

GRAND NATIONAL 2018 – PREVIEW

PREAMBLE

To my regular readers, no apologies for the familiarity of the principles I use in this review. The Grand National has been going since 1839 and the huge data-sample is a statistician's dream. I use races back to the early 90s; although the nature of the race changed somewhat in 2012 it is still the longest race, with the biggest field and the most difficult jumps, so the need for an extremely durable horse remains.

SHAPE OF RACE

This year there were 105 entries, 4 down on last year but a fairly high number historically. Bottom weight on the day was historically a horse who was around number 70 at entry stage, but in the last two years far more of the higher rated horses have stood their ground.

A rating of 139 used to be a clever winning one a decade ago; in 2015 it just got a horse in off-bottom-weight; Doctor Harper on 143 squeaked into the 40th slot in 2017 and the same rating is necessary to get a run this year.

This change is partially also down to a marked "inflation" of ratings in the last ten years – for statisticians and racing anoraks [this article](#) is an interesting explanation of how that has come about.

WEIGHT AND GOING

No horse carried more than 11 stone to victory from 1988 until 2005, but then Hedgehunter in that year was the first of five in eight years to carry the weight. The last five years have seen four winners carrying 10-3, 10-6, 10-7 and 10-11, around the mighty effort by Many Clouds under 11-9, the biggest weight carried since Red Rum in 1974. Many Clouds was however seemingly anchored by just 1lb more than his winning weight on softer ground in 2016, and the big weights have more stopping power on softer ground. In the sample period (going back to 1992) the winners on soft or heavy ground have carried 10-8, 10-5, 10-11 and 10-7.

After a wet winter and recent rain on Merseyside, the ground looks likely to be testing on Saturday and I think we have to be cautious about the topweights.

BREEDING

Pedigree is generally seen as less important in jump racing than on the Flat. But the Grand National poses such a stern test of stamina that horses not bred with that factor in mind are at a massive disadvantage. All of the last 24 winners had substantial influence (an average winning distance of their offspring) of 11.4f+ from sire or damsire.

AGE

A spell of winners aged 9 or 10 was followed by three winners aged 11. Neptune Collonges was a top-class horse, Aurora's Encore a complete surprise and Pineau de Re was arguably still unexposed over fences despite his age. After that, Many Clouds won aged 8, Rule The World at 9 and One for Arthur at 8. Plenty of 11 year olds have been placed and they are usually preferable to 8 year olds – that age group has scored just four wins since Red Rum in 1973. No 7-year-old has won since 1940. Amberleigh House was the last 12 year old winner in 2004, but for the last 13 year old you have to go back to Sergeant Murphy in 1923.

The lesson seems to be that it takes an outstanding horse to win aged 8, that 11 year olds of such merit can also win, but those old chaps can also do so if they have had a well-plotted path to the race.

EXPERIENCE

The hurly-burly of a 40-runner steeplechase is unique in world racing. Young inexperienced horses used to single figure runner novice chases will simply have never encountered anything like it, and it is generally all they can do to complete the course. 22 of the last 23 winners have obtained experience in a 16+ runner handicap or Festival championship race. The massive “stats- buster” Rule The World was the first maiden chaser to win the National for well over a hundred years, but even he had had a (statistically commonplace) 13 runs over fences, including places in big handicaps, so he was not lacking in experience. The table of previous winners below shows that the optimum number of chases run in is between 13 and 23 - sufficient experience, but not having shown so much of the horse’s ability as to allow the handicapper to have got his measure. The fewest pre-Aintree runs was 9 by Miinehoma 24 years ago, but he was a brilliant horse with top class form over hurdles and fences who had had his career interrupted by injury.

Year/ going	Winner/ age /weight	Previous Chases	Longest race won	Big field experience	Date last run
2017 G-S	One For Arthur	10	3m5f	P51	14/1
2016 Soft	Rule The World 9 10-7	13 (2 nd season over fences)	2m4f hurdle	Placed in Irish National, Kerry National, run in Thyestes & Galway Plate	6/3
2015 G-S	Many Clouds 8, 11-9	10 (2 nd)	3m2f	Winning Hennessy	13/3
2014 G-S	Pineau de Re 11, 10-6	14 (2 nd)	3m4f	4 chases and Pertemps Hurdle	13/3
2013 G-S	Aurora’s Encore 11, 10-3	23 (5 th)	3m (also 2 nd in Scot. National)	Summer Plate & National, Scottish National, Jewson	2/3
2012 Good	Neptune Collonges 11,11-6	27 (6 th)	3m1f (also 3 rd Gold Cup	2 Gold Cups, 2 Hennessys, Scottish National	18/2
2011 Good	Ballabriggs 10, 11-0	12 (4 th)	3m1f	Kim Muir	5/3
2010 Good	Don’t Push It 10, 11-5	12 (4 th)	3m1f	Aintree handicap, Mildmay of Flete	18/3
2009 G-S	Mon Mome 9, 11-0	23 (4 th)	3m2f (also 2 nd Welsh National)	Nine times	14/3
2008 Good	Comply or Die 9, 10-9	14 (3 rd)	4m1f	Six times	23/2
2007 Good	Silver Birch 10, 10-6	13 (4 th)	3m6f	Welsh National and 4 others	13/3
2006 G-S	Numbersixvalverde 10, 10-8	10 (2 nd)	3m5f	Irish National	12/3
2005 G-S	Hedgehunter 9, 11-1	11 (3 rd)	3m4f	NH Chase, Hennessy	19/2
2004 Good	Amberleigh House 12, 10-10	36 (6 th)	3m1f	Six times inc 2 GNs	6/3
2003 Good	Monty’s Pass 10, 10-7	41 (5 th)	3m (never ran a yard further before Aintree)	Five inc 2 Galway Plates	16/3
2002 Good	Bindaree 8, 10-4	15 (2 nd)	3m	Topham, CHF 3.1 handicap.	12/3
2001 Heavy	Red Marauder 11, 10-11	13 (4 th)	2m4f	GN, Irish National, Hennessy	24/2
2000 Good	Papillon 9, 10-12	22 (4 th)	3m1f	Irish National	19/3

