

# THE GUIDE

## PUNCHESTOWN

### GUINNESS GOLD CUP

29<sup>th</sup> APRIL 2009

#### ALBERTAS RUN

He has now won four out of 12 chases. This season he has run six times and has flopped in all four chases he has contended where there has been plenty of give in the ground. On the two occasions he has raced on much quicker going he has performed to a higher level. In the King George he finished an eight length second to Kauto Star in the Grade One King George Chase at **Kempton**; this is easily his best run of the season. In his latest start he was beaten 22 lengths by Madison Du Berlais and the ill fated Exotic Dancer in the Totesport Bowl at **Aintree** on good going. Denman would have also finished well in front of him but for falling at the second last fence. He has now failed to sparkle at **Aintree** in all three chases at the course despite benefiting from favourable ground conditions each time.

We have now witnessed a number of performances that strongly suggest that Albertas Run – along with the other better novice chasers of last season – is a fair way behind the very best chasers even when racing on favoured ground. However, he should still be a valid contender for all three mile chases run on quick going where the likes of Denman, Kauto Star and perhaps Madison Du Berlais are absent. He should be marked down on good to soft ground and crossed out on soft or heavy.

When he ran below form in the Grade Two Mildmay Novices' Chase at **Aintree** in April 2008 his jockey, AP McCoy, suggested his poor performance was partly due to it being one race too many, after being on the go since October and particularly after a tough race at the Cheltenham Festival. That was his sixth chase of last season whereas the Guinness Gold Cup will be his seventh race of the current campaign.

If the only evidence we had to go on was the King George form at **Kempton**; Albertas Run would be trading at much shorter odds for this race. It is worth noting that when he disappointed in his second to last run behind Madison Du Berlais over the King George course and distance; the race took 30 seconds longer to complete than the Boxing Day event. The ground at **Punchestown** will have much more in common with his latest **Kempton** run and as such he is likely to be found wanting again on the prevailing soft ground.

#### AFISTFULLOFDOLLARS

He has a very good win to run ratio and has finished in the first three in 12 out of 14 career starts. Unfortunately, he has only managed to race six times in the last four years and has run just once this season; when finishing tailed off in fourth place behind Neptune Collonges and **Notre Pere**. He ran a lot better than his final position suggests in that last race at **Leopardstown**, making good headway before tiring badly in the home straight. He was returning from a year off the track and may have needed the run. At his best, he would be up to running well in this race and it is more than possible that he could play a part in the finish. The fact that he has had so many setbacks is a little off putting.

# THE GUIDE

## AIR FORCE ONE

He has won four out of 12 chases and finished runner up three times. This season he has raced on five occasions and performed well in his first two starts when he was asked to race prominently. His last three runs have been disappointing and coincide with the three times he has been held up. Other factors have no doubt played a part in these figures. However, it is fair to say that, generally speaking, he has looked happier and jumped better when helping to force the pace.

His form looks stronger and more consistent when he has raced on right handed tracks; furthermore, connections have always felt that he is better suited to racing on good ground. Nevertheless, his run in the Hennessy at **Newbury** on testing going is arguably the best performance of his career and proves that he is capable of running to a high level of form on very soft ground and on a left handed course.

He has acquired his lofty mark with three wins in minor novice events, a Grade One Chase win at **Punchestown** last April when he won impressively after being handed an unchallenged lead and his second place in the Hennessy Cognac Gold Cup at **Newbury**. His only experience of a fast run competitive chase last season resulted in him making several mistakes before finishing a disappointing fifth at **Cheltenham** behind one of today's opponents **Albertas Run**.

He jumped much better on his seasonal debut in a competitive handicap chase at **Ascot** [a right hand track] and followed up with another solid display of jumping in the Hennessy behind **Madison Du Berlais**. He has certainly put in two improved performances this season. He injured himself early on when disappointing in the King George at **Kempton** and was rested until finishing well beaten in the **Cheltenham** Gold Cup. His trainer blamed the track for his disappointing performance. He travelled well for a long way on his latest start at **Aintree** despite making several jumping errors. This was in the Grade Two Totesport Bowl which was run at a fast pace on good ground.

Air Force One proved suited to **Punchestown** last season when leading all the way to take the Champion Novices' Chase by a comfortable 13 lengths. It would be no surprise to see him being asked to race more prominently here and, in a contest where few of the contenders are guaranteed to be suited to the conditions of the day, he looks reasonably priced at his current odds of **14/1**.

## ROLL ALONG

His first time out record reads: **1 1 1 1 1** – whereas, since winning two minor contests in 2006, he has failed to win any of his last eight races, aside from his seasonal debuts. Since winning on his first start this season he has run badly at **Sandown** flopped on very heavy ground at **Cheltenham** and stayed on past beaten horses to finish a remote sixth in the Gold Cup at the festival in March. On the strength of two or three of his runs he appears to offer broadly similar claims to those of **Albertas Run** and **Air Force One**. His trainer has had a particularly difficult time of it this year and perhaps the recent form of Roll Along merely reflects the general trends of most horses from the yard. On balance, until he proves otherwise, he is a horse to mark down in all races bar his seasonal debut. Off his current mark of 160 it will be very interesting to see where his trainer places him for his first run in the autumn.

