

Malcolm Heyhoe Previews November's UK Horse Racing

December usually means the King George at Kempton for the racing fan, but the traditional centre-piece of the Christmas programme is merely the climax to a thrilling month's racing that begins at Sandown with the two-mile spectacular that is the Tingle Creek Trophy on Saturday, December 2.

Shocks are a rarity in this Grade One contest and even though many of the familiar faces will be missing from this valuable event, it's safe to say that backers should stick with those horses towards the head of the market.

In the absence of leading two-mile lights such as Well Chief, and Newmill, this may well be an excellent opportunity for Voy Por Ustedes, last season's top two-mile chaser and Arkle Trophy hero, to establish his claims for the two-mile chasing crown.

His trainer, Alan King, has long earmarked this race as an ideal starting-point for his stable star and with agility and the need to travel up with the pace a priority at Sandown, Voy Por Ustedes has plenty in his favour. Ashley Brook, last year's runner-up, may also be in opposition and it'll be intriguing to see how he fares after missing most of last season through injury.

The Tingle Creek isn't the only top two-mile chase on the agenda at Sandown because the Henry VIII Novices' Chase is also a key feature of Sandown's cracking December 2 card. There's already a wealth of talent in the two-mile novice chase division and it would be no surprise to see Fair Along, a most impressive winner of the Independent Newspaper Novices' Chase at Cheltenham contest this prize and put his Arkle credentials on the line.

Remarkably five of the last eight winners of the Henry VIII ran in the Independent Chase at Cheltenham while trainer Paul Nicholls has also been responsible for two of the last seven winners and whatever he runs from his Ditchet stable should be noted. The same is true for Alan King's Barbury Castle yard and My Way de Solzen, a most impressive winner on his Lingfield chase debut, would be another top-notch contender.

Sandown's Saturday card wouldn't be complete without a bookies' benefit in the shape of the William Hill Handicap Hurdle which has been a graveyard for market leaders in recent seasons. It is twelve years now since a favourite has landed this two-mile contest and the soundest advice is to stick with horses carrying a low weight that are trained by Gary Moore or Philip Hobbs and have run already in the Greatwood Handicap Hurdle at Cheltenham's Paddy Power Open meeting. Both Mahogany Blaze and Verasi fit this bill.

On Sunday December 3 Ireland stages a couple of key races in their pattern calendar courtesy of the Drinmore Novices' Chase and the Hatton's Grace Hurdle at Fairyhouse, the latter being widely acknowledged as a stepping-stone to Champion Hurdle success and likely this year to feature Brave Inca and Asian Maze, two of Ireland's leading candidates for top two-mile hurdling honours.

The best of the jumps action switches to Cheltenham on December 9 for a superb day's racing that features the BoyleSports.com International Hurdle (formerly known as the Bula Hurdle) as the meeting's showpiece contest. Punters needn't look any further than Detroit City the current Champion Hurdle favourite, for the most likely winner of the Boylesports. The Philip Hobbs-trained grey is rapidly developing into a course specialist at Prestbury Park and only last month he swiftly added the Greatwood Hurdle to the Triumph Hurdle he landed back in March.

The former contest has twice supplied the winner of the Boylesports and all being well the vastly improved Detroit City should make it three mainly at the expense of some inferior rivals. The Irish landed the race a year ago but any raiders from across the Irish Sea will be hard pressed to make it three recent winners this time around.

The Boylesports.com Gold Cup Chase is yet another change of name for a race that was once called the Massey-Ferguson Gold Cup, the Tripleprint, the Robin Cook and now this anonymous bookmaking mouthful. Sometimes progress has its limitations. Still, this is a cracking handicap and the trick here is to look for a horse carrying less than eleven stone that boasts winning form at the course, features towards the head of the betting and is trained either by Nicky Henderson or Paul Nicholls. Irish horses also tend to do well here.

Over at Lingfield on December 9 there are a couple of important novice events courtesy of the December Novices' Chase and the Summit Junior Hurdle. The two highest-rated juveniles to win this event in the last three years were trained by Francois Doumen (the injury-prone Grand Seigneur in 1999/2000 and future Champion Hurdle winner Hors La Loi in 1998/9), and any horse sent over by the gallic raider must be respected while Oliver Sherwood has had this race in mind for some time for his smart youngster, Marodima.

The countdown to Christmas begins at Ascot on December 16 with a top-notch programme that features the Long Walk Hurdle, the totesport.com Handicap Chase and the Ladbroke Hurdle. The later race is only in its infancy at Ascot and already Nicky Henderson has proved the man to be with having won the race recently with Chauvinist.

This time around he relies upon the well-regarded Tarlac, an easy winner over course and distance on his seasonal bow while Ireland's Victram, a dab hand in this grade, also bids to add this race to his Imperial Cup success at Sandown in March. Ireland should also be strongly represented in the Long Walk Hurdle with trainer Dessie Hughes thinking hard about bringing over Hardy Eustace for this valuable prize following his easy win over slightly shorter at this course last time.

On Boxing Day, December 26, the King George VI Chase is always a race to savour and this year's renewal may well see a small field and an odds-on favourite in the guise of Kauto Star, who has been elevated to superstar status in most quarters following an easy success against a bunch of declining forces at Haydock last time.

In a race that has been a corker for those punters that follow the market leaders ? 13 of the last 18 winners have featured in the top two in the betting ? Kauto Star is going to be very hard to beat but at least faces decent opposition in the shape of rising stars such as Monet's Garden and Racing Demon who should give him a race over a course that rewards quick and accurate jumping and finds out any who slack in those departments. The former holds the best chance of overturning the favourite especially if he forces the latter to match him in the jumping department over the three rapid-fire fences in the home straight.

On December 27 Chepstow stages the Coral Welsh National, a severe test that is best left to those dour staying types that can plough through the Welsh mud. Light weights and previous winning form at the course will be a bonus and backers should look closely at any horse Paul Nicholls runs in the race while over at Leopardstown on the same day there's the Paddy Power Handicap Chase, one of the main betting events at the big Christmas festival at the Dublin-based course. Look out here for Tony Martin's Ross River, who is being trained to win this prize after finishing third in last year's renewal.

Short note about the author

Malcolm Heyhoe writes weekly horse racing articles for the UK horse racing betting site <http://GG.com> - horse racing betting, information, free daily tips, free expert articles, free 4 year form database, free alerts, free racing commentary, free tipping competition, compare odds, forum and more!

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