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Racing: Cheltenham take steps to cut Festival risks

By Chris McGrath at Cheltenham

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The gathering tempo of the jumps season gains further impetus tomorrow when no less a horse than the Cheltenham Gold Cup winner appears at Punchestown. Cheltenham itself resumes business next Tuesday, while the winner of a novice chase at Exeter yesterday, Natal, was dignified by quotes as low as 14-1 for the Irish Independent Arkle Trophy, still five months distant. All in all, there is a very pleasant expectation in the air.

At the time of his Gold Cup success, however, War Of Attrition appeared to have been named with morbid foresight. Nine horses had died during the course of the four-day Festival. In terms of public profile and private scruples, this was a freakish dividend to the inevitable risks shared by man and beast on racecourses throughout the year. Yesterday, however, Cheltenham's management did their utmost to show themselves immune to complacency.

Responding to an investigation by the Horseracing Regulatory Authority (HRA), they revealed measures that might in themselves seem trivial, but for the marginal causation of such traumas. And certainly there was no mistaking the fundamental scope of the most arresting provision, which allows runners to be compulsorily withdrawn from Festival races after veterinary inspection.

It being logistically impractical to examine every Festival runner, discretion will be used to identify those that might warrant particular attention: horses returning from a long absence, for instance, or those that have run previously during the meeting. One prominent Irish trainer is fond of remarking that he would no sooner welcome another man feeling the legs of his horses than those of his wife. And only yesterday Brian Ellison, having flown his horse halfway round the world from Yorkshire, was aghast to be informed - under similar powers in Australia - that Carte Diamond will not be permitted to run in the Melbourne Cup because of a leg problem.

Peter Webbon, the HRA chief executive and himself a respected veterinary expert, acknowledged the potential for emotive differences of opinion. "But this is more a matter of reassuring people, rather than us going round saying this horse can run and that one can't," he said. "Clearly, if things go wrong, we would want to have inspected any horse that might give you credible grounds for doing so. I see it as positive, not negative."

The most substantial innovation is the replacement of the notoriously awkward fence at the crest of a sweeping descent towards the home straight. A portable obstacle has now been moved several yards back, giving a flat, straight landing area that vitiates the sense of leaping into a void.

Adjustments to the width of other obstacles will provide outside "lanes" during winter meetings, preserving pristine ground for the Festival, while improvements have also been made to hurdle padding. Field limits are being trimmed, notably from 24 to 20 in the most contentious race, the National Hunt Chase over four miles. This has claimed seven lives in the five years since entry qualifications were upgraded, compared with none in the previous five runnings - even though the percentage of fallers has diminished.

With renewed attention to seeding, the management remains unabashed in seeking easy ground for the start of the Festival, and willing to water during its course if necessary. The track's officials have to be prepared for every manner of crisis, from pestilence to acts of God. They abandoned the 2001 Festival because of foot and mouth, and last winter were mortally embarrassed by the 11th hour loss of a major fixture to an unexpectedly stubborn frost.

There should be no repetition of the latter, at any rate, following the acquisition by Racecourse Holdings Trust of 45 acres of frost covers. Depending on the duration of a freeze, and daytime temperatures, it is hoped that the group's premier fixtures should remain immune to five or six degrees of frost. The covers can be rolled out inside two hours.

Much the same can be said, meanwhile, of the horses starting out at Punchestown over the next couple of afternoons. Star turn today is Iktitaf, who won the Irish Cesarewitch the other day on his first start since beating Straw Bear in the big novice hurdle at the Punchestown Festival.

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Nap: Hits Only Cash

(Yarmouth 5.10)

NB: John Terry

(Nottingham 4.00)

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