## IMPERIAL COMMANDER

His record over fences at **Cheltenham** reads: **1 1 4 1 1** – the only time he has lost in a **Cheltenham** chase was when stepping up in trip to three miles and one and a half furlongs. His overall form over three miles plus reads: **6 3 4 6** – he has had excuses offered in each of those four runs, but the fact remains that he has looked a non stayer each time. Imperial Commander has run disappointingly in two out of the three races he has contested away from **Cheltenham**, yet is currently trading at 3/1 favourite for this Grade One Chase run at **Punchestown** over three miles and a furlong on soft going.

In his last race he put in a career best effort when winning the Grade One Ryanair Chase at **Cheltenham** over two miles and five furlongs. Although he stayed on well that day, he did not stand out as a horse crying out for a step up in distance. He may stay the trip and could perform to his best at **Punchestown**; he will be difficult to beat if he manages both. If he was trading at a double figure price one might conclude that he was worth taking a chance on. However, the consistent logic of The Guide is that long term profits can be achieved by opposing short priced favourites that are priced up more on supposition than substance. He is not a certain stayer and has a poor record away from his favourite track and as such, at his current odds, he simply has to be taken on.

## NOTRE PERE

He is a very sound jumper and has barely put a foot wrong in his last three chases. He has won four from 11 starts over fences and finished placed in three more. He is a relatively slow horse full of stamina and lacking in speed. He was well suited to very heavy ground when winning the Troytown Chase at **Navan** in November 2008. He travelled well that day and stayed on doggedly in the finish.

In the Welsh National at **Chepstow** he again travelled well within himself off the strong pace and stayed on strongly over the extended trip. Last time out we witnessed a different side to him in the Grade One Hennessy at **Leopardstown**. He was badly outpaced, came under pressure and appeared to be woefully slow as the pace quickened down the far side. The fact that he eventually stayed on to give the comfortable winner Neptune Collonges most to do is to his credit. Nevertheless, this performance highlighted his need for a strong pace on soft ground over three miles plus to bring his stamina into play.

To repeat, his profile is that of a slow dogged stayer with an abundance of stamina. Consequently, he can be readily crossed out for any race that requires speed over endurance. There appears to be two or three horses that are likely to push the pace in the Guinness Gold Cup at **Punchestown** and at least three doubtful stayers taking part. There is a strong chance that the race will be run to suit Notre Pere and, as a result, he looks very likely to be involved in the finish. He appears to have the strongest credentials of the market leaders.

# THE GUIDE

## SCHINDLERSHUNT

He has run in seven chases this season. In his first three runs he had blinkers on and performed badly each time. The blinkers have been left off for his last four chases, a strategy that has produced the goods and seen him return to form he last showed in his early novice chase career. In fact, his last two races, at **Cheltenham** and **Aintree** have probably been the best two performances of his career.

He has a poor win to run ratio which has not been helped by running below form many times over the last two seasons in a manner that suggested he had lost his enthusiasm. Nevertheless, he has come back to form with a vengeance yet remains a horse that is often overlooked and under played in the betting market. Perhaps this is, in part, due to his long run of poor form.

He has never been tried over three miles and so, like quite a few of his rivals in this race, we cannot be certain he is going to stay this trip well. Four runs ago he won well at **Leopardstown** over two miles and five furlongs on soft going, in a fast run race where he pushed the pace on from a long way out. This evidence certainly gives some optimism that, given a more patient ride, he may stay a little further. Whether he can stay three miles and a furlong on soft going is another matter altogether and is simply a case of not knowing until he tries.

If he stays the trip then his form compares favourably with his opponents here. It is a point of interest to compare his price of **16/1** with that of the 4/1 now available for the drifting favourite **Imperial Commander**. Neither horse is proven over the trip. The favourite, however, has competed and failed in four races over three miles whereas Schindlers Hunt has yet to try. The question to ask is: Would we rather take a chance on a horse at double figure odds that is untried over the trip or support a rival that has tried and failed yet is trading at a much shorter price?

## SCOTSIRISH

On the 25<sup>th</sup> April 2008 his trainer Willie Mullins stated: "The ground is probably crucial to him – he needs good ground." He has an excellent record the few times he has managed to compete on good ground. Last time out he ran to his best form when finishing a close fourth in the Grade One Melling Chase at **Aintree** over two and a half miles on good ground. He was ridden very quietly that day and, although he ran on well he never looked like troubling the three leaders, one of which, **Schindlers Hunt**, re opposes today.