1999 Good	Bobbyjo 9, 10-0	17 (3 rd)	3m5f	Irish National	17/3
1998 Heavy	Earth Summit 10, 10-5	26 (4 th)	4m1f	Scottish National	28/2
1997 Good	Lord Gyllene 9, 10-0	18 (4 th)	4m2f	Had never run in field bigger than 10 (61238521 in NZ)	15/3
1996 Good	Rough Quest 10, 10-7	23 (5 th)	3m1f	Gold Cup	14/3
1995 Good	Royal Athlete 12, 10-6	17 (4 th)	3m3 ½ f	Gold Cup, GN, Irish National	4/3
1994 Heavy	Miinehoma 11, 10-8	9 (3 rd)	3m2f	RSA chase (18)	17/3
1993 VOID G-F	Esha Ness	18 (3 rd)	3m1f	RSA chase (20) Welsh National, Festival 3.1 handicap	16/3
1992 G-S	Party Politics 8, 10-7	14 (3 rd)	3m2f	Welsh National	29/2

(Racing Post records are only partial for earlier winners, though Seagram in 1991 had run in at least 24 chases prior to his win)

Contested chases before National therefore =

9 / 10 / 10 / 10 / 11/

12/ 12/ 13 /13 / 13 /

14/ 14 / 14 / 15/ 17 /

17 / 18/ 18 / 22 / 23/

23 / 23 / 26 / 27 / 36 / 41

Average = 17.7

Median = 14

STAMINA

It is quite impossible to bluff stamina in the National 22/24 winners had won a chase over at least 3 miles before Aintree. Of the other two, Rule The World had been second over 3m5f and Red Marauder's win was a once-in-a-century fluke. A 100-yard shorter course has made not the slightest difference.

PREPARATION

A stat that moved last year. Every previous winner in 24 years had had run since 18th February but One For Arthur had not run since his Warwick win on 14th January. While modern training methods have much improved performances after a lay-off, no horse ever wins the National on the bridle, so it was a fine piece of training by Lucinda Russell to maintain her horse's condition for ten weeks. It would be surprising though to see that date get much earlier- the very few National runners in recent years coming off a long lay off have sunk without trace.

BOUNCING BACK

There is a fine record for horses coming back from injury or a slump in form – this can be worth 7lb in the handicap. Miinehoma, DPI, Mon Mome, Comply or Die, Silver Birch all fitted that bill, and all of them except Mon Mome had had encouraging prep races. Even Neptune Collonges, with respectable form figures of P422, had been dropped 11lbs in the preceding 12 months.

TACTICS

Prominent racers have a big advantage, with the winner usually placed in the first seven or eight at halfway. For hold-up horses to win they need to be very solid stayers; Amberleigh House came from 25 lengths back at the Melling Road in 2004, and both of last year's front two were well off the pace at second Canal Turn.

TARGET

So ideally, we are looking for a nine to eleven year old, with 11-27 contested chases (ideally around 15), a prominent racer and both bred and proven (with a 3m chase win) to stay. Form in excess of 3m is a distinct advantage as is top six form in handicaps with 16 runners or more. If we are looking at an eight-year-old, he must really have the scope to be something special.

In recent years there has been no consistent pattern of weights carried on good ground, though soft going is to the advantage of lightweights.

