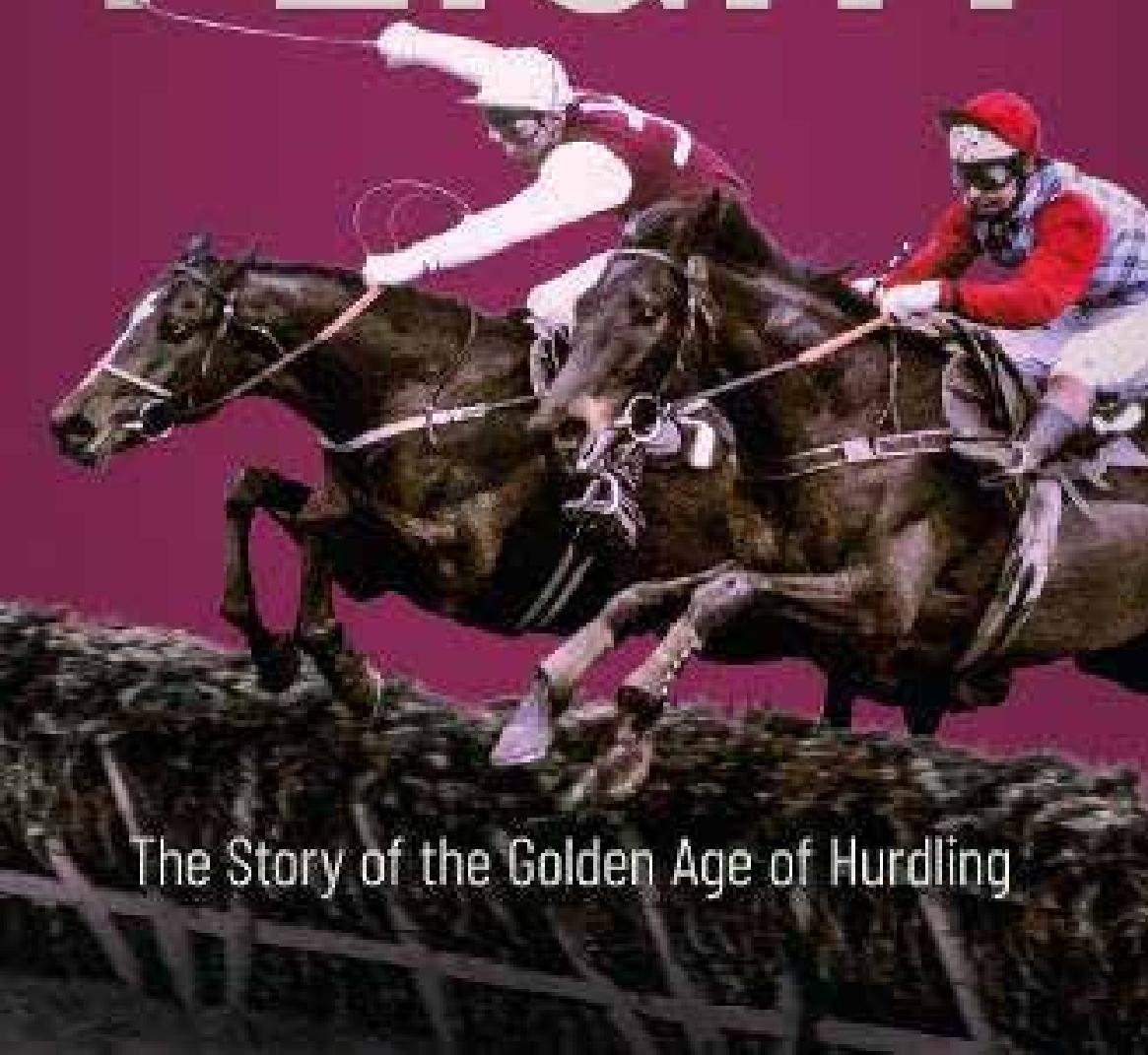


EAMONN PRESCOTT

IN FULL FLIGHT



The Story of the Golden Age of Hurdling

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IN FULL FLIGHT

The Story of the Golden Age of Hurdling

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CHAPTER 1

1968: PERSIAN WAR – IN THE BEGINNING

Season Until Champion Hurdle

The second ‘Golden Era’ of British hurdling started in 1968, 14 years after the first and shorter one had ended. That first era surrounded just three horses: National Spirit, a dual Champion, and the three-time winners Hatton’s Grace and Sir Ken. Sir Ken won the last of his three in 1954. Between then and Persian War winning in 1968 there had been no horse with multiple victories in the Champion Hurdle. That was all to change over the next 14 years.

Persian War was a beautifully bred horse. His sire Persian Gulf had won the Coronation Cup in 1944 and was by Bahram, who himself had won the Triple Crown (one of only two in the last 100 years along with Nijinsky). His dam was Warning, who was by another Coronation Cup winner in Chanteur and had already produced a fourth-placed Derby horse named Escort.

Initially, Persian War went to Dick Hern’s stable in the idyllic Berkshire village of West Ilsley. He won twice on the flat as a three-year-old. However, his flat career was just that, flat, and he was eventually sold for 3,600 guineas to David Naylor-Leyland and went into training at Tom Masson’s yard with a view to a National Hunt career in future.

Persian War started as a novice hurdler in the season before his first Champion Hurdle triumph and quickly established a reputation as a very smart juvenile. He was second in his first start

before progressing to win the Toll House Hurdle at Sandown by 15 lengths from Major Imp, and then the Freshman's Hurdle at Newbury by the same margin. He won at Newbury again in the Kintbury Hurdle, this time by eight lengths from Spearhead, and we still hadn't reached the New Year. He was creating a buzz in the hurdling world, and many seasoned observers believed they were looking at a future champion.

