

CHRISTIE'S FOXHUNTER STEEPLE CHASE CHALLENGE CUP

(AMATEUR RIDERS)

Year	Form	Winner	Age/Wt	SP	Trainer	Last Race (no days)	Tactics
2007	0	Drombeag	9-12-0	20/1	J O'Neill	unpl Punch'town Hunter Chase (324)	Prominent
2006	3114U	Whyso Mayo	9-12-0	20/1	R Hurley (Ire)	u.r Leo'town Hunter Chase (33)	Tracked leader
2005	1U1	Sleeping Night	9-12-0	7/2F	P Nicholls	1st Fakenham Hunter Chase (28)	Tracked leaders
2004	11P2	Earthmover	13-12-0	14/1	P Nicholls	2nd Fontwell Hunter Chase (25)	Held up & bhd
2003	11	Kingscliff	6-12-0	11/4F	Mrs S Alner	1st Milborne Open pt-to-pt (25)	Prominent
2002	43	Last Option	10-12-0	20/1	R Tate	3rd Newbury Hunter Chase (13)	Prominent
2001		Meeting Abandoned					
2000	221	Cavalero	11-12-0	16/1	H Manners	1st Warwick Hunter Chase (12)	Held up in rear
1999	111	Castle Mane	7-12-0	9/2	Mrs C Bailey	1st Warwick Hunter Chase (12)	Made virtually all
1998	F11	Earthmover	7-12-0	3/1	R Barber	1st Newbury Hunter Chase (13)	Made virtually all

Race Distance: 3m 2f 110y

Winner's Market Position: 2 2 0 0 1 5 1 9 9

Fate of the Favourite: 5 2 5 P 1 P 1 P 2

15 OF THE LAST 17 WINNERS WERE AGED NO OLDER THAN NINE FROM 47% REPRESENTATION

Being a ten-year-old, last season's hot favourite, *Whyso Mayo*, had the stats against him as 14 of the previous 16 winners were aged in single figures. The fact that the only pair to win aged ten or older were previous winners in *Double Silk* and *Earthmover* is no coincidence in my opinion and, when *Double Silk* won for a second time, there was only one horse aged under ten in the race. Maybe that means we should not be too hasty in overlooking last year's winner, *Drombeag*, but statistically it has to be construed as a serious negative for any other contender aged in double figures. I don't believe that being ten years of age cost *Whyso Mayo* the race last season of course, but surely something has to be read into the fact that horses aged in double figures win the large majority of hunter chases but when it comes to the most prestigious hunter chase of them all, their record is appalling registering just two successes since 1990? Although he had only raced 11 times in his life, you still couldn't describe the nine-year-old, *Drombeag*, as being an up-and-coming Foxhunters' winner, but being aged in single figures he was in the minority in that, year after year, horses aged ten and older outnumber their younger rivals but still come off second best.

THE LAST 14 WINNERS HAD PREVIOUSLY WON UNDER RULES

There will be point-to-pointers that have yet to win on a park course (and some hunters for that matter) that will sneak into the race but as we have to go back to *Rushing Wild* in 1992 to locate the last Foxhunters' winner to be scoring for the first time under Rules, we can quickly gloss over such contenders. Point-to-point fences are a far cry from Cheltenham's obstacles so, if they are not already at a class disadvantage, the chances are that the stiffer fences will catch them out. Besides, *Rushing Wild* subsequently proved himself to be the best winner of the Foxhunters' for generations by running second in the Gold Cup to *Jodami* 12 months later when moved to Martin Pipe so we are dealing with an exceptional case with him.

18 OF THE LAST 19 WINNERS WERE EDUCATED FROM A POINT-TO-POINT OR HUNTER CHASE BACKGROUND

With 18 of the last 19 winners brought up through the pointing/hunting ranks, it makes sense to oppose the many former-quality handicappers in this race that found the combination of the ageing process in conjunction with a highish handicap mark too much of a burden to overcome so were sent hunter chasing and aimed at the Foxhunters'. The only Foxhunters' winner since *Observe* overcame his rivals in the blizzard of 1987 that did not start life in point-to-points or hunter chases was the 143-rated *Sleeping Night* who comfortably outclassed his rivals

to win in 2005. That said, he was only nine and had endured injury problems so was not regressive or over-raced so he was unlike most ex-handicappers (or better, remember the dual Gold Cup third *Harbour Pilot* blew out big style as favourite in 2006) who are on the downgrade when aimed at this race. Last season's winner, *Drombeag*, dabbled at handicap chasing with little success for a while before being sent hunter chasing but he started his career by winning his only point-to-point in Ireland as a four-year-old. Ex-handicappers (or better) to oppose that appear to have been trained for this season's Foxhunters' include *Thisthatandtother*, *Cornish Rebel*, *Take The Stand*, *Lord Of Illusion*, *Mister Banjo*, *Armatuurk*, *Lou Du Moulin Mas*, *Green Belt Flyer* and *Tribal Venture* amongst others.