2018 ENTRIES

- 1) MINELLA ROCCO (IRE) 8-year-old 11st 10lbs, Official Rating 162 13 chases (only 1 win) (3rd season over fences) Big field form - 13

A big, beautiful strong horse with a real engine, to the extent he was second in the 2017 Cheltenham Gold Cup, in which he beat the 2018 winner of that race, Native River, for the second time in their careers. Unfortunately, he is also a very inconsistent jumper and regularly ruins his chances with mistakes or falls, and since he last won a race in March 2016 he has failed to complete 4 of his 8 races. His last race was typical Minella Rocco, only 12-1 for the Irish Gold Cup and well in contention 2 out, he weakened rapidly on the home turn and fell at the last. It is a huge feat to win a Grand National off top weight and there's not much to suggest he's up to the job

- 2) BLAKLION 9 11-09 161 1. 15 chases (3rd), BFF – 541

Tough performer with lots of stamina who won 2016 RSA chase and is a similar sort to his trainer's second National winner, Bindaree. Didn't win in his second season but put in solid performances, including over 3m4f at Haydock, and in last year's National he loved the whole experience. Raced quietly early but had the class to move up on the run to second Becher's, looking the winner there and even more so when he took the lead and quickly went clear 5 out. But the One for Arthur bumped him 2 out and it was clear his stamina was running out there. Still stuck to his job very well and got 4th. His stamina needs to improve on that showing. An imperious win off 153 in the Becher Chase on heavy ground made him favourite for this year's National and he was even nibbled at for the Gold Cup. Connections chose to go back to Haydock though and that proved pretty disastrous. The formbook says he was second in the race the same as last year, but this time he was beaten 54 lengths rather than 3, and on desperately heavy going that may have left a mark. Blaklion is a fine horse and has had 8 weeks to recover from that pummelling, but he has not put away the doubts raised by last year's run and he has a big weight to carry on soft ground yet again.

- 3) **ANIBALE FLY** (FR) 8 11-07 159 11 chases (2nd) BFF – 11

A proper racehorse who is no stranger to big fields. Won two of his three bumpers, and two of his five hurdles, culminating in winning a 25-runner handicap at Punchestown. Has put in strong efforts throughout his chasing career, his only poor runs being in the Feltham and over an inadequate distance on his reappearance last autumn. Since then he has won a 28-runner handicap at Leopardstown, fallen when still in contention in the Irish Gold Cup, and run a very honourable 3rd in the Cheltenham Gold Cup. In theory he's a big player, but the worries are that the National is an afterthought after a hard race at Cheltenham, and his big weight should the ground be soft.

- 4) **THE LAST SAMURI** (IRE) 10 11-07 159 16 chases (4th) – BFF – 23023

He has a nice respite from last year's 11-12 top weight, when he raced nicely enough in the second rank on the first circuit, but drifted back on the run to second Becher's and had no chance 4 out. Gallant runner-up when joint favourite in 2016, perhaps not suited by late rain but leading 4 out and only caught in the last 150 yards. Now runs off the same mark he had two years ago, and has had another expert light preparation from his hugely experienced trainer: second in a hurdle race, second again in the Becher to Blaklion (that horse running at his best trip) and then a very creditable 4th at Cheltenham at his bare minimum trip. His warm up was a very respectable 3rd in the Festival Cross Country. He is still very much statistically "in the zone" and would be a very big contender in his third National given good ground; soft definitely against him though.

- 5) **VALSEUR LIDO** (FR) 9 11-06 158 17 chases (4th) BFF – never run in a chase field bigger than 15

Strong form in his first two seasons chasing – unseating when about to win the Irish Gold Cup, then second to his brilliant-then-stable companion Vautour at Cheltenham. He has had injuries though since the autumn of 2016 and doesn't look anywhere near as good as he used to be.

- 6) **TOTAL RECALL** (IRE) 9 11-04 156 9 chases (sets off alarm bells) BFF 4011 (calms them a little)

A proper enigma. Loads of stamina in his pedigree, unsurprisingly nothing special as a hurdler (rated 127). His novice chasing over 2m 4f was moderate too. Transferred to Willie Mullins after Sandra Hughes retired, his new stable clearly knew they had a well-handicapped horse. TR won with ridiculous ease at Limerick, then battled hard to win a much, much stronger race at Newbury off 147. Given a break, he then won a handicap hurdle at Leopardstown again with ridiculous ease and assumed favouritism for the National. Slightly surprisingly he was then sent to the Cheltenham Gold Cup. While he didn't run badly in that championship race, staying in the vanguard of the chasing group, the fact remains he fell 4 out. In the last 30 years only Red Marauder and Rhyme'n'Reason had fallen in their previous race. If TR can beat that stat he is a leading contender, but he is a short price when there is a worry about jumping. His weight is also higher than ideal on soft ground.

- 7) **ALPHA DES OBEAUX** (FR) 8 11-03 155 14 chases BFF - 82

Alpha was a strong stayer from the start of his career. On only his 5th hurdle race he was giving Thistlecrack a race at Aintree over 3m when falling at the last, in his second season he put in solid efforts culminating in a 7 length second to Thistlecrack at Cheltenham. Sent chasing in the autumn of 16 he scored a couple of easy wins early, but his form didn't continue (18 lengths behind Might Bite at Cheltenham and 8th in the Irish National). Started this season fine with 2nd to Total Recall at Limerick (and now 17lbs better off for a 7-length beating) and then winning at Clonmel. However, has put in 4 weary efforts since then and cannot be confidently recommended.