It was during that race at Newbury that Henry Alper, a wealthy insurance executive, was so impressed by watching Persian War on the BBC cameras from his Southend home that he said to his two sons watching with him, 'I would like to buy that horse.' He was as good as his word and made a then-record £9,000 offer, the highest ever for a hurdler in the UK. Naylor-Leyland, who was suffering with a long-term illness and rarely attended races anymore, accepted, and the horse was immediately transferred to Brian Swift's yard in Epsom. Swift, in his first year of training, said, 'To get a horse of Persian War's calibre, in my first season as a trainer, was something of a compliment but also it was a tremendous worry.'

Hurdles specialist Jimmy Uttley became his regular jockey at this stage, replacing Bunny Hicks, who had ridden him in his first four races. Bunny was very philosophical about the decision. 'It's just one of those things,' he said. He did continue to follow Persian War's career, though, with great interest.

Into the New Year, and Persian War continued to excel in his novice season, winning the Challow Hurdle at Newbury and then the Walton Hurdle at Kempton, both with considerable ease.

His next race was the Victor Ludorum Novices' Hurdle at Haydock. This was expected to be Persian War's first real test. Run at the start of March, this was a valuable and prestigious race in the juvenile calendar, and Persian War would be facing some of his peers within the novice ranks for the first time. Opinion was divided, with some saying that this ungainly gelding that showed little respect for the hurdles in front of him had beaten nothing in some facile wins,

whereas others had the opposite opinion and viewed him as a new rising star within the hurdling fraternity.

The race began and Persian War was settled into the front three, where Jimmy Uttley sat motionless throughout the first half of the race. After the field jumped the fifth flight of hurdles, Uttley gave Persian War a bit more rein and he began to pull away from his rivals with contemptuous ease, opening a gap of 15 lengths in what seemed to be no time at all. The on-course commentator was awestruck and stated that it looked as though Persian War was simply cantering in front. After he jumped the last, Uttley eased Persian War down and at the line he was eight lengths clear of a field of decent juvenile hurdlers including Spearhead and Beau Chapeau. The time was very fast and had Uttley ridden the horse out, he would have undoubtedly broken the track record.

