

# IMPERIAL COMMANDER

JULY 2009

**FORM**            1 / 1 4 6 1 7 3 / 1 1 4 / 1 6 1 P

Imperial Commander has won four out of the seven chases he has contested. His best performance to date came in his penultimate start when he won the Grade One Ryanair Chase over two miles and five furlongs at the **Cheltenham** Festival in March 2009.

He began his racing career in April 2005 with a victory in a point to point race at **Summerhill** in Ireland. He made his English debut fully eighteen months later in a National Hunt Flat race run over approximately two miles at **Cheltenham** where he beat the highly regarded **Snap Tie** by a comfortable eight lengths in receipt of 14 pounds. He has since run a further eight times at **Cheltenham** where his record now reads five wins from nine starts.

For the purposes of this profile we shall focus on his performances whilst trained in England by **Nigel Twiston-Davies**.

**CHASES**            1 1 4 1 6 1 P

**HURDLES**        4 6 1 7 3

**NH FLAT**         1

Imperial Commander proved to be a little below the best over hurdles. He was well beaten on the two occasions he raced over three miles. His only win over the smaller obstacles came in a minor novice hurdle race at **Newcastle**. The runner up that day was **Jass** who is now rated 130 over hurdles and earned a chase rating of 136 by winning a four mile race over fences.

His two races over two miles and five furlongs at **Cheltenham** are probably the most reliable guide to his standing as a hurdler. In both races he was beaten a few lengths by the top novice hurdlers of the year. He ran well on both occasions but proved to be below the standard set by the likes of **Wichita Lineman**, **Tidal Bay** and **Massini's Maguire**.

He is clearly a much better chaser than hurdler. He has won four out of seven races over fences and appears to have genuine excuses for each of his three defeats. All of his successes as a chaser have come when racing at **Cheltenham** over a trip of approximately two and a half miles. His one defeat at the track came when attempting to race over three miles and one and a half furlongs in December 2007. That day he jumped without fluency at the back of the field in the early stages. His jumping certainly improved when he joined the pace and he was still there with a chance until weakening very quickly from four fences out. Apparently, he returned with injuries to his hip and back and, considering how far out he was when he stopped to nothing, it does appear far more likely that, on this occasion, his demise was due to injury rather than any lack of stamina.

In beating **Voy Por Ustedes** to win the Grade One Ryanair Chase at **Cheltenham** in March 2009 he acquired a rating of 165 and proved himself to be a top class two and a half mile chaser.

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## COURSE

<b>CHELTENHAM</b>	<b>1 4 6 7 1 1 4 1 1</b>
<b>AWAY</b>	<b>1 3 6 P</b>

All three of his defeats in races run away from **Cheltenham** have come when competing over a distance of three miles or more. In his only other contest away from his local course Imperial Commander won very easily over two and a half miles in a minor novice hurdle race at **Newcastle**.

He has run well in seven out of nine races he has competed in at **Cheltenham**. He has won five times [four over fences] and run two honourable races in defeat, both of which were won by **Massini's Maguire**. Those two defeats were probably a fair reflection of his ability as a hurdler. However, on the two other occasions he has been beaten, he has certainly run well below form. In both contests he was racing over a distance of three miles or more.

After the first of these races on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2006 his jockey Tony Evans said "the ground and the trip were completely against him". On the other hand, stable representative Richard Bevis suggested "one or two of the horses were not 100%". In the other contest on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2007 he picked up an injury during the race.

What we know for certain is that he has lots of experience racing at **Cheltenham** and has an excellent record there when racing over two and a half miles. Conversely, the jury remains out regarding his 'away form' as he has yet to be given the opportunity to run in a top class race over two and a half miles at any other track.

## FIELD SIZE

<b>10 AND OVER</b>	<b>1 1 7 3 1 6 1 P</b>
<b>LESS THAN 10</b>	<b>4 6 1 1 4</b>

Imperial Commander has more proven form when competing in races with plenty of runners. Before his handicap chase debut in November 2008, his successful chase form had consisted of two all the way wins in six runner novice events run over two and a half miles at **Cheltenham** where, on both occasions, he had enjoyed uncontested leads. If anything, his jumping appeared to improve for the more competitive nature of the 19 runner Paddy Power Chase. Furthermore, his jumping was exemplary when taking care of his nine rivals in the ultra competitive Ryanair Chase.

The most one could say, given the limited information available, is that, whilst his best performances have come in bigger fields, there are no obvious reason to have any concerns at the prospect of Imperial Commander making his own running in any chase with few runners.

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## GOING

<b>GOOD</b>	<b>3 1 1 4 6</b>
<b>GOOD/SOFT</b>	<b>1 4 7 1</b>
<b>SOFT/HEAVY</b>	<b>6 1 1 P</b>

Imperial Commander has proved able to run to a high level of form on ground ranging from soft to good. His only defeats on testing going occurred on the two occasions he raced over three miles or more. Last time out on heavy going at **Punchestown** he was pulled up before the second last fence when racing over three miles and a furlong. Previously, on soft ground, he had finished tailed off in sixth place over three miles in a novice hurdle race at **Cheltenham**. Two of his more impressive wins came when running over two and a half miles on soft ground at **Newcastle** over hurdles and, more recently, in the Paddy Power Chase at **Cheltenham**.