8) GOLD PRESENT (IRE) 8 11-03 155 8 chases (2nd) BFF - 2FP

Only spent one season hurdling and after two wins in minor company his form tailed off. His early novice chases were competent but not spectacular, but he raised his game to be second in the Cheltenham Festival novice handicap. That was a 20-runner race which suggested well for his future, but the 29 runner Topham was too much next time for one so inexperienced, and he fell at the Canal Turn. GP's second season chasing started with smooth wins in two valuable handicaps at Newbury and Ascot, getting his rating up to make a National bid feasible. He sat out midwinter and had a prep race at Cheltenham, but this was rather disastrous, weakening quickly three out and pulling up with a nosebleed. Has never raced a yard beyond three miles and misses the experience stat, so although he is a decent racehorse, on balance I pass him over.

9) PERFECT CANDIDATE (IRE) 11 11-02 154 22 chases (5th) BFF – 050P0

6lbs lighter than last year, he's an experienced and very honest stayer with a record over 3m+ of 470210102P1P0105. He's twice won valuable handicaps at Cheltenham but has only won a veterans' race elsewhere in the last 3 years. Last year he showed up in the first rank on the first circuit, but had run his race at the second Canal Turn and was pulled up shortly afterwards. Age might have brought him enough stamina to squeak into the top 6 but he's not realistically going to win unless a mudbath makes this a race for old sluggers.

10) SHANTOU FLYER (IRE) 8 11-01 153 23 chases (3rd) BFF- F9P2

Has paid his way since importation from Ireland with a 20-1 win in valuable Cheltenham handicap in January 2017. He is bred to stay well but has mostly raced around 2 ½ miles – his form at 3m+ is 21PF55PP2. Last year he never got beyond mid-division and was well behind when pulled up 4 out. Has paid his way this season with four consecutive second places (three of them at Cheltenham) He is not without talent, but doesn't win much and his record in staying races is poor. Easily passed over.

11) TENOR NIVERNAIS (FR) 11 11-00 152 27 chases (5th) BFF – U90

Another of last year's also rans, TN is a talented horse when he gets his preferred conditions, winning a valuable handicap at Ascot in February 2017 by 30 lengths. However, those preferred conditions are an easy 2.5 to 3 miles and heavy ground, and his 3m+ form is U69P310P6. Last year his guts kept him racing even when his stamina gave out and while never threatening, he got around in 17th beaten 73 lengths. Just two runs since (pulled up and last) so no reason to suppose he can do any better this time.

12) CARLINGFORD LOUGH (IRE) 12 11-00 152 27 chases (6th) BFF – 74P129

Has had a long and honourable career, with wins in the Galway Plate, Irish Gold Cup (twice) and Punchestown Gold Cup. Stays 3m well but running most of his career in Irish Graded races, has never tried an extended trip. The real problem is that it is now 2 years since his last win (at Punchestown) and he has looked very listless since, only beating three horses home in total in his 6 races in that period. Trailed round at the back in this year's Irish Gold Cup and looks more suitable for retirement than a National bid.

13) VICENTE (FR) 9 10-13 151 17 chases (4th) BFF – 51F6F1UP

Was on my shortlist last year but infuriatingly fell at the first. He's a confirmed good ground horse whose form usually gets pretty poor in midwinter, but bounced back on his preferred surface to win 2016 Scottish National and then won that race again in 2017 after his Aintree fall. Actually ran one good race on soft at Cheltenham in November when second to Perfect Candidate, but has reverted to type with poor efforts in two subsequent big handicaps run on mud. Couldn't be ruled out

entirely if the ground miraculously dried up, but he would have a much better chance waiting another week for Ayr again.

14) **TIGER ROLL (IRE)** 8 10-12 150 16 chases (in just 2 seasons) BFF 1P1

A triple Cheltenham Festival winner in three different races, and to put that in context there are only 8 of those in history. TR won the Triumph Hurdle on only his third career start, but didn't really progress and only won one more hurdle. Sent chasing he was campaigned hard in the summer of 2016 with ten races (three wins) between May and October. Given a 4 month break he came back and won the 4m NH Chase at Cheltenham, beating the useful Missed Approach 5 lengths. He probably "bounced" when pulled up in the Irish National a month later. Had a very light winter again, two warm up runs and a "sighter" (never put in the race and beaten 43 lengths) in a Cross-Country race at Cheltenham in December. Then he again came off a long lay-off to win the Cross-Country race at the Festival on very soft ground, travelling strongly and staying on well over 3m6f with The Last Samuri 13 lengths behind. His trainer conditioned last year's runner up and the 2007 winner Silver Birch in the same prep race, and he is ridden by the leading jockey at the Cheltenham Festival, the hugely experienced Davy Russell. A major bid looks on the cards, though the possible negatives are that he ran poorly in his post-Cheltenham race last year, and his fairly small size. Against that he has never fallen and only unseated once in a tough thirty race career.