The race was a turning point for many in their opinion of Persian War. Here was a real superstar. Then, as so often happens when someone or something is built up, the horse suffered a shock defeat at Kempton in his next race, and the hype was brought back down to earth. Starting a warm odds-on favourite, he made a bad mistake at the sixth flight and contrived to bite his own tongue in an incident that was far from clear. Uttley thought he had hit his head on the ground, while observers suggested he had caught the rear hooves of Charlot, a horse that he had been tracking in the race. The result was that Persian War lost two teeth and had blood pouring from his mouth by the time he returned to the unsaddling enclosure. Uttley was shaken after the race when he told waiting reporters, 'He just paddled through the sixth flight. I thought he had gone. He did strike the ground hard with his mouth. It must have been before the straight that he lost two teeth and cut his tongue so severely.'

Persian War bounced back to form and confirmed his status as Champion Juvenile with victory in the Daily Express Triumph Hurdle at Cheltenham. The race was run in April then, rather than at the Festival as it was to be just a year or so later. Henry Alper, such was his confidence in the horse, had contemplated whether to

race Persian War in that season's Champion Hurdle after his win at Haydock, but his trainer Brian Swift, initially willing to discuss the idea, ultimately decided against it with Alper's blessing. 'The Champion Hurdle is not like the Derby, which can be won only once in a horse's lifetime,' he reasoned. 'Persian War still has about five years of peak performance ahead of him. He might run up a sequence of victories.' How prophetic that comment turned out to be.

He started second-favourite for the Triumph behind Oberon II (trained by Guy Harwood), at 4/1. Two of his other dangers were Te Fou and Al Alawi, both of whom Alper tried to buy prior to the race. The race began with horse called Supermaster setting out to make the running. Uttley had Persian War well in touch from the very beginning. Chantou II took the lead with three flights of hurdles left, with Persian War a close third. Oberon II hit the hurdle hard, lost ground and with it all chance of winning. Meanwhile, at the front, Supermaster had rallied and retaken the lead by the time they were jumping the second-last. As they started up the home straight, Persian War seized the advantage as they approached the last flight. He absolutely flew over the hurdle and landed running. He didn't stop as he went up the hill and, despite Te Fou finishing like an express train, he held on by three-quarters of a length, with Al Alawi a further eight lengths back in third and the rest of the field left trailing a long way behind.

'Persian War was always going like the winner,' said Uttley on returning to the unsaddling enclosure.

The race had been run at breakneck speed, with the winning time a full 19.6 seconds under the average, and 12 seconds faster than Saucy Kit had clocked when winning the Champion Hurdle over the same course just a month before. The horse had been foot-perfect at every hurdle, leaving his novice trait of flattening at least one behind him on this occasion.

Persian War ended the season as the Champion Juvenile hurdler and many experts were looking forward in anticipation to the new

season and seeing how he would progress when racing against older horses for the first time.

To say that the 1967/68 season was eventful would be a huge understatement. It started in tremendous style for Persian War with a 25-length win in the Wyld Court Hurdle at Newbury. This was even more impressive when you consider he beat Mugatpura, who would go on to be a future winner of both the Fighting Fifth Hurdle and Scottish Champion Hurdle.

However, things would take a downturn on Persian War's next outing, in the Lansdown 4-Y-O Hurdle at Cheltenham. There had been plenty of rain at the Prestbury Park track, and the ground was squelching as Persian War and his four rivals exited the parade ring. Having been proven on the ground, there was an air of confidence from his supporters. Persian War started at 1/6. Spanish Steps, a future steeplechasing star, was also in the field (receiving 10lb) and he went off next best at 7/1.

Approaching the second-last, with Spanish Steps having led most of the way, Uttley roused his horse to move upsides the leader. At the flight of hurdles, Spanish Steps was still ahead of his rival but, as they went to jump the obstacle, Persian War took off at the same time as his rival but significantly further away. What compounded this mistake was that he slipped on take-off, went into the air, came down and hit the top of the hurdle with his head. The horse was bent sideways from the impact and slid along the ground for what seemed like an eternity. He lay completely still, as if frozen.

