

Cheltenham goes under cover to reduce threat from frost

By Alan Lee
Racing Correspondent

BEING the theatre of championships brings an unforgiving scrutiny. Cheltenham launched its new season yesterday and, after a year in which more than one drama escalated swiftly into crisis, the themes were prevention, protection and, though unspoken, perception.

The four-day Festival in March endured the sobering statistic of 11 equine fatalities, indefensible figures that have duly been addressed. If some of the measures can and will be dismissed as cosmetic by those involved in the sport, they must also acknowledge that doing nothing would have invited censure.

So there will be reduced maximum

fields of 28 in all handicap hurdles at the next Festival, which boasts prize-money of more than £3 million, and the controversial National Hunt Chase will now be limited to 20, rather than 24. A fence has been moved, hurdles redesigned and veterinary reviews introduced.

But Cheltenham's winter of discontent also included a key meeting lost to frost and intensifying problems with low sun turning late afternoon steeplechases into a dangerous farce. There can be no guarantees against the climate but the search for solutions has been long and expensive.

Racecourse Holdings Trust (RHT), the Jockey Club company that owns Cheltenham and nine other jumps courses,

announced yesterday that it has secured 45 acres of frost covers for the coming winter and will deploy them at grade one weekend meetings.

Upwards of £100,000 has been spent on a 12-month lease and additional costs will be incurred each time they are used. So far, no sponsor is involved, as RHT has decided on its own initiative, rather than await the ongoing discussions involving the Racecourse Association and Betfair.

John Maxse, RHT's spokesman, explained: "We badly wanted to do something for this season, rather than have a further wait." He added that the covers would sometimes be sufficient to cover two entire courses, though this does not apply at Cheltenham.

Simon Claisse, clerk of the course at Cheltenham, said: "We need all 45 acres of covers for most of our meetings but 75 acres would be required for the Festival. We're still taking a view as to how best to approach that meeting but we're looking forward to this capability of protecting against frosts of down to -6 degrees."

The covers were rolled out for media inspection yesterday. Not on show, however, was the screen recommended to counteract low sun shining down the home straight at the mid-winter meetings. "The scientists tell us it would need to be 65m tall and 120m wide and simply holding down something of that size would take up our entire south car park," Claisse reported.

With this scheme a self-evident non-starter, Cheltenham is continuing to search for physical solutions while taking the reluctant step of reshuffling its running order at all meetings from November to January.

"The problem only applies to chases run late in the day, so we simply won't schedule any," Claisse said. "We will lose the conventional rhythm and could end with three successive hurdle races but that is better than having chases with a lot of the fences not being jumped."

One horse already being directed at a Festival novice chase had his first public outing over fences at Exeter yesterday. Natal, the first of Paul Nicholls's formidable team of novices to appear, was unextended to win at 1-3.

PHIL MINGO / PINNACLE



Natal wins his first start over fences at Exeter yesterday

WORCESTER

ROB WRIGHT

- 1.50 Apollo Lady 3.20 Jeremy Cuddle Duck
- 2.20 Norseman Cateline 3.50 Nawow
- 4.20 Caribou
- 2.50 Leading Contender 4.50 Golden Child

GOING: SOFT (GOOD TO SOFT IN PLACES)

AT THE RACES

1.50 PUNTERSLOUNGE.COM BETTING FORUM MARES ONLY NOVICES HURDLE (£5,482; 2m) (15 runners)

- 1 3064-1 THEATRE DIVA 150 (S) H Daly 5-11-2 R Johnson [117]
- 2 0025 ANDREA GALE 45 E Williams 5-10-10 Paul Moloney
- 3 1130- APOLLO LADY 195 (D,G) A King 5-10-10 R Thornton
- 4 ARISTI 49F R Stronge 5-10-10 B Fenton
- 5 244300 CURVED AIR 3 B Powell 4-10-10 Charlie Studd (7)
- 6 0/POP FASHION SHOOT 192 P Kelsall 5-10-10 D Lavery (5)
- 7 /ROOP GEORGIE'S LASS 14F R J Price 7-10-10 L Stephens (5)
- 8 HAZELBURY N Hawke 5-10-10 A Thornton
- 9 33 IM BUSY 38 L Corcoran 5-10-10 H Ephgrave (5)
- 10 05 MESCALERA 6 R J Price 5-10-10 S E Durack

- 12 4454-6 TAKSINA 143 (S) R Buckler 7-10-12 D-Jacob (3)
- 13 0006P/ OUR LAWMAN 563 Mrs S J Smith 7-10-5 D O'Meara
- 14 00000 ASHGAN 46 (C,F,G,S) Dr P Pritchard 13-10-5 J Mogford
- 15 P0-P00 THE YELLOW EARL 19 J Jefferson 6-10-3 P Kinsella (5)

7-2 Norseman Cateline, 4-1 Willie The Fish, 5-1 Super Dolphin, 8-1 Kirby's Vic, 10-1 Taksina, 12-1 Allez Melina, Real Definition, 20-1 others.

THUNDERER'S VIEW: A weak race in which the safest option may be **NORSEMAN CATELINE**. Some uninspired hurdlers have given way to better efforts over fences, and a repeat of a 41 second to Jefferetti in a handicap chase at Uttoxeter (2m, soft) a week ago — off today's mark — may well be good enough. The tricky one is **Willie The Fish**, who showed bits of form two seasons ago but has not run for 18 months. A long absence is also a problem with **Super Dolphin**, not seen since unseating his rider in a handicap chase at Leicester (2m, good) last December. **Real Definition** made a series of jumping errors when 211 sixth to Sitting Duck in a handicap chase at Taunton (2m 3f, good to soft) on his most recent start, while **Kirby's Vic** tried to run out before unseating his rider last time.