5 OF THE LAST 12 WINNERS MADE VIRTUALLY ALL THE RUNNING

In last season's *Cheltenham Festival Betting Guide* I stressed the importance to in-running backers with regards to this race of supporting a horse that was being given an uncomplicated ride, i.e. one that was not being purposely ridden from too far off the pace. Hopefully some of you took the in-running prices on *Drombeag* who J T McNamara never had out of the first three hugging the inside rail throughout and taking overall control with more than a circuit to race. We are dealing with amateur riders here after all so why try and be extra clever? There are no extra prizes for winning looking pretty as 'Keep It Simple Seb' proves year after year on the Flat losing very few races he should have won unlike many of his peers who can overcomplicate matters. No names mentioned but Sir Michael Stoute has been around a while so knows a thing or two. If you backed or, even worse, made the 2/1 favourite, *Whyso Mayo*, your Festival Banker last season, you have every right to question why Damien Murphy spotted the winner 20 lengths on the first circuit having ridden the same horse close to the pace when he won the previous season's Foxhunters'? Did his over-confidence cost him the race? Given that *Whyso Mayo* blundered four out and landed flat-footed when *Drombeag* flew the last, it is easy to argue the favourite's jumping was what cost him most but, I would argue when you are clearly riding the best horse in the race, and providing it does not have to be ridden like *Arazi* in the Breeders' Cup, surely it makes sense to keep it simple as that gives more opportunity from which to recover from mistakes. Few things infuriate me more than when I've backed a horse that is pulling double over its rivals but his jockey has not yet committed him heading to the final fence only to see him belt it and have insufficient time from which to recover. Having led for the most part, *Drombeag* became the fifth Foxhunters' winner in the last 12 renewals to cut out the majority of the running and the eighth winner to pass the post in front with a circuit to race in the last 25 renewals to also pass the post in front when it matters most. If *The Man From Slatt* comes over from Ireland, I am not sure anything will want to lead him on the first circuit or otherwise they are going too fast. However, he was wildly impressive making all to score by 25 lengths on his hunter chase debut at Downpatrick in December having won his three previous point-to-points by a combined margin of 65 lengths so would be a very interesting contender.

RECENT FORM

I used to be big on last-time-out winners for the Foxhunters' as, up until six years ago, only one of the previous 15 winners had failed to win on their previous start. However, four of the last six winners were beaten on their most recent start so the importance of ensuring we are on a last-time-out winner is no more. Confession time. Although I didn't put him up as a likely winner in my *Overnight Email Service*, I simply could not resist shelling out a few quid a couple of minutes before the off that a Jonjo O'Neill-trained, J P McManus-owned, J T McNamara-ridden contender for a weak renewal of the Foxhunters' was paying as big as 36/1 on the tote. Following *Greenhope's* Grand Annual win the previous season when he paid 29/1 on the tote, that's the second time in as many Festivals I got really lucky in the final moments before the off noting a massive price on the tote about a horse likely to be have trained to the minute for the day and why we should all make a note to check out the totepool odds at the Festival. Watching the re-runs on Racing UK later that evening, I had to chuckle when Stewart Machin interviewed Jonjo O'Neill before racing and his trainer didn't even mention him when running through his day's chances! As punters, reading between the lines of trainers' comments is a skill as most don't want to give too much away. Martin Pipe was a past master of it. I attended Pipe's Cheltenham November Meeting press day a couple of years ago and, as one by one he paraded some of his likely runners over the three days, all I wanted then to do was note which ones he hadn't brought out that had an entry. He had seven winners at that meeting and I don't recall too many of them parading before us! With regards to certain trainers, it is not what they say that is key, but what they don't say.



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PAUL NICHOLLS' LAST 2 RUNNERS BOTH WON

Paul Nicholls hasn't saddled a runner in the last two renewals but take note if he unleashes a contender this season as his last two runners both won. It is also worth noting that between *Fantus'* brace of Foxhunters' wins for **Richard Barber** in 1995 and 1997, it was Nicholls that trained him for both his races in handicaps in between those Festival successes. As for Barber, his better pointers now head to Nicholls earlier in their career so the chances of him improving on his four Foxhunters' winners are becoming more remote. He had his first big chance for almost a decade with *Patches* last season (started second-favourite) but he fell before half-way. As far as owners are concerned, if it's a race for slow, old plodders at the Festival, we must look twice at the **J P McManus**-owned horses as he loves these contests and makes a habit of winning the NH Chase, Cross-Country and the Foxhunters'. Although he hasn't notched up a 'Kim Muir' winner yet (the fourth chase for relative slowcoaches at the Festival), it's not for lack of trying having supplied the losing favourite on five occasions. *Drombeag* was giving McManus his second win in this race following *Elegant Lord's* stylish victory 11 years earlier (also placed on two other occasions) and I dare say he'll have another runner or two lined up for another crack this season.