Brian Swift raced from the stands over to where Persian War lay on the ground. Upon reaching the scene, he found Uttley cradling the horse's head in his arms.

'I thought he was dead. He slid for all of 20 yards and there was a strange stillness as he lay there, completely motionless,' said Uttley. What transpired was that the horse had knocked himself out

and thankfully was soon back on his feet after some heart-stopping minutes for all connections.

‘The horse hasn’t been hurt,’ said Swift to assembled reports later. ‘It could be a blessing in disguise, and I feel it will prove a valuable part of his education in the plans to win a Champion Hurdle.’

The season was about to take an even stranger turn as an outbreak of foot and mouth disease caused chaos and unpredictability with the racing calendar. Enter Henry Alper.

Alper wanted to send Persian War to France, to continue racing and pick up some prize money. Swift was against the idea. Alper continued to press forward with his plan and tried to reason with Swift. In his estimation, Persian War was in the form of his life, so travelling over to France and picking up some lucrative prize money seemed entirely sensible considering there was no racing in the UK.

Alper, by chance, then met Pierre Sanoner, a trainer based at Chantilly, at a lunch in London. The luncheon in question was the Derby Awards, and news was coming through that the French were about to ban English horses from entering France. Alper acted with extreme haste and made a call to set in place arrangements to transport Persian War to Chantilly. Alper claimed to have tried to call Swift but that he had got no reply. He failed to try to phone him again, a point he much regretted later when a horse box turned up early the next morning at Swift’s Epsom yard. The trainer was livid to have been kept in the dark. Alper accepted responsibility for this, but the relationship had become fractious. Swift finally agreed to the horse going to France but wanted him to go to a trainer of his choosing. Alper said that he had already agreed the horse should go to Sanoner, but Swift was adamant that it had to be a trainer that he would choose personally. The conversation ended with Smith asking Alper to remove all his horses from the yard. Alper would retell the story a few years later, saying he was determined to ring Smith back the following day to resolve their differences. Smith though, according to Alper, had then leaked the story to the press, and by the following day it was all over the

papers. Alper felt he had no choice but to remove the horses from the yard.

So, Persian War travelled across the Channel to his temporary new home in Chantilly. Alper had to choose a new permanent trainer for Persian War when the horse finally returned from France. Alper decided to send the horse to Welsh trainer, Colin Davies. His yard was based near Chepstow on the Welsh/English border. Alper was not short of offers to train Persian War, but Davies was at the top of his list.

‘I made it clear that he could expect me to telephone at least once a day and that it would not be long before he probably considered me a nuisance,’ said Alper, leaving Davies under no illusion of what was to come.

Alper had visited Persian War in France just 24 hours after he had arrived and was not happy with the horse’s demeanour. He returned to the UK and informed Davies that he would like him to come with him to France to assess the horse. Alper and Davies agreed they should also invite Persian War’s regular jockey, Jimmy Uttley, to go with them. When they reached the stables in Chantilly, they were shocked at what they discovered.

What they found was a horse looking like a pale imitation of the Persian War who had left just days before. All were shocked at his physical condition. The gruelling three-day journey from England, combined with unseasonably freezing cold temperatures in France had clearly taken their toll on the horse.

‘It’s a wonder he never died. He looked like death,’ said Uttley.

Davies gave a rather colourful description of what he saw: ‘A madman, wearing breeches with huge checks, had been in charge of him. Persian War was in this vast box, freezing cold. He was a sick horse.’ He then advised Alper that the best thing they could do was to get the horse back home without delay so that his condition deteriorated no further.

The horse was immediately brought back to Davies’s yard in Gwent and nursed back to health. Fortunately, his condition was

no worse than an internal chill, but he was glad to be back in more welcoming surroundings that he found in France.

Davies rode him in work, and the plan was to get him in shape for a crack at the Schweppes Gold Trophy Hurdle at Newbury. A plan was devised by Davies for a couple of warm-up races to get the horse race-fit again before heading off to the Berkshire course.