15) **REGAL ENCORE (IRE)** 10 10-09 150 12 chases (2nd) BFF- PP803

Maddeningly inconsistent chaser. Since the start of 2016 he has pulled up 7 times, won two valuable races at Ascot and had one of his rare good days in last year's National, racing in rear but then running on through beaten horses from 3 out to finish 8th. More of the same this year, two stinkers, third to Total Recall at Newbury and a game win at Ascot. That run means he cannot be entirely discounted, but nor can he be enthusiastically recommended.

16) **VIEUX LION ROUGE (FR)** 9 10-12 150 13 chases (3rd) BFF – 671

Dropped 3lbs from last year and now having his third crack at the National. In 2016 he was in contention to the home turn when an inexperienced 7 year old, then put in two exemplary staying performances, winning the 2016 Becher Chase, and dominating the 2017 Haydock National Trial. He therefore looked a leading contender last year but was slightly disappointing given expectations. He got into the front rank after second Valentine's and but was ridden at the Melling Road and couldn't go with the leading four. Stayed 3m4f at Haydock but adding in the 2016 result it looks like he does not stay the National trip. His form this season has been moderate, looking too slow over 3m and nowhere near the pace in the Becher. Hard to be enthusiastic

17) **CHASE THE SPUD** 10 10-11 149 15 chases (4th) BFF – P71PP

Out and out grinding stayer, with all his chase wins at stiff tracks or extended trips, The best of those was the 2017 Midlands' National over 4m1f. He restarted this season in fine style with a win on nearly unraceable ground at Haydock, but then did too much work early on in the Welsh National and was a spent force on the home turn. The Eider didn't go any better and he was beaten with a circuit to go. While in principle he's the right sort of horse for a soft ground National, his recent form is nowhere near good enough.

18) **WARRIORS TALE** 9 10-11 149 13 chases (3rd) BFF – 02

Unconvincing start to his chasing career and reverted to hurdles in spring 2016. Better over fences second time round, with wins at Perth and Newbury (twice). This season he has run a fine second to Gold Present at Newbury (now 2lbs better off for a neck beating) and an even better second in the highly competitive Skybet Handicap Chase. He hasn't much experience in the big time, and has never run at an extended trip, but at he comes to this race in form which is more than can be said for many.

19) **SEYOUATMIDNIGHT** 10 10-11 149 9 chases (3rd) BFF – 3

Highly progressive staying novice hurdler in 2013-14, winning his first start under Rules at 66-1 (beating Regal encore who was the 1-4F) and the Grade 2 Rendlesham on his third race, then finishing a (distant) third in the G1 Sefton Novices. Sent chasing in 2015 he made an immediate impression on soft ground, beating One For Arthur at Kelso by 21 lengths, winning the Dipper at Cheltenham (beating Blaklion and with Minella Rocco trailing 80 lengths). He wasn't so effective on good at the Festival – 30 lengths behind Blaklion this time – but then made an excellent handicap debut in the Scottish National, just 3 lengths behind Vicente (re-opposes on the same terms). This prompted his small (but very competent) stable to aim high; he was only 4-1 to beat multiple G1 winners Cue Card, Coneygree and Silvianaco Conti in the 2016 Betfair Chase. He was injured there and pulled up, and only had one more hurdle race all season. Returning after a year off, he showed up well for a long way in an ordinary handicap chase at Newbury recently.

Seeyouatmidnight has in three or four races in his career looked like he has a very big race in him. He has to definitively recapture his early promise, and indeed produce a career best, to win a National, and to do so off an interrupted preparation would be a fine feat. Soft ground may help him, and he has just achieved the minimum level of experience. His career has had a similar path to Miinehoma, the record holder of that stat, and he has to be shortlisted.

20) GAS LINE BOY (IRE) 12 10-10 24 chases (5th) BFF – 8PF4345F

A solid and pretty consistent stayer, proven over 3m4f. Fell at the first in 2015 National and normally competes in Veterans' races these days, but stepped back into open company with 4th in the Haydock Trial in February. Then ran the race of his life to be 5th in last year's National, indeed had he not been impeded at each of the last two fences he might have been third. This season he has won the Grand Sefton over 2m5f of this course and been 3rd in the Veterans' Final. He's too old now to expect further improvement and probably cannot win but shouldn't be disgraced in his last shot at the big one.