THE IRISH HAVE SUPPLIED 7 OF THE LAST 8 TOP-FOUR POSITIONS

Following an unprecedented 1-2-3-4-5 in 2006, although the Irish were foiled last season, their overall performance remained one of high consistency being responsible for the second, third, fourth and sixth. Since 1983, the Irish have won the Foxhunters' on five occasions and, judging by their strength-in-depth showings of the last two seasons, I could not dissuade anyone from looking at their challenge before that of the home team. Traditionally, the leading Irish trial is the **Raymond Smith Hunters' Chase** at Leopardstown on Irish Hennessy Gold Cup day, a race in which the last two Irish-trained Foxhunters' winners limbered up in. This season's running saw *Agus A Vic* beat *Climate Control* with a long gap back to the remainder. However, *Beautiful Sound* beat *Agus A Vic* at Fairyhouse last spring and has not run since so he is a major player.

KEY RACES

Like the Champion Hurdle and Champion Chase, as good a place as any to look for the winner is to rewind 12 months and consider **last season's renewal**. Two of the last four winners finished unplaced in the previous season's Foxhunters' with *Drombeag* only ninth in 2006, but *Earthmover* fared much better beaten just under four lengths into fourth 12 months before he returned to make history scoring as a 13-year-old. It is also worth noting horses that have run well in any previous renewal as there have been three fairly-recent dual winners in *Fantus*, *Double Silk* and *Earthmover* (his two victories were a staggering six years apart), *Last Option* was third three years prior to winning the 2002 running, *Elegant Lord* in 1996 and *Call Collect* in 1990 improved on their third placing of 12 months earlier and *Three Counties* was a dual runner-up before grabbing his moment of triumph.

The Stewart Tory Memorial Hunters' Chase at Wincanton used to be a good guide but not any more now it has been rescheduled to take place after the Festival, therefore the **Willoughby De Broke Hunters' Chase** at Warwick on February 22nd after this book has gone to print - a race that regularly attracts the best hunters based in the Midlands - is the best current-season guide. When it has beaten the weather, it has a strong record with two of its last three winners (*Cavalero* and *Castle Mane*) going on to win the Foxhunters'.

Willoughby De Broke Hunters' Chase (Warwick): 2 (*Castle Mane* 1st, *Cavalero* 1st)

Last Season's Renewal: 2 (*Earthmover* unpl, *Drombeag* unpl)

6 OF THE LAST 14 WINNERS HAD PREVIOUSLY WON AT CHELTENHAM

Although *Drombeag* had not won at the track before, he was third as a six-year-old in the NH Chase three years earlier so had some 'previous' at the Festival, as of course, did last season's runner-up. Cynics will argue that if only six of the last 14 winners had won at Cheltenham, then eight winners have not so it is a worthless statistic. I would disagree however, as there are not that many opportunities for a hunter to a register a success at the course (just eight hunter chases scheduled at Cheltenham per season) and only one winner since 1987 did not start life as a pointer/hunter. It is not something to major on, but it is certainly not going to harm your fancy's chance if it has proven itself at the course before.

5 OF THE LAST 7 WINNERS HAVE STARTED AT 14/1+

What was formerly a great race for punters has turned full circle in recent seasons with five of the last seven winners proving tricky to find being sent off at 14/1 and upwards. That said, it has not all been doom and gloom as *Kingscliff* and *Sleeping Night* justified favouritism during that time span but it is a far cry from the 24-year period up to and including 1999 when all 24 winners started at no bigger than 12/1. I am not going to let the market guide me in any way.