In the two races prior to Newbury, Persian War carried huge weight in both. The first was the Allendale Handicap Hurdle at Doncaster in January 1968, where he was giving lumps of weight away to his rivals.

'I had no idea how the horse was going to perform on a racecourse. In training I had been amazed at his apparent slowness and idleness on the gallops,' said Davies.

He ran the race from the front and only started to tire at the second-last. He eventually finished second behind Inyanga (receiving 33lb) and Amber Diver (later disqualified). He did beat Drumikill, of whom more later in the book. Davies was delighted with the run. He had been bringing him along slowly as he recovered from the illness that he had picked up in France. The horse had been big and heavy at Doncaster, and Davies was confident the run would bring him on immensely.

A week later he went to Kempton for the Lonsdale Hurdle and once again front-running tactics were employed. This time Persian War was a lot fitter and stronger, the Doncaster race indeed having brought him on. At one point in the back straight he was 15 lengths clear of a field that included his old rival, Spanish Steps. Rounding the home turn, only Stubbs II (receiving 7lb) looked capable of catching him, and he did, snagging him close to home as Persian War went down by a head.

Uttley was very happy with the horse, commenting that 'he had given me that old feeling'.

Davies was delighted with the run: 'He's run a marvellous trial for the Schweppes. I couldn't see him do anything but improve.'

Two weeks later, at Newbury in the Schweppes Gold Trophy Hurdle, he carried 11st 13lb at the age of five and against a field of 31 rivals. Despite the huge field, the race was billed as a two-horse battle: Persian War versus Major Rose. Major Rose was trained by Captain Ryan Price, one of the great trainers of that decade. Since the inception of the Schweppes Hurdle, he had won four of the five runnings, and Major Rose was his main hope this time around. The horse had beaten Saucy Kit (the 1967 Champion Hurdle winner) in his previous race at Wolverhampton some four months previous. He had been rested and targeted at this race ever since. Major Rose would go on to win the Cesarewitch later that year, one of Britain's top staying handicaps on the flat, such was his class.

Before the off, Persian War was made the 9/2 favourite, with Major Rose at 7/1. It was 11/1 bar these two. There was drama before the race got underway when Hill House, who had won the race the previous year, was in reluctant mood at the starting line and not wanting to take part in proceedings. His then-trainer Frank Carr (he had been trained by Ryan Price when victorious 12 months ago) had walked him down to the start to placate him but, after refusing numerous times to line up, the starter eventually let the rest of the field go, a full seven minutes after the official start time.

The race was a cracker from the off, with Even Keel setting a blistering gallop, looking to run his rivals into the ground. However, this was a field made up of some of the best hurdlers around, and it wasn't long after the halfway point that he was being surrounded and passed on either side. Persian War, running strongly, went into the lead at the third-last hurdle. Sempervivum, Major Rose and Black Justice (ridden by future racing journalist and broadcaster Brough Scott) were all there waiting to produce their challenge. At the last, Sempervivum touched down just in the lead but soon lost ground as Persian War and Major Rose got locked into a ding-dong battle to the line. Every time that Josh Gifford on Major Rose made up a few inches on Persian War, Jimmy Uttley would ask more of his horse, and more he would get. The battle was truly joined all the

way up until the line. Neither horse nor rider gave an inch. At the post it was a photo finish.

The result was announced, and Persian War had beaten Major Rose to establish a new weight-carrying record for the race. A record that still stands to this day. An amazing training feat by Colin Davies, given the condition in which he had brought the horse back from France.

‘Persian War was magnificent,’ Davies said afterwards. ‘I thought Jimmy Uttley’s judgement was perfect.’

Uttley was also in celebratory mood: ‘It was a great race and a great performance by Colin to get Persian War right in time. But I knew I had won and when I took the horse into the winners’ enclosure the applause was deafening. I suppose it was my most thrilling victory.’

Sir Henry Alper had the full range of emotions after the race, when he and his wife had initially thought that Major Rose had won. Having not known for certain, he had enquired of a man standing near them and got the answer that Major Rose had prevailed. Dejected, they walked to the unsaddling enclosure, where another man asked Alper how much he had won. Alper was a well-known gambler. It was only when Alper and his wife looked up at the noticeboard and saw the number four in top spot did they accept the result and start to celebrate.

