

PAUL ON MARCH FOR AINTREE SHOWDOWN

National win to clinch title for Nicholls army



ON THE MOVE: Cheltenham winners Flagship Uberalles (left) with Joe Tizzard, Call Equiname (centre) and See More Business with Paul and Bridget Nicholls respectively

a pair of spectacular performances at Wincanton elevated him to prominent positions in both Gold Cup and Grand National markets.

Nicholls went to Cheltenham last month winnerless at the great festival.

But Flagship Uberalles, who won so impressively at Aintree on Thursday, soon put the record straight in the Arkle Challenge Trophy.

"That was probably the best of the lot as it broke the mould and took the pressure off," admitted Nicholls.

Call Equiname, who lost his unbeaten record in the Melling Chase yesterday, roared to Queen Mother Champion Chase glory a day later before See More Business came back to his best to land a famous victory in the Gold Cup itself.

Well back in fourth place that day was Double Thriller, who had

shown too much early pace to last home in the toughest school in racing.

"We had always looked on him as a stayer and it was a bit of a surprise to see him show that pace," said Nicholls.

"But I had him as fit as a flea, to take on the best at level weights that day and he is in about the same shape now."

"He wore a grackle (crossed) noseband when he did a bit of schooling with Joe (Tizzard) the other day. I expect Joe will be able to settle him and the

noseband is nothing new to the horse as he wore one in his hunter chase days.

"The idea will be to get him popping away and I would not worry about the ground for Double Thriller, or any horse for that matter. Joe walked the track after the Foxhunters' and said it was perfect."

"As for dangers. Well, start with 30 fences and 31 other runners and you see how difficult it is."

"But Double Thriller is the type I think is tailor-made for the place, if he stays."

Bookie-basher Tizz

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were framed. "That was a good performance as it was only his sixth run and the first real race he had been in."

"My only worry is that he was a bit strong in the early stages at Cheltenham, but I don't get ner-

vous before my races and I am really looking forward to this one."

Young Joe is in his first season as a professional rider yet is in sixth place in the jockeys table. "Joe is a budding champion - we have every confidence in him," declares boss Paul Nicholls.

Nicholls knows plenty about taking in the Aintree spotlight.

Although you would not believe it, looking at his sturdy frame now, Nicholls was a successful jockey in the 1980s, and enjoyed his first high-profile experience when he rode Another Duke, who was leased by Des Lynam, in the 1986 National.

After retiring from the saddle, on medical advice after twice breaking a leg, Nicholls played a major part in Seagram's preparation for his winning National run in 1991 when assistant to David Barons.

He then branched out on his own and took over the Manor Farm Stables owned by farmer Paul Barber.

"My wife Bridget and myself had scraped together ten grand and gave ourselves five years to make a go of it," he recalled.

Make a go of it is one thing they certainly did!

NATIONAL WIRE

BRINGING YOU UPDATED REPORTS AND NEWS FROM AROUND AINTREE

Galloping greys

Housewives grey delight

ONLY two grey horses, The Lamb in 1868 and '71 and Nicolaus Silver (1961), have won the Grand National.

This year, three silver flashes face the starter. Suny Bay, runner-up for the past two years, heads the list with top weight of 11-13.

He is supported by Baronet and Kendal Cavalier, who have already won Nationals.

Baronet, who carries 10-2, won the Scottish National at Ayr last April. He carries the colours of Mrs David Thompson, who won the National in 1992 with Party Politics.

Welsh National winner Kendal Cavalier is trained by Nigel Hawke, who rode Seagram to Aintree glory in 1991.

Blinkers

Blind spots

ALTHOUGH Earth Summit carried blinkers to victory last year, horses equipped with the "head-gear" seldom win the National.

Before him you have to go back to L'Escapade in 1976 to find a blinkered winner and back to Poinavon, in 1967 and Battleship (1938), ridden by the youngest-ever winning jockey Bruce Hobbs, before that.

This year Earth Summit, Cyborgo, Nahten Lad and Samlee are horses taking the blinkered approach.

Eastern promise

Big business in Hong Kong

MARTELL are not only sponsoring the Grand National, they are also giving up the prizemoney for eight races at the floodlit meeting at Happy Valley, Hong Kong.