21) THE DUTCHMAN (IRE) 8 10-10 148 8 chases (2nd) BFF- none

Competent novice hurdler and chaser for Seeyouatmidnight's trainer then loved to Somerset last summer. Second – albeit by 17 lengths - in a hot handicap hurdle on very bad ground at Haydock, then not really competitive on ordinary ground at Cheltenham. Back on the Haydock quagmire he won a good 3m2f handicap in January, but then something went wrong inside 2 miles returned to that venue the next month. Lacks experience and realistically needs a mud bath to get competitive

22) PLEASANT COMPANY (IRE) 10 10-10 148 9 chases (3rd) - BFF00P – P4

Dropped 5lbs since last year. Two good runs in Ireland as a novice before the NH Chase was too much for him at 2016 Festival. Just two prep runs before last year's National – 4th in the strongly contested Thyestes handicap, then won the Bobbyjo Chase, a traditional trial. But his lack of experience showed as he moved easily into contention out in the country and looked booked for a place until stumbling at Valentine's. That stopped his progress, but he galloped on to the line in 9th, beaten 28 lengths. It was a decent performance for one so inexperienced, but this season's quiet prep seems odd in context – he's never been sighted in two big Irish handicaps, and still lacks experience. Without an encouraging warm-up race he's on a wing and a prayer.

23) **UCELLO CONTI** (FR) 10 10-09 147 25 chases (7th season – he started over fences aged 3 in France!) BFF – 264724U2

Turning up for his third National, Ucello's strike rate is poor with just 3 wins in his 22 chases, but he has been contesting big competitive races ever since arriving from France in 2015. 6th in 2016 National, when he looked dangerous three out but weakened off the home turn, then very respectable 4th in the Becher and a definite hard-luck story in the 2017 National. UC was tucked in and going nicely when

Saint Are jumped across him at the 22nd and in jinking to get out of the way, he lost his jockey. Well worth another crack at the race with 6lb less on his back, and shows he still has plenty of ability when second at Leopardstown over Christmas. Disappointing in his last race at Gowran Park. The slight suspicion is that he might not see out extended distances, but I could see him still involved coming round the home turn.

24) SAINT ARE (FR) 12 10-09 147 33 chases (7th) BFF – U0F090PF327P0F3P

The second most experienced horse in the field, a Aintree specialist, Grand National regular and a real warrior. This will be his fifth National. Second to Many Clouds in 2015, third last year and an overall record over the big fences of 9327PF3. He also has a good record on the Mildmay course of 1215F. Last year he produced another valiant staying performance to finish 3rd, passing Blaklion after the Elbow without threatening the front two. Has run pulled up in both his races this season, but didn't have a prayer in either. Realistically he's just another in the long and honourable line of tough horses who were never quite good enough to win a National, but repeatedly showed their best form in it. No reason he should win at last, but every NH fan should cheer him on.

25) BEEVES (IRE) 11 10-09 147 25 chases (5th) BFF-87

This chap jumps really well but doesn't stay extended trips. He has won a few small events over 3m but his record beyond that distance is 04P23248597. Thoroughly honest, can't crab him being in the race, will show up well and give his owners fun, won't win

26) RAZ DE MAREE (FR) 13 10-08 146 26 chases (6th) BFF 1P08POU172UP0F1

Another absolute warrior. Ran in the 2014 National, respectably 8th 38 lengths behind Pineau de Re. Since then has been second in a Midlands National, second in a Wels National and then with stamina at a premium in a bog, won the 2017 Welsh National with a strong move three out. If he were a younger horse that would be a great credential; his problem is that only two of his age group have won the National ever, the last being Sergeant Murphy 95 years ago. Easy to see him running an honourable 4th / 5th / 6th, hard to see him actually winning

27) **I JUST KNOW** (IRE) 8 10-07 145 10 chases BFF - P

A flamboyant front runner and really good jumper, he has generally plied his trade at a lower level, proving his stamina (in the breeding) with a 15-length win from moderate rivals at Catterick over 3m4f. Went up a stone in the ratings for that run, guaranteeing him a run, and has just had a potter round in a novice hurdle since. Bombed out when fancied for the 3m1f handicap chase on this card last year, which is a concern. He is no more than a live outsider, but his trainer has won the race before and he should give his backers a run for their money.

28) VIRGILIO (FR) 9 10-04 145 10 chases, (2nd) BFF – none

Plenty of ability over hurdles and fences, well worth a rating in mid 140s. But his lack of big field form is a serious concern and he has only beaten a single rival in two races this season. Easily discarded

29) **BAIE DES ILES** (FR) 7 10-07 145 12 chases (3rd season, intermittently) BFF – 6053

A credible outsider, this grey mare is all about stamina with a record beyond 3m is 12465133. Has run 5th in the Welsh National (as a 5 year old!) and 6th in the Irish, and the form of her warm-up race has worked out really well, as the two horses who beat him were in the mass-photo finish of this year's Irish National. She is statistically too young to win a Grand National but has run so many good races already over extended trips that she must come into consideration. The prospect of a first ever National win for a female jockey has knocked some value out of her price.

30) MAGGIO (FR) 13 10-07 145 22 chases (5th) BFF – 00

Veteran who didn't win a race for three years at the start of his career, but has paid his way since then. His day in the sun came in 2016 when he won the handicap chase before the National as a 50-1 shot. That gave connections dreams of the big one, but a last-minute injury ruled him out last year. They get their day out this time, but Maggio hasn't won since that 2016 race, has finished last 4 times since then and was a distant 10th on his only attempt at the big fences in the 2015 Topham. I'm happy to rule him out.