Now, all roads led to the Festival and Persian War’s first crack at the Champion Hurdle.

1968 Champion Hurdle*The Field*

Horse	Trainer	Jockey
Sempervivum	F. Walwyn	T. Jennings
Straight Point	C. Davies	D. Hughes
Inyanga	G. Robinson	P. McCarron
Severn Bore	A. Brake	Mr R. Tate
Black Justice	L. Dale	B. Scott
Chorus	H. Thomson Jones	A. Turnell
Johns-Wort	J. Norris	J. King
Talgo Abbess	K. Prendergast (IRE)	H. Beasley
Le Vermontois	R. Price	J. Gifford
Cool Alibi	J. Bower	R. Reid
Salmon Spray	R. Turnell	J. Haine
Saucy Kit	M. Easterby	R. Edwards
Commander In Chief	E. Cousins	D. Nicholson
Persian War	C. Davies	J. Uttley
Mugatpura	F. Walwyn	G. Robinson
Secret Venture	P. Mullins (IRE)	J. Brogan

The Contenders

Persian War	Champion Juvenile 1967
Saucy Kit	Champion Hurdle Winner 1967
Salmon Spray	Champion Hurdle Winner 1966
Chorus	Gloucestershire Hurdle Winner 1967
Sempervivum	Champion Hurdle Runner-Up 1966

The Race

The 1968 renewal saw a very competitive field of 16 go to post. It included previous Champion Hurdle winners Salmon Spray (1966) and Saucy Kit (1967). Salmon Spray had beaten Sempervivum in his victory and both horses were now ten years old. They weren't fancied

in the betting based on their form of that season, and a suspicion lay that their best years were behind them.

Reigning champion, Saucy Kit had been beaten by Chorus in a previous race. Chorus was the previous season's winner of the Gloucestershire Hurdle (now the Supreme Novice Hurdle) at the Cheltenham Festival. He went off the 7/2 favourite for the Champion Hurdle. He was also subject to some bizarre speculation on the day before the race. A headline in the *Daily Mirror* announced, 'Chorus Rumours Denied'. It had been claimed that the horse was to be withdrawn; however, these rumours were promptly scotched by his trainer Harry Thompson-Jones's assistant, Jeremy Hindley, who declared, 'Chorus is perfectly well and there is no strength whatever to these rumours.' Chorus had been installed as the 4/1 joint-favourite with Persian War on the morning of the race.

Saucy Kit had his backers and was napped by several of the morning's newspapers, including Clive Graham writing as 'The Scout' in the *Daily Express*.

The unfamiliar sound of hooves rattling on the Cheltenham turf at yesterday's opening of the National Hunt Festival [the Champion Hurdle was run on the Wednesday in those days] suggested that conditions will be ideal for the speedy Saucy Kit to repeat last year's victory in the Champion Hurdle.

Admittedly on early season form, the northern horse is held by the greatly fancied Chorus, who also will not be incommoded by the state of the going.

In fact, if you scan through many of the newspapers from that morning you will see very little support for Persian War, purely based on the firm going. It was thought that he would be at his best on softer ground, and that his form was relatively unknown on a faster surface.

Graham did concede, however, that ‘it is impossible to disregard the claims of the gallant Persian War, although connections would so much have preferred a downpour instead of the short shower we experienced yesterday’.

To ensure a good gallop and to make the race a true test, Alper and Davies decided they needed a strong pace and wanted to employ a pacemaker. There was an obvious answer at the Davies stable in the form of Straight Point. A decent, if unspectacular hurdler, who would be ideal to go at a good clip from the off and last as long as he could until Persian War could take over. He wasn’t owned by Alper, though, but by Colin Davies’s father, John. Alper and Davies Sr struck a deal, and Alper merely leased Straight Point for that one race. He would run in the second colours of Alper. Duncan Hughes, the stable jockey of Colin Davies, would take the ride, with the instructions of setting a good gallop to ensure a true-run race.