TRENDS SUMMARY

Strong Advice:

Oppose horses aged ten and older (with the exception of a previous Foxhunters' winner)

Dismiss ex-handicappers (or better) switching to hunter chasing

Reject confirmed hold-up horses

Other Patterns Worth Noting:

The Irish challenge has been very strong for the last two seasons

Look twice at horses that like to force the pace

Consider previous course winners

Respect Paul Nicholls' and J P McManus' contenders

Consider horses to have run well in the race before

The winner of the Willoughby De Broke (Warwick) and Raymond Smith (Leopardstown) Hunters' Chases

THE MAJOR PLAYERS BY MARTIN HARRIS OF MACKENZIE & HARRIS HUNTER CHASERS AND POINT-TO-POINTERS

THISTHATANDTOTHER (IRE)

12-y.o (Bob Back - Baden)

Paul Nicholls

Cheltenham Form: 451F2221F57

Without a win since beating Fondmort in the inaugural Ryanair Chase at the '05 Festival, this fellow has sought refuge from the handicapper in Hunter Chases this season, and scored without breaking sweat on his debut in the sphere at Fontwell. Ran off a high of 159 in the past, he clearly retains a touch of class, but he has never won beyond 2m5f, and that fact will give the opposition real hope.

AGUS A VIC (IRE)

7-y.o (Old Vic - Marovia)

Patrick Martin (Ire)

Confirmed himself the leading candidate from across the water when beating Climate Control at Leopardstown in February. The seven-year-old who has a progressive profile has only been beaten by Beautiful Sound and General Striker when completing, and receives excellent assistance from Jason McKeown. Normally ridden for a turn of foot.

BEAUTIFUL SOUND (IRE)

6-y.o (Presenting - Croom River)

Ted Walsh (Ire)

Has only been seen on a racecourse twice, but has won both times, the latest a defeat of Agus A Vic (gave 12lbs) in a Hunter Chase at Fairyhouse last April. Only a six-year-old he could be very special indeed, but connections appear in no rush to put the gun to his head.

DROMBEAG (IRE)

10-y.o (Presenting - Bula Beag)

Jonjo O'Neill

Cheltenham Form: 391

Landed this prize on his seasonal reappearance last year, but had Whyso Mayo not fluffed his lines at the final fence would surely have been beaten, and no previous winner has successfully defended his crown since Double Silk in

1994. Goes best fresh. Has been tried in blinkers and cheekpieces.

LOU DU MOULIN MAS (FR)

9-y.o (*Sassanian - Houf*)

Paul Nicholls

Cheltenham Form: 62018

Is most adept at course completion and has run at the last three Festivals, but overall has a poor winning record, and lacks the class of his more illustrious stablemates. Regularly went well for an amateur in his handicapping days and made a highly satisfactory start to his new career winning at Folkestone. Runs tongue-tied, and has been tried in blinkers.

BON ACCORD

8-y.o (*Accordion - Park Athlete*)

Alan Hill

Cheltenham Form: 1

Proved impetuous and not an easy ride at first but has improved leaps and bounds since joining his current yard, and is unbeaten in his last six starts, including the Hiscox Final at Cheltenham. Beaten the useful Ballylusky on his reappearance at Ampton, but the form has taken a knock since.

MISTER BANJO (FR)

12-y.o (*Mister Mat - Migre*)

Simon Sherwood

Cheltenham Form: 110127

A very smart hurdler in his youth winning the Grade 1 Finale Hurdle, and has romped to victory in both his Points, the latest an impressive defeat of Something Small at Chaddesley Corbett, but he is as fragile as bone china these days. Retains a real touch of class and thoroughly deserves to take his place, but would only be risked on easy ground.

CLIMATE CONTROL (IRE)

12-y.o (*Montelimar - Fraoch Ban*)

John Paul Brennan (Ire)

Cheltenham Form: 0

Was at the height of his powers when scoring four times in the '05/6 season, but has never stood much racing, and finished tailed off in this event last year. A good second to Agus A Vic at Leopardstown in February suggests he is in better form now, but at 12 he will surely be unable to turn the tables.

LORD OF ILLUSION (IRE)

11-y.o (*Mister Lord - Jellaride*)

Sophie George

Cheltenham Form: 21P200

Completed a hat-trick over fences for Tom George in January '05, including a defeat of Lou du Moulin Mas, but the handicapper took note and failed to register a success in ten subsequent starts under Rules. Now in the care of his former handler's wife, Sophie, he ended his losing run when scoring at Weston Park on his Pointing debut in January. Contested the '06 Gold Cup and Grand National when rated a career-best 141.

TAKE THE STAND (IRE)

12-y.o (*Witness box - Denys Daughter*)

Peter Bowen

Cheltenham Form: 5625PP

Another high profile horse to descend to the Hunter Chasing arena, but his best days are surely behind him. Runner-up in Kicking King's Gold Cup, and rated 163 in his prime, but his enthusiasm appeared to have drained away completely latterly under Rules. Is likely to have his favoured decent ground though.