The L'Or de Martell Cup, will be simulcast at Aintree at 1.15 as will the Martell Cordon Bleu Handicap at 12.45.

Happy Valley expect a crowd of 50,000 to watch these races - plus the National, on which the Hong Kong turnover will be \$25m.

Jockeys records

Woody tops

DUAL-WINNER Richard Dunwoody is the most experienced Aintree rider in action today.

'Woody', who won the great race on West Tip in 1986 and Minnehoma in 1994, made his debut in 1965 when West Tip fell at the second Becher's.

He has ridden in 13 Nationals, completing eight times, while Graham Bradley, who has ridden in the race 12 times, has only got round twice.

Carl Llewellyn, Mick Fitzgerald, Tony Dobbin, Brendan Powell and Jimmy Frost are other former winning jockeys riding today.

Eight jockeys make their debuts today.

They are Steve Wynne on Coome Hill, Barry Fenton on Kendal Cavalier, Tom Jenks on Commercial Artist, Gerry Catter on Merry People, Aidie Smith on Castle Coin, Robert Widger on Choisty and Brian Harding on Feels Like Gold.

Number crunch

Easier to stay to the end

SINCE the fences were sloped in 1961 the percentage of finishers in the National has risen considerably.

Recent instances of single-figure completions have usually coincided with heavy ground.

Last year only six got round, while the same number made it to the winning post in 1994. Four out of 30 finished when the ground was heavy in 1980.

Unless Aintree is hit by heavy rain overnight, the ground will ride on the soft side of good and experts expect 17 to 20 horses will get round.

Food and drink

Meal appeal

MORE than 100,000 people are expected through the turnstiles at Aintree over the three-day meeting and they have to be provided with drink and mouthwatering food.

Around 2,500 catering staff will be on hand to serve up:

4,000 bottles of champagne, 70,000 pints or cans of beer and 6,000 bottles of wine.

Those who need to be fed can look forward to getting through: 800lb of salmon, 2,500lb of sirloin and 5,500lb of fillet of beef, 1,000lb of poached salmon, 5,000 new potatoes, 1,000 dressed crabs, 2,200 fresh fruit and 5,500 lemons.

Unlucky lad

Sharp after a slice of glory

PHIL SHARP is looking to put the record straight at Aintree today.

The 33-year-old stable lad will be leading up Suny Bay for the third time in the National.

But Phil is the 'nearby man' of the great race, for, not only has he twice led Suny Bay in the runner-up enclosure he also ended up in the same place in 1991 with Garrison Savannah.

TO FINISH ON TOP

Jenny will be slipping out of sight completely.

"There is just going to be a bit of a role reversal with my son Mark and I am moving onto the sub's bench. The time was right for him to take over," said Jenny, who has recovered from cancer.

Retirement of a sort will come when Jenny takes up a new role as manager for Robert Hitchens, one of her main owners.

But Grand National Day will not be the same without a horse trained by Mrs J Pitman.

"We have always trained our horses with Cheltenham and Aintree in mind as the meetings are the pinnacle of our season."

"I have enjoyed some great days

at both of them, but it was a struggle when I first started training and I have not made enough money out of this game to put my feet up," she admits.

Jenny has given her fans a roller-coaster ride over the years.

Royal Athlete recovered from serious injury to double her National score in 1995, while Esha Ness was the first to finish in the void race of 1993.

Just an hour after Garrison Savannah had won the Cheltenham Gold Cup in 1991, Mark Pitman was stretched over the Gloucestershire track with a cracked pelvis following a fall over hurdles.

He made it back in time to ride "Garry" at Aintree, only for the

National to be snatched away in the dying strides by Seagram.

"I was really proud of both of them. Mark has made a great start to his career as a trainer."

"Now he needs to develop his team and expanding into my place is the right move."

Today it is all down to Nahten Lad to send Jenny back to Lambourn crying tears of joy.

"Nahten Lad did well in his last race at Cheltenham and I am lucky to get Andrew Thornton to ride him. The horse is in good form," she enthuses.

Is this going to be another impossible Aintree dream come true?

Do not bet against Jenny Pitman!



PITMAN: Aintree swansong