He has run to form in all four races he has contested on good to soft ground. He won a national hunt flat race by eight lengths on his English debut. The highly regarded **Snap Tie** finished runner up that day and is currently a 158 rated hurdler. His other victory on good to soft going came with the most impressive performance of his career to date in the Grade One Ryanair Chase at the 2009 **Cheltenham** Festival. He probably ran to the level of his hurdle form in both of his defeats in this sequence.

He has been beaten a long way in all three races he has contested over three miles or further on good going. The stable may have been going through a lean spell for two of those defeats and, as previously mentioned, he injured himself during the other. He recorded two comfortable novice chase wins over two and a half miles in his other two races on such ground.

On balance, although he appears perfectly able to run well on good going, his most impressive performances have coincided with his runs on soft or good to soft ground. He is yet to race on ground officially described as firm or good to firm.

## DAYS OFF

<b>30 DAYS AND MORE</b>	<b>1 1 7 3 1 1 6 1 P</b>
<b>LESS THAN 30 DAYS</b>	<b>4 6 1 4</b>
<b>FIRST TIME OUT</b>	<b>1 1 1</b>

On the limited information at our disposal it appears that Imperial Commander's form has much more substance to it when he has raced as a fresh horse. He has only won one weakly contested novice chase when returning to race within 30 days of a previous run. In two of his three defeats in this sequence he finished tailed off. His positive record when racing as a fresh horse is reinforced by his 100% success rate when making his seasonal debut. This record reads as four wins from four if we include his point to point victory at **Summerhill**.

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## BREEDING

According to the available statistics Imperial Commander is currently the one and only chasing progeny of his dam **Ballinlovane**. An analysis of the performances of the offspring of his sire **Flemensfirth** offers a few points of interest. [See attached sheet] The figures suggest a more prolific strike rate for the **Flemensfirth** progeny at around the two and a half mile mark. This information is slightly offset by an increase in the win percentage at three miles up to about three and a half miles. However, these numbers are very small and would be very different without the influence of the staying career of **Joe Lively**. The going percentages, albeit again gleaned from very small numbers, highlight a similarly positive record for all grounds other than testing or firm.

One of the few **Flemensfirth** progeny to share a broadly similar level of ability to Imperial Commander is the Howard Johnson trained **Tidal Bay** who was the better hurdler of the two and is currently rated a 158 chaser. Not only do they share the same sire, but they are also both out of **Le Moss** mares. Interestingly enough, **Tidal Bay** looks best at distances around two and a half miles and has looked short of stamina on the two occasions he has raced beyond three miles.

## TIME OF YEAR

PRE NEW YEAR	1	4	6	1	1	4	1	6
POST NEW YEAR	1	7	3	1	P			

Imperial Commander has shown that he can perform to a high level from October through to March. He has pulled up and finished tailed off in the two races he has contested in April.

His level of performance appears to be far more significantly linked to the prevailing form of the stable rather than any particular time of year. Generally speaking, when the yard has been in good form he has run well. Conversely, at least three of his below par runs can be identified as being symptomatic of the poor form shown by many of his stable mates at that time.

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## DISTANCE

CIRCA 2 MILES	1
CIRCA 2.5 MILES	4 1 7 1 1 1 1
CIRCA 3 MILES	6 3 4 6 P

He has only lost twice in seven races when he has run over a distance of about two and a half miles and is unbeaten in four chases at **Cheltenham** over this sort of trip. His first defeat came in November 2006 in a novice hurdle race when he finished fourth behind **Massini's Maguire**, **Wichita Lineman** [who both went on to win novice hurdle races at **Cheltenham** the following March] and **Juveigneur** who finished runner up in the Hennessy Cognac Gold Cup at **Newbury** off a mark of 142 later that month. In his only other reversal in this sequence he finished seventh behind some top class hurdlers [including **Massini's Maguire** again] in the Grade One Ballymore Properties Novices' Hurdle at the 2007 **Cheltenham** Festival. He probably ran to the level of his best hurdle form in both defeats.

Imperial Commander has run five times over three miles or further, losing by wide margins in four of those races and being pulled up when well beaten in the other. There have certainly been mitigating circumstances for each of those five defeats. The stable was out of form when he was beaten at **Cheltenham**, **Aintree** and **Kempton** and he injured himself during the race in his more recent defeat at **Cheltenham**. In his last run at **Punchestown** the combination of very heavy ground and the trip of three miles and one furlong looked to stretch his stamina beyond its limits.

In the Grade One King George Chase run over three miles at **Kempton** on Boxing Day 2008, he travelled well to the end of the back straight before stopping abruptly turning for home. The style of this performance was mirrored by many of his stable companions at that time. Previously, in April 2007 he had finished third over three miles at **Aintree**. On this occasion the two pace setters **Massini's Maguire** and **Wichita Lineman** set a suicidal gallop before getting very tired close home. Although he managed to catch and pass the first mentioned; the fact that he lost many lengths to **Wichita Lineman** from the second last hurdle at a time when that horse was running on empty strongly suggests that **Imperial Commander** failed to stay on the day.