The race went to plan beautifully. Hughes set a blistering pace on Straight Point, which continued well after halfway and further than owner and trainer thought possible. Straight Point kept going until the flight before the top of the hill, four from home, and eventually gave way to Persian War. Jimmy Uttley had bided his time on Persian War and was primed to take up the running, as planned. He continued to lead at the top of the hill and was going ominously well as they freewheeled down the descent, over the third-last and approaching the business end of the race.

At the second-last flight, Chorus, under a patient ride from Andy Turnell, was settled in nicely just over a length behind, on the outside of Persian War, with Saucy Kit further to the outside, travelling well under Roy Edwards. As they took off at the penultimate hurdle, Persian War had a length-and-a-half lead. Then the race changed in an instant. Saucy Kit jumped the hurdle fine, but pecked on landing and skewed sideways, nearly bolting Edwards out of the side door. Amazingly, he stuck tight, but the reigning champion’s chances had gone. He had lost at least five lengths and all momentum, and ended up finishing way down the field.

As they rounded the home turn, Uttley asked Persian War to quicken up and he responded by going two lengths clear of Chorus, with the chasing pack seemingly going backwards. At the last flight, Chorus tried to mount a challenge, but truth be told he never got closer than two lengths to Persian War, who galloped up the hill like a champion to win by four lengths. Chorus gave his best and stayed on for second, five lengths ahead of Black Justice (Brough Scott again in the saddle) in third. A great performance from Persian War and achieved at just five years old.

‘There’s no doubt about it,’ said Davies, ‘he’s a real champion. It is surprising but the one thing I learned was that Persian War, who had hitherto been regarded as a soft ground specialist, could go equally well if not better on firm ground. Yes, he’s a great horse.’

Observers were also impressed with Persian War and the ease at which he won. Writing for the *Mirror*, Dick Rafferty: ‘Persian War’s four length win in yesterday’s Champion Hurdle at Cheltenham was the most impressive performance I have ever seen in this race. And that includes Sir Ken’s three successive victories.’

Prior to the race, Willie Stephenson, who had trained Sir Ken to his three wins, had told Colin Davies that he thought his horse was the best hurdler since his old champion, and it certainly looked that way.

The iconic commentator Peter O’Sullevan called the race for the BBC. In his column in the subsequent day’s *Daily Express*, he wrote:

Persian War proved himself a great champion when becoming the first British trained hurdler to top £20,000 prize winnings and that at the tender age of five.

The manner in which he disposed of Chorus, left an emphatic impression that under no circumstances would he have been troubled.

Now, Mr Henry Alper’s young star could well become the first £100,000 hurdles prize winner. For following his brilliantly achieved Schweppes/Champion double, he’ll

now be aimed at France's £35,000 Grande Course de Haies d'Auteuil on July 1.

There's no doubt that the 1968 Champion Hurdle was one of the strongest renewals of its era. In fact, it's quite apt that it was the one to start hurdling's second and most prestigious 'Golden Age'. Persian War's gallop was relentless after he took up the running at halfway, and only Chorus and Saucy Kit provided any real opposition, and they couldn't lay a glove on him.

At this point in his career, Persian War had already won ten races and nearly £23,000 in prize money. The world was his oyster.

Result

1st	Persian War	4/1
2nd	Chorus	7/2 fav
3rd	Black Justice	100/6

Distance: 4 lengths, 5 lengths **Going:** Good to Firm

Post-Champion Hurdle

Persian War did indeed follow his owner's desire, and went to France to compete in two lucrative races. The main target was the French Champion Hurdle, or the Grande Course de Haies d'Auteuil, as it was known in France. The race was run at the Parisian course, Auteuil, which is in the west of the city, near Longchamp and the Roland Garros Tennis Centre.

The races would be run in June and at the start of July. The ground would invariably be on the firm side, and the weather in Paris in June and July tended to be hot.

