one to look out for in novice hurdles and she looks nailed on to win more races.

GORDON ELLIOTT

BYKER (IRE) 4 b g

Byker was picked up for 25,000gns by shrewd Irish trainer Charles Byrnes following his good-ground Windsor victory for Richard Hannon in October 2022. It immediately looked like money well spent when he ran out a cosy winner of a Naas maiden hurdle on only his second start for his new trainer the following February. Although beaten when returning to the same track under a penalty next time, he turned in his best effort in first-time cheekpieces when a neck second to Jazzy Matty in the Boodles Juvenile Handicap Hurdle (formerly the Fred Winter) on his handicap debut at the Cheltenham Festival, keeping on strongly in the closing stages to finish ahead of two subsequent scorers in a race that also threw up a couple of other winners. His only run since came in the valuable Swinton Handicap Hurdle at Haydock in May and he ran well again to finish fifth in a competitive renewal against older handicappers. He shapes as though he’ll stay a bit further and he has plenty of handicapping scope from his current rating.

CHARLES BYRNES

CAPTAIN TEAGUE (IRE) 5 ch g

Captain Teague only ran twice in bumpers last term but he ended up as one of the best performers in that sphere courtesy of a fine third to A Dream To Share, the division’s best performer of the season, at the Cheltenham Festival in March. In a race dominated by the Irish, the Paul Nicholls-trained 5yo caused interference to a few of his rivals by hanging left in the closing stages (earning Harry Cobden a four-day ban) but he still stuck on pluckily to get within two and a half lengths of John Kiely’s unbeaten runner, earning

himself a 33/1 quote for this season's Supreme Novices Hurdle and a 25/1 one for the Ballymore. Although this point winner has stamina in his pedigree and should stay at least 2m4f, he's also not short of speed (he's a half-brother to smart 2m chaser Sky Pirate), so it'll be interesting to see which route his trainer chooses for him. Whichever path is trod, it will be surprising if it doesn't turn out to be a fruitful one. PAUL NICHOLLS

CHASING FIRE 6 b g

Chasing Fire was found out when he went up in grade over hurdles last season but he still showed enough to suggest that he remains one to keep an eye on in the coming months. This point and bumper winner won his first three starts over hurdles – justifying odds-on favouritism on each start – at Market Rasen (twice) and at Sandown before coming up short in the Supreme Novices' Hurdle, where he finished twelfth of fourteen. He appreciated the switch back to the non-graded novice company on his final start at Cheltenham's April meeting where he ran well to finish third to The Friday Man over 2m4f, one place behind subsequent hurdle and chase winner Twig. Before the Supreme his trainer intimated that this highly-regarded sort will be a very good chaser for this season so presumably he'll be starting off in the new discipline. He handles good and soft ground, is open to improvement and should be able to make his mark in novice company over fences. OLLY MURPHY

CHASING UNICORN (IRE) 5 b g

The green silks of Simon Munir and Isaac Souede have become a familiar sight on British and Irish racecourses both over jumps and, more frequently of late, on the Flat. They'll likely have a strong hand in several departments for this jumps season and it'll be a surprise should the once-raced bumper winner Chasing Unicorn not contribute to their tally of wins at some stage. Despite a starting