31) PENDRA (IRE) 10 10-07 145 12 chases (5th) BFF - 305020

A good quality racehorse but a palpable non-stayer. 50-1 when he ran 13th in 2016 National, competitive to second Canal Turn but then weakening badly from 3 out. Has run once a year since, each time in the Kim Muir at Cheltenham, each time failing to see out 3m1 ½ f; in 2017 he threw away a 3 length lead at the last, and this year he weakened badly from 2 out to finish 15th. The trainer should really find something easier (and shorter...) for this old chap.

32) BUYWISE (IRE) 11 10-07 145 21 chases (6th) BFF – 55420374

Not always the best of jumpers but hasn't fallen since his debut 5 years ago. Buywise has spent most of the intervening time running honourably in Cheltenham 2m4f handicaps without winning them, but had his day in the sun at Sandown in January, winning the 3m Veterans' Final. That was his first win at 3m – career figures F6300461 – and his only experience of an extended trip was running 80 lengths 12th in Rule The World's National, and realistically he shouldn't do much better this time round.

33) CHILDRENS LIST (IRE) 8 10-07 145 4 chases (2nd) BFF – P

Was well beaten in his trips to Cheltenham and Aintree as a hurdler, and is woefully inexperienced as a chaser. That's not to say he's without talent, as he beat subsequent Irish Gold Cup winner Edwulf in his second chase. But that was in December 2016, and he then missed ten months through injury. Second in a minor 4 runner race at Limerick on his comeback, but put into a big field handicap in the Irish National Trial things went badly, weakening from 4 out and pulling up. It's hard to see him coping with the hurly-burly.

34) LORD WINDERMERE (IRE) 12 10-06 144 IRE 20 chases (6th) BFF- OPP7F

The poorest Gold Cup winner for many a decade in 2014, his form has been mostly dreadful since and he trailed round in the 2015 National, never remotely competitive and tailed off when pulled up 6 out. Back last year with at least a second place in his warmup race, LW put in a surprisingly good run to finish 7th. Well behind early on as usual, he made progress early on the second circuit and was on the back of the leading group 2 out. The winner had flown by then and he could find no more, but he ran all the way to the line. His only run since was a fall half way round in the Becher and it's four years since he won a race, so cannot be recommended.

35) CAPTAIN REDBEARD 9, 10-06 144 12 chases (2nd) BFF – P

This year's dour Scot. Got going to win 3 races at the end of his hurdles career, then progressed from a slow start to win two novice chases before making no impression at the Cheltenham Festival. Won the Tommy Whittle chase at Haydock before Christmas, but that race is a shadow of its former status. Second to The Dutchman over 3m1f – his first long distance race – was if anything a better performance, but he was beaten 13 lengths. Won a handicap hurdle last time out and is in good form, but he is taking a big step up in class and distance sixth or seventh is probably the limit of his scope.

36) HOUBLON DES OBEAUX (FR) 11 10-06 144 36 chases (5th) BFF – 16U20F3440

9lbs lower than last year, he's been in the long distance chases for years now- record at further than 3m is 746496U20F94P3484063P – and the hustle and bustle will hold no fears for him. However he can't really lie up with the strong pace on the second circuit of a National – last year was beaten 42 lengths into 10th. Realistically I expect something similar unless the ground is very deep.

37) BLESS THE WINGS (IRE) 13 10-05 143 46 chases (7th) BFF – 109P60292532808226

He's the most experienced horse in the race with career achievements including: winning the Cheltenham January novice handicap, 2nd in a Kim Muir, twice 2nd in the Festival Cross Country and an Irish National. He is however too old on the stats now and has only completed one of five races this season, so must be passed over for betting purposes.

38) MILANSBAR (IRE) 11 10-05 143 16 chases (3rd) BFF- 29PPU52

Went chasing quite late in life but picked it up quickly, running from the outset in decent company and 2nd in the Midlands National in only his 5th chase. His form dropped off badly in the winter of 2016-17 and his career looked to be going nowhere until he made nearly all the running to win the Warwick Classic (same race as One For Arthur won last year) under his new rider Bryony Frost. Well beaten in the Eider next time out where he perhaps lost interest when headed, he then repeated his 2016 performance to again come second in the Midlands National. That wasn't a very strong race but Milansbar has huge stamina and if he can stay in the front rank for three miles he will have a chance of toughing it out to the end

39) FINAL NUDGE 9, 10-5 143 11 chases (2nd) BFF- F239

Plied his trade at the country tracks until a Newbury win in February 2017, and was then still in contention when falling 4 out in Chase The Spud's Midlands National while still a novice. His second season has been pretty decent, second at Wincanton and third in the Welsh National but his form has dipped in his last two races and he has only an ordinary chance

40) DOUBLE ROSS 12, 10-5 143 30 chases (5th) BFF – 549P3P4

An old warrior who has run in lots of big handicaps over hurdles and fences including winning the big December and January cups at Cheltenham in 2013-14, 5th in the Topham while still a novice, 5th in a Grand Sefton and recently 4th in a Kim Muir. The suspicion remains however that he doesn't really stay long distances; in the 2016 National he pulled up at the 26th, and in the recent Kim Muir he kept pace with the winner missed Approach until 2 out, then just ran on at his won pace. Has never won beyond 3m and this looks unlikely to be the day that changes.