What we can state for certain is that he has a perfect one from one record over two miles, has top class form to his name over two and a half miles and although there have been other contributing factors, he has run five times over three miles or more and is yet to prove he stays.

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## CONCLUSIONS

- He is a much better chaser than he was a hurdler.
- Although he has form on good ground, his best performances have come when he has raced on soft or good to soft going.
- He is yet to race on firm, or good to firm ground.
- He has a perfect record when making his seasonal debut and has proven top class form when racing as a fresh horse.
- Generally speaking, when the **Nigel Twiston-Davies** yard has been in good form he has usually performed well and when the yard has been out of form he has run below par.
- He has proved himself at the highest level when racing over about two and a half miles round **Cheltenham** and is yet to be tested in a top class race over this sort of trip away from his local track.
- After five attempts racing over a distance of three miles or further he is yet to prove he stays this trip.

## PROGRAMME

On the balance of available evidence Imperial Commander's optimum trip is most likely to rest somewhere short of three miles. Therefore, the Grade One Ryanair Chase looks to be his most winnable target at the 2010 **Cheltenham** Festival. Unfortunately, there are very few opportunities for two and a half mile chasers in the pattern book. Before Xmas the races that stand out are the Old Roan Chase at **Aintree** in late October and the Peterborough Chase at **Huntingdon**. Following on from this the obvious choice of races up to two and a half miles would be a] to drop in trip and go for the Grade One Victor Chandler Chase over two miles and a furlong at **Ascot** in the middle of January. b] Carry top weight in a two and a half mile **Cheltenham** handicap or c] go for the Grade One First **Ascot** Chase in the middle of February. The first choice of dropping in trip would require soft ground, the second option of lumping a big weight around **Cheltenham** against inferior rivals looks less than ideal and choice three involves the risk of running too close to the **Cheltenham** Festival.

With such a dearth of top class chases over two and a half miles available one could understand connections of the horse feeling that they had little to lose by having another crack at three miles somewhere along the line. After Imperial Commander won the Ryanair Chase over two miles and five furlongs in March 2009 **Nigel Twiston-Davies** stated, "he is a definite for the Gold Cup next year – he will stay the trip – he won today by staying." Even though he has since failed to stay three miles one furlong at **Punchestown**; the fact that this race was run on

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very heavy going could mean that connections will still have half an eye on going down the **Cheltenham** Gold Cup route.

This being the case, two possible starting points might be the Grade One Betfair Chase at **Haydock** at the end of November or the Grade One King George Chase at **Kempton** on 26<sup>th</sup> December. These races both offer good prize money, a trip of three miles and are quite likely to provide ground with some cut in it as well as a class of opponent that should offer a true gauge of Imperial Commander's stamina limitations. If he fails to stay in either of these events the only factor to be left unresolved would be whether or not he is a '**Cheltenham** specialist'. Given this scenario the key race in determining his **Cheltenham** Festival objective would become the Grade Two Letheby and Christopher Chase run over three miles and one and a half furlongs at **Cheltenham** at the end of January.

In conclusion, the most realistic starting point for **Imperial Commander**, based on his preferred conditions, is probably the Grade Two Old Roan Chase at **Aintree**. He is very likely to benefit from soft or good to soft ground and with horses like **Voy Por Ustedes** around he may not have to carry top weight. Furthermore, the race is run over his optimum trip and in October, which is a time when the stable are traditionally in top form.

After this the choices become a little more difficult; the Grade Two Peterborough Chase has a lot going for it but might hinder his chances of going for the King George a month later. What's more he would have to carry a Grade One penalty at **Huntingdon**. Likewise, if he goes for the King George at **Kempton** he is unlikely to have enough rest time between Boxing Day and the Letheby and Christopher Chase at the end of January.

Clearly, some difficult decisions lie ahead for connections. Thankfully, every important dilemma does not have to be solved here and now. Each race will bring some new information to make fresh decisions from. However, one piece of evidence that does appear to be fairly critical is his showing last time out at **Punchestown**. On the basis of his performances over three miles and on this run in particular, it becomes very difficult to envisage Imperial Commander challenging a true stayer like **Notre Pere** in the event of the **Cheltenham** Gold Cup being run on testing ground. Given this scenario, surely the Champion Chase would be a more viable option. If any horse is capable of outstaying **Master Minded** up the hill in a Champion Chase run on soft ground it is Imperial Commander.

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## 3 Year Old Plus Chasers [Sire Statistics for Flemensfirth]

Distance	Wins	Runs	%
16	10	40	25
17	5	33	15
18	0	8	0
19	9	17	53
20	12	117	10
21	15	68	22
22	3	54	6
23	0	22	0
24	14	99	14
25	5	65	8
26	4	20	20
27	4	12	33
28	1	4	25
29	0	6	0
30	0	4	0
31	0	3	0
32	0	2	0
33	0	2	0
34	0	3	0
36	0	1	0

Going	Wins	Runs	%
Hvy	13	141	9
Sft	23	176	13
GS	12	80	15
GD	18	138	13
GF	7	39	18
F	0	6	0

