

2023

# CHELTENHAM

## FESTIVAL GUIDE

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# TUESDAY, MARCH 14 (OLD COURSE)



PAUL KEALY ON THE KEY PLAYERS



## 1.30 Sky Bet Supreme Novices' Hurdle

• 2m½f • Grade 1 • £135,000

ITV/RTV

This race was won in eye-popping style by Constitution Hill last year and, while it is likely to return to the realm of mortals this time, an intriguing contest is in prospect following ante-post favourite Facile Vega's shock defeat at the Dublin Racing Festival. Willie Mullins' son of Quevega was unbeaten until then and looked on course for another festival success to add to last year's Champion Bumper. Now, though, he is threatened from within his own camp by Il Etait Temps, the impressive winner of that DRF race, and possibly Impaire Et Passe and Gaelic Warrior. Owner-trainer Barry Connell has a strong contender in Royal Bond winner Marine Nationale, while leading British hopes are Tolworth scorer Tahmuras for Paul Nicholls and Nicky Henderson's promising Luccia, if she is diverted from the Mares' Novices' Hurdle.

### Facile Vega

**6 b g; Trainer** Willie Mullins

**Hurdles form** 115, best RPR 154

**Left-handed** 15, best RPR 154

**Right-handed** 1, best RPR 129

**Cheltenham form** (bumper) 1, best RPR 141

**At the festival** 16 Mar 2022 Towards rear of midfield, headway from over 6f out, close up 4f out, shaken up to challenge 2f out, led over 1f out, soon pushed along, went clear inside final furlong, readily, won Champion Bumper by three and three-quarter lengths from American Mike

There was plenty of talk about Facile Vega even before he'd made his racecourse debut as he is the second foal of six-time Cheltenham Festival winner Quevega, and it's fair to say he did his mum proud in his first season, going unbeaten in four bumpers, which included the championship races at Cheltenham and Punchestown. Having been understandably made favourite for the Supreme following that campaign, he was always likely to shorten if he started his hurdles career well, and after just a maiden win and a four-length Grade 1 success from Il Etait Temps in the Future Champions Novice Hurdle at Leopardstown over Christmas he was made the shortest price ever for the festival's curtain-raiser at that stage of the season, with some bookmakers going as low as 4-6. However, he was given a free time of things up front in both races, and the wheels rather fell off when he was taken on in the Tattersalls Ireland Novice Hurdle at Leopardstown's Dublin Racing Festival. He

dropped away tamely to finish fifth of six, beaten 20 lengths. Jockey Paul Townend received plenty of stick from Willie Mullins for "riding him like a machine rather than a horse", but while time comparisons showed he did go considerably faster than Irish Champion Hurdle winner State Man in the early stages, that was at least in part due to the fact State Man went so slowly. Winner Il Etait Temps was never much more than five lengths off the speed, which means he was also considerably faster than State Man early on, yet he powered to victory by nine and a half lengths. Mullins revealed a few days later that Facile Vega was a bit sore afterwards, so he does have a plausible excuse, but there's no doubt he has a little to prove now. The overall strength of last season's Champion Bumper has been called into question as well, with the race not producing the number of winners it usually does. While ten hurdles winners from 40 starts up to the end of January at a strike-rate of 25 per cent is far from a terrible return for any race, the ten-year average at the same stage before the 2022 running was 18.3 winners per year at a strike-rate of just over 36 per cent. He could easily still have been a very good winner of an average renewal, but only five Supreme winners since 1994 failed to win their prep, and they went off in March at odds of 12-1, 20-1, 25-1, 25-1 and 50-1.

**Going preference** Has won on all surfaces but suspicion is he needs it soft to be at his best

**Star rating** 🌟🌟🌟



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### 3.30 Paddy Power Stayers' Hurdle

• 3m • Grade 1 • £325,000

ITV/RTV

Gavin Cromwell's Flooring Porter has made himself a Cheltenham hero with back-to-back all-the-way triumphs in the past two runnings but, with doubts about his form and even his participation this time, there has been plenty of activity in the ante-post market. The latest twist was the winning return of Blazing Khal (*below right*) in the Grade 2 Boyne Hurdle after a long layoff and that took him to favouritism for trainer Charles Byrnes, whose most recent festival victory came in this race ten years ago with Solwhit. Gordon Elliott's Teahupoo had previously headed the market, having landed the Hatton's Grace and proved himself as a stayer by taking the Grade 2 Galmoy Hurdle. Another leading Irish contender is the Joseph O'Brien-trained Home By The Lee, who was only sixth in this race last year but confirmed his significant improvement this season with victory in the Grade 1 Christmas Hurdle at Leopardstown. Klassical Dream (Willie Mullins) and Ashdale Bob (Jessica Harrington) are two more from Ireland, while British hero Paisley Park is set to line up again for Emma Lavelle. Marie's Rock would have a major chance if Nicky Henderson sends her here rather going for a repeat bid in the Mares' Hurdle and France's Gold Tweet could well be supplemented after winning the Cleeve Hurdle for trainer Gabriel Leenders.