He is clearly capable of running well in testing conditions as he proved when winning comfortably at **Cork** on heavy going over two miles in December 2008. The question is: Can he stay three miles plus in testing ground? His performance at **Thurles** in November 2008 would suggest that the answer to that question is, at best, unlikely! His form over fences on soft going reads: **2 3 1 F 3 U 4 2 1 3** – he has a very poor win to run ratio in all races and particularly those run in conditions that prevail today. Although he hails from a stable in good form and has Ruby Walsh on board, it is difficult to envisage him staying this trip well enough to trouble the principals

# THE GUIDE

## WAR OF ATTRITION

This former **Cheltenham** Gold Cup winner has run four times since being absent from the track for two years. In his first two comeback races he won very easily in weakly contested events. In his latest two runs he has been easily brushed aside by Noland, The Listener and Exotic Dancer. Neptune Collonges would also have finished 20 lengths ahead of him last time out but for falling at the second last fence. All four of his races this season have been run on unsuitably soft ground. His record over three miles in such conditions now reads: **2 2 3 2** – the horses that have finished in front of him in this sequence are: The Listener, Beef Or Salmon [three times] and Exotic Dancer. At their best, the last two named horses would have been strong favourites for this event.

His trainer has stated many times that War Of Attrition cannot compete to his best form on soft ground. His performances on the track support this view. His win in the 2006 Gold Cup run on good ground is far superior form to anything he has achieved on soft or heavy going. Nevertheless, he has some good form at **Punchestown** to his name, his form on soft going suggests he will still be competitive in this race and he could easily finish in the first few despite the conditions. He is a horse that tends to be over bet and under priced in the market and today is no exception. He is far from certain to stay this trip well enough in testing conditions to win this race and at his current price of 6/1 he is clearly one to oppose.

## SNOWY MORNING

The level of form he showed when finishing runner up in this race last year is arguably as significant as any on show today. However, he has only won three from 16 starts over fences and has run below the form he showed in last year's renewal in all five chases he has contested since. In his second to last run he finished very tired when beaten by Black Apalachi at **Fairyhouse** over the same trip as he will face today. Willie Mullins blamed the soft ground for him not getting home that day and has gone on record several times to state that Snowy Morning is not suited to testing conditions.

It looks significant that Ruby Walsh has chosen to ride the unproven stayer **Scotsirish** over a horse that finished close up in the same race last season. Whilst it remains a possibility for Snowy Morning to return to form in this race, he is competing against horses that are in form plus one or two others guaranteed to stay the distance on this ground. Although he may well perform above his place in the market it remains difficult to recommend supporting a horse that has been so distinctly out of form in most of his recent runs.

# THE GUIDE

## THE REST

Of the outsiders **Miko De Beauchene** will be staying on past beaten horse and could pick up some prize money. All his best form is over three and a half miles and more and he is likely to find this race unfolding too quickly for him. However, there are plenty of non stayers in this field and if his rider pushes the pace on he could easily be rewarded with a positive finishing position. His chances will improve significantly in the event of very heavy ground. At his best **Gungadu** would have some sort of a chance in this race. He has always looked to prefer racing right handed, is best suited to running over this sort of trip and hails from a stable in top form. Nevertheless, he has failed to complete or finished tailed off in each of his last four runs, has always appeared happier on better ground than he will face today and is difficult to support in this step up from handicap company to Grade One Chase. Connections will, no doubt, be very happy to collect some prize money if he manages to step up significantly on his most recent performances.

## CONCLUSIONS

This is a race that includes several horses unsuited to the conditions and/or unproven over the distance on the prevailing ground. As such, it looks like a race to make a financial investment in. **Notre Pere** has the best chance of winning this race and is currently trading at **12/5**. The only negative with him is that he has been troubled by a small piece of birch in his leg and is having it removed in a small procedure next week. Providing this small problem does not hamper him in any way he should go close here.

With half the field being easy to cross out it would be no surprise to see the two outsiders **Afistfullofdollars** and **Miko De Beauchene** run solid races. The two horses that would go close **IF** they stay the trip are **Imperial Commander** and **Schindlers Hunt**. The first named is trading at 4/1 whilst **Schindlers Hunt** is currently available at **16/1** and is therefore the preferred selection of the two.

The three top novices from last season, **Albertas Run**, **Roll Along** and **Air Force One** are horses of broadly similar abilities. Of the three only the last named has a profile that suggests he could be suited to the day. He has won over the course and distance and his Hennessy second on testing ground looks significant form with today's challenge in mind. The downside with this horse is that he has now run below form in three races since finishing just behind Madison Du Berlais in November. However, with so few horses guaranteed to stay the trip he may well revert to the forcing tactics that served him so well at **Newbury**. On balance, although he is by no means certain to run to his best, **Air Force One** is a leading contender here and looks attractively priced at **14/1**.