The main difference between the British hurdles that Persian War had been used to and the French equivalents were that the British ones were far more robust, and if you hit them hard it could cost you the race or a fall. The French, on the other hand, used a mere brush-style obstacle, which could be hit halfway up without

much fear of penalty. Alper and Davies felt they had nothing to lose.

The plan was to run the horse in a prep race at the same course. The Prix La Barka was chosen. The French Champion Hurdle was run over three miles, a mile further than the Champion Hurdle. This wasn't expected to be too much of a problem, as Auteuil was a relatively flat course and the firm/fast ground would help Persian War get the trip.

In the Prix La Barka, Persian War gave an exceptional display of jumping with regular jockey Jimmy Uttley on board. No doubt a little concerned about this new style of fences, Persian War gave them plenty of air on the way around, not touching a single one. He eventually finished a very creditable third behind Orvilliers and Top Dream. It was a decent performance, especially given that Orvilliers had twice raced and twice beaten Pardallo II, a horse that would later win the Ascot Gold Cup.

The French Champion Hurdle was run on 1 July in roasting hot weather. The Auteuil crowd was awash with summer colours, the skies were an unbelievable blue and the temperature was touching 90 degrees. The favourite for the race was Orvilliers, who by now was being recognised as the best stayer in the world on the flat or over hurdles. He looked a magnificent specimen in the paddock. Persian War was also looking his stunning best, as the sun shone down on this wonderful bay gelding, so the scene was set for a fantastic race.

The field was predominantly made up of high-class flat stayers, who were hurdling on this day due to prize money and sense of occasion. The standard that Persian War was facing was nothing like he had seen before, even in the Champion Hurdle, which had been widely praised for the quality of that field. The race began and, as was the way with French hurdles races in that era, the field went off at an incredible pace. In the UK, despite the Champion Hurdle being an exception, most races were run at a sedate pace, with horses being held up for their finishing run. In France, it was the opposite, all out and hold on if you can. This race was no different,

and three horses were setting the pace out front, Orvilliers, Biriatou and Persian War. They were out on their own for nearly the whole race, rarely changing positions. As they reached the final hurdle, it was Persian War who fractionally led, but his race was run. The heat, the ground and the extra mile had finally taken its toll. Orvilliers strode away to win from Biriatou, with Persian War clinging on to third place ahead of the fast-finishing Eclat. It was still an immense performance.

Jimmy Uttley said a few years later, 'I think that was the best race Persian War has ever run. He was truly magnificent against horses who clearly were top-class stayers.'

Major Rose also ran in the race but was pulled up at halfway.

Persian War was awarded the 'Horse of the Year' title at the end-of-season National Hunt Presentation. He was the first hurdler to achieve that honour.

Supporting Cast

Spanish Steps

The Lansdown Hurdle, the race in which Persian War fell and was knocked unconscious, was won by a horse called Spanish Steps.

Spanish Steps went on to win the Tote Novice Chase at the Cheltenham Festival in that season (now the Browns Advisory and maybe better known as the Sun Alliance Novice Chase). He won the following season's Hennessy Gold Cup carrying 11st 8lb, the Benson & Hedges Gold Cup and the SGB Chase.

He went on to be placed in both the King George and Cheltenham Gold Cup. He was a mighty horse and the natural progression for him was to have a crack at the Grand National. His first attempt was in possibly the most famous and greatest renewal of them all, in 1973. Carrying 11st 13lb he finished fourth behind Red Rum, Crisp and L'Escargot, with all four of them beating the course record of Golden Miller. Not a bad trio to be behind. Between them they racked up four Grand Nationals, two Cheltenham Gold Cups and a Champion Chase!

Spanish Steps continued his attempt the win the National, and it was his bad fortune to come up against two of the greats in L'Escargot and Red Rum. He was fourth again in 1974 behind the two of them, before finishing third in 1975, beaten only by ... L'Escargot and Red Rum.

He was an extremely popular horse. He was owned, trained and bred by Edward Courage, who was wheelchair-bound. He, along with Clifford Nicholson helped set up the Injured Jockeys Fund, a charity to whom my proceeds from this book are dedicated.