#### Blazing Khal

**7 b g; Trainer** Charles Byrnes  
**Hurdles form** 1111, best RPR 164  
**Left-handed** 111, best RPR 164  
**Right-handed** 1, best RPR 124  
**Cheltenham form** 11, best RPR 150

Looked a potential star novice early last season with three wins on the spin, two of them at Cheltenham in Grade 2 company from Gelino Bello, who wound up the season winning the Grade 1 staying novice at Aintree. However, he suffered an injury and missed Cheltenham, and very little was heard about him for the next year, with Charles Byrnes suggesting for a long time that he'd struggle to make Cheltenham this year too. However, after 14 months off, he finally made his reappearance in the Boyne Hurdle at Navan in February and it was worth waiting for. Blazing Khal travelled strongly throughout, made his ground very easily between three out and two out to join the leaders and then won going away by three lengths after the last. It wasn't the hottest Grade 2, but runner-up Meet And Greet was rated 150 and was getting 5lb from a long-absent horse who did it in some style, and it was clearly a massive career-best from the winner. In a race that has had its share of favourites over the last few months, he's the new one and it's hard to argue that he doesn't deserve it even if his form isn't yet quite the best on offer. He gives the impression there's a lot more in the locker, and if he stays sound and gets to Cheltenham fit and well he will surely be a major player.

*Going preference* Seems equally at home on any surface

*Star rating* ★★★★★

#### Teahupoo

**6 b g; Trainer** Gordon Elliott  
**Hurdles form** 11121119611, best RPR 168  
**Left-handed** 119, best RPR 149  
**Right-handed** 11211111, best RPR 168  
**Cheltenham form** 9, best RPR 134  
**At the festival** 15 Mar 2022 Midfield, bit short of room 1st, pushed along and dropped to last 3 out, weakened before 2 out, finished ninth, beaten 33 lengths by Honeysuckle in Champion Hurdle

Prolific six-year-old who was tailed off on

both starts last season when finally put into Grade 1 company, including in the Champion Hurdle, in which he finished last. However, he has found more since being upped in trip this season and became the first horse to win a race which involved Honeysuckle when a neck victor from Klassical Dream in the Grade 1 Hatton's Grace over 2m3½f at Fairyhouse in December with the dual Champion Hurdle winner two and a half lengths back in third. Teahupoo then stepped up to 3m for the first time and sauntered home by 15 lengths in the Grade 2 Galmoy Hurdle at Gowran Park, after which he was briefly made favourite. However, it did look like a bit of an overreaction at the time as he was a 4-11 shot and his main market rival finished stone last, beaten more than 90 lengths. Teahupoo was left to beat the 145-rated, regressive 11-year-old Summerville Boy (a former Supreme winner, but five years ago), while the third went into the race rated just 123. Teahupoo is obviously very decent, but he's going to have stiffer tasks at 3m than that one, and he has a huge amount to prove if the ground isn't deep. He has won all seven of his outings on soft or heavy ground, but has lost three out of four when it has been quicker, and it does seem that the faster it is, the worse he is.

*Going preference* Needs mud

*Star rating* ★★

#### Home By The Lee

**8 b g; Trainer** Joseph O'Brien  
**Hurdles form** 218U226RO11, best RPR 163  
**Left-handed** 28611, best RPR 163  
**Right-handed** 1U22RO, best RPR 154  
**Cheltenham form** 6, best RPR 157

**At the festival** 17 Mar 2022 Chased winner, lost second but close up 5th, pushed along and lost position after 3 out, not fluent 2 out, ridden and rallied against near rail after last, not reach leaders, finished sixth, beaten seven and a half lengths by Flooring Porter in Stayers' Hurdle

Finished only sixth of ten in last season's Stayers' Hurdle, but he was a 33-1 shot then and won't be this time because he has continued to improve. Unfortunate to run out when short of room at Down Royal on his return in the summer, he is 2-2 since then and he proved his 28-1 Navan defeat of