2.50 WBX.COM WORLD BET EXCHANGE HURDLE (£3,426; 2m 4f) (16)

- 1 PP/P- ALL THAT JAZZ 528P Mrs S Johnson 7-10-12 T Siddall
- 2 2232- BRADLEY BOY 185 (BF) C Llewellyn 5-10-12 Paul Moloney
- 3 40- CELTIC SOCIETY 212 P Ritchens 5-10-12 A Tinkler
- 4 0/60- INCANDESCENCE 259 (B) Mrs P Robeson 5-10-12 J A McCarthy

- 7 2- KILCARTY 241P N Hawke 6-11-0 A Thornton
- 8 3121P- NOR NOR EAST 242 (S) Jomjo O'Neill 8-11-0 A P McCoy
- 9 51- BIBLE LORD 234P (S) A Turrell 5-10-12 M D Grant
- 10 11P50- JEREMY CUDDLE DUCK 215 (S) N Twiston-Davies 5-10-12 Tony Evans
- 11 11150- NINE DE SIVOLA 216 (D,G,S) F Murphy 5-10-12 G Lee
- 12 46060- HELTORNIC 181 (D,G,S) M Scudamore 6-10-7 T Scudamore

7-2 Jeremy Cuddle Duck, 4-1 Nine De Sivola, 5-1 Ferimon, 6-1 Nor/nor' east, 8-1 Heltonic, 12-1 Bible Lord, 14-1 Amanpuri, Corlande, 16-1 others.

THUNDERER'S VIEW: An interesting race can go to **JEREMY CUDDLE DUCK**. He mopped up three minor contests before coming unstuck in better company, but he ran respectably when 71 fifth to Neptune Collonges in a grade two novice hurdle at Haydock (2m 7f 110yd, heavy). He may just have the edge over another chasing newcomer, **Nor/Nor'East**, who was pulled up early in a handicap hurdle at Haydock (2m 7f 110yd, heavy) after beating Nonantais 1½ off a mark of 116 in a handicap hurdle at Sandown (2m 6f, heavy). **Nine De Sivola** was rated 133 when 301 behind Kadoun in the Pertemps Final handicap hurdle at the Cheltenham Festival (3m, good). He is useful but his stable is struggling for peak form. **Corlande**, rated 119 over hurdles, disappointed on his return when 361 sixth to Not Left Yet in a beginners' chase at Carlisle (2m 4f, good to soft). **Ferimon** is a similar type, rated 125 over hurdles last term but then disappointing when 281 third to Royal Courrouge in a beginners' chase at Warwick (3m 2f, soft).

3.50 WORLD BET EXCHANGE WBX.COM HANDICAP HURDLE

4.20 RICHARD DAVIS MEMORIAL HANDICAP CHASE (£13,012; 2m 4f) (11)

- 1 2FU-16 NAYODABAYO 155 (BF,D,F,G) E Williams 6-11-12 W Hutchinson 117
- 2 42102- BRIERY FOX 175 (BF,D,G) H Daly 8-11-11 M Bradburne 122
- 3 03000- FAIT LE JOJO 186 (D,F,G,S) L Corcoran 9-11-11 H Ephgrave (5)
- 4 5/050- ALEXANDERTHEGREAT 290 (G,S) F Murphy 8-11-3 G Lee 93
- 5 31F14- NICE TRY 186 (D,G,S) Miss V Williams 7-11-2 S Thomas 129
- 6 2413P- GIVE ME LOVE 40 (B,T,S) A Jukes 6-11-2 L Heard (5) 123
- 7 5513- ANOTHER NATIVE 186 (D,S) C Mann 8-10-12 N Fahly 137
- 8 3F-2PP MAJOR EURO 118 (CD,G,S) S Gilmore 9-10-12 M Foley [124]
- 9 /60P- ALAM 290 (S) R D P Newland 7-10-9 D Elsworth 118
- 10 52060- BAODAI 11 P Hobbs 4-10-5 R Johnson
- 11 0141- CARIBOU 192 (S) O Sherwood 4-10-5 L Aspell

7-2 Caribou, 5-1 Baodai, 6-1 Nice Try, Another Native, 7-1 Briery Fox, 8-1 Nayodabayo, 10-1 Fait Le Jojo, Alexanderthegreat, 12-1 others.

THUNDERER'S VIEW: Baodai cut little ice on his British debut when 221 ninth of 13 to Mahogany Blaze in a handicap hurdle at Chepstow 11 days ago (2m 110yd, good) but should strip fitter here and does not look harshly treated on the switch to fences. Preference, though, is for the other bottom weight, **CARIBOU**, who looked a chaser in the making when winning two of his three novice hurdles last season and is thrust straight into handicap company over fences, seemingly on an attractive mark. **Fait Le Jojo** ran well in valuable handicap hurdles last season but failed to complete on his two most recent starts over fences in 2003. Having won over 3m 1f at Fakenham last season, **Briery**

11 MIRACLE BABY 88F A Chamberlain 4-10-10 J Morgan (7) -
12 000 PADDYMCTUME 17 S Curran 4-10-10 W Kennedy (3) 21
13 210.45 RIVER TRIPS 14 (F) D. Ross 4-10-10 T Soutman 82

5 450-11 HAPPENED OUT 217 J Mullins 3-10-12 A Thornton -
6 P/ KALIN DE THAIX 996 P Nicholls 8-10-12 P Merrigan (5) -
7 110-1 LEADING CONTENDER 217 (S) P. Hobbs 5-10-12 R Johnson -

(£5,482: 2m 4f) (16)

Fox may find this trip on the sharp side, while Nayodabayo has shown his best form on a faster surface.