SOUTHWESTERN (IRE)

9-y.o (*Roselier - Catchthegoose*)

Camilla Scott

A smart Pointer in the West Country, he was touched off in the Touareg Final at Towcester last year before gaining ample compensation in the Weatherbys Chase John Corbet Cup at Stratford. The winner of 11 races but a setback at Larkhill in February may well rule him out of contention.

GREEN BELT FLYER (IRE)

10-y.o (*Leading Counsel - Current Liability*)

Venetia Williams

Cheltenham Form: 08

Successful on seven occasions and attained a high mark of 140 when racing under Rules, the last when in the care of his present handler. Had too much resolve for Cornish Rebel at Huntingdon on his Hunter Chase debut, and deserves his place in the line up. Suited by mud.

CORNISH REBEL (IRE)

11-y.o (*Un Desperado - Katday*)

Lisa Williamson

Cheltenham Form: 01330710

Won six of his first eight starts under Rules, including a Grade 1 Hurdle and a Grade 2 Chase, but he often looked a very difficult ride, and has subsequently only scored once in 14 appearances. Found Green Belt Flyer too good on his Hunter Chase debut at Huntingdon in February, once again giving the impression that he could have won had he so wished. Should he make the line up this will be his fourth consecutive appearance at the Festival. Has been tried in blinkers.

ARMATURK (FR)

11-y.o (*Baby Turk - Armalita*)

Paul Nicholls

Cheltenham Form: 23486414795P20

Successful over hurdles in his homeland has since won 12 races at up to 2m5f for Paul Nicholls, and would have scored by a wide margin had Nick Scholfield not fallen off him at the second-last on his Hunter Chase debut at Bangor in February. A Grade 1 winner and rated 158 at his best, but has not won since December 2005, and finished tailed off on his only attempt over 3m to date.

GENERAL STRIKER

8-y.o (*Classic Cliche - Springfield Girl*)

Enda Bolger (*Ire*)

An inmate of Enda Bolger's powerful yard who ran Whyso Mayo to two lengths at Punchestown in April '06. Beat Agus A Vic in a Hunter Chase at Down Royal on his only appearance last season, and is sure to be better for a recent pipe opener in an Irish Point, but has to prove that he retains all of his ability. Seems to be best going right-handed.

SOMETHING SMALL

8-y.o (*Supreme Leader - Rachel C*)

Robert Waley-Cohen

Has blossomed into a smart performer this season, and his demolition of 18 rivals (including Buckby Lane and Man From Highworth) in a very fast time at Larkhill in January was nothing short of spectacular. However he limped away from the Winner's Enclosure after Mister Banjo put him firmly in his place at Chaddesley Corbett next time, and his participation must be in some doubt.

TRIBAL VENTURE (FR)

10-y.o (*Dom Alco - Babacha*)

Philip Hobbs

Cheltenham Form: 31FPREF065

A 139-rated chaser three years ago he has found winning difficult in recent times, scoring just once in 25 starts prior to a successful Hunter Chase debut at Ludlow. No slouch in this sphere, but will need one or two of the others to fail.

AMICELLI (GER)

9-y.o (*Goofalik - Arratonia*)

Cherry Coward

Cheltenham Form: 320

The winner of six races when in the care of Philip Hobbs before losing his way latter under Rules reversed the tables with Buckby Lane (who had beaten him a length at Thorpe) on 7lbs worse terms at Brocklesby Park in February, and looks to have regained his enthusiasm. Unsuitd by soft ground.

BUCKBY LANE

12-y.o (*Nomadic Way - Buckby Folly*)

Jane Starkey

Cheltenham Form: 111

A smart but lightly-raced performer under Rules is unbeaten in three previous visits to Cheltenham. Had a fitness advantage when beating Amicelli at Thorpe in January, but the tables were turned when they met again at Brocklesby Park the following month. Only risked on good or easy surfaces, and might find 3m2f stretching his stamina.

MAN FROM HIGHWORTH

9-y.o (*Ballet Royal - Cavisoir*)

John Manners

A 110-rated winning hurdler had not scored since November '04 until springing a 33-1 shock in a competitive Open at Larkhill in January. Proved that to be no fluke with an authoritative success in the prestigious Coronation Cup at the same course next time. Speedy, and John Manners knows how to breed and train the winner of this race, but does he have the stamina reserves? In an age where highly professional outfits are dominating this arena there would be no more popular winner.

ROBBERS GLEN (IRE)

8-y.o (*Muroto - Dante's Thatch*)

Valerie Jackson

An imposing individual who is unbeaten in four completions for Valerie Jackson, and showed his wellbeing when trouncing useful opponents in a Ladie's Open on his reappearance at Thorpe in January. Needs to prove his ability to handle regulation fences, but is fast improving, and would be no forlorn hope if he does.

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