ONLY THE TOP 40 ARE GUARANTEED A RUN

41) ROAD TO RICHES (IRE) 11 10-04 142 25 chases (5th) BFF – 113P090P

Once a top-class chaser, third to Coneygree in 2015 Gold Cup, Irish Gold Cup winner the month before that and winner of the 2014 Galway Plate. It's a long time since he has shown that form however - his last win was in November 2015 and he has been beaten at least 25 lengths in all of his races in the last two years. It's hard to make a case for him.

42) THUNDER AND ROSES 10, 10-4, 142 28 chases (4th) BFF - U1P0P0P0076U48PF

A former Irish National winner (2015), he seems to have completely lost the knack of running in big fields since, with his only decent form in single figure fields. In last year's National he was showing up well when hit hard by a loose horse at first Valentine's and knocked flying. But another drab season has followed; he has failed to complete his last three races, including falling early in the Irish National, and it is hard to see him as a serious contender.

43) DELUSIONOFGRANDEUR (IRE) 8 10-04 142 13 chases (2nd) BFF - nil

Third at Haydock over Easter and unlikely to turn out again. A decent chaser who may make up into a National horse in time, but lacks the CV just yet.

44) WALK IN THE MILL (FR) 8 10-03 141 19 chases (4th) BFF- nil

An ordinary horse at 2m4f on country tracks until he raised his game to win at Ascot over 3m in November 2017, though that was not a strong race. When he was third in a much stronger race in December it was an improved performance. However his stamina then gave out badly behind The Dutchman at Haydock and it is hard to see him playing a big part here.

45) VINTAGE CLOUDS (IRE) 8 10-03 141 12 chases (2nd) BFF – F743

It will be a great shame if this chap doesn't get a run as he looks made for the race, an out and out stayer for whom no distance is too far. He was giving the top class Bristol de Mai a good race when falling 3 out at Haydock in only his 4th chase last winter, then chased home Vieux Lion Rouge and Blaklion in the National trial at the same track. After that he was still in contention when falling at Cheltenham, and possibly over the top when only 7th in the Scottish National. Two soli runs started this season, then an extraordinary 4th in the Welsh National, nearly brought to a standstill in the back straight but staying on very solidly. A second at Wetherby and third in a hot Cheltenham handicap followed. His jumping hasn't always been top notch but no horse has more stamina and if he squeaks a run he has a major chance.

LONG LIST – if you have a fancy for one of these, I couldn't criticise...

Anibale Fly

The Last Samuri

Total Recall

Tiger Roll

Warriors Tale

Seeyouatmidnight

Ucello Conti

I Just Know

Baie des Iles

Milansbar

Vintage Clouds

FINAL ANALYSIS

The last two months have been desperately wet, and a soft ground National looks in store. For that reason I discard those with over 11 stone at this last “push comes to shove” stage.

Sadly it looks as if my long term fancy Vintage Clouds will miss out on a run

Tiger Roll's trainer says he would prefer good ground but he won on mud at Cheltenham, I'm worried about his size and the effort the jumping will take out of him but if he is in the leading group on the home turn his stamina means he should win.

Warriors Tale is a shot in the dark – his trainer has a poor record in the race and his stamina is completely unproven. But he is an in form horse with some big race experience at 50-1

Seeyouatmidnight; I (and I'm sure the trainer) would have preferred to see him have two prep races. But he has a decent racing weight for a classy horse, should stay (on his form in the Scottish National) and has a high class jockey. Mud holds no fears as he has three wins on heavy.

Ucello Conti is low profile compared to some but has done nothing wrong in three trips round this course and is “solid”. The price around 20-1 is about right

I Just Know is another shot in the dark. Jumps well and will probably lead on the first circuit, should stay – has won recently over 3m6f – but his lack of big race experience is a minus

Baie des Iles. If she was 9 years old with her profile, and trained by a big name trainer, she would be nearly favourite. Her very small stable had a winner earlier this week though, and her last race has worked out very well. We'll just have to take a chance on her age and the statistics.

Milansbar. The key will be keeping him in the front rank; if he makes a mistake and gets horses in front of him there is a risk he sulks. Because of that he cannot be the top pick, but his staying form is there for all to see.

SHORTLIST

1. SEEYOUATMIDNIGHT
2. BAIE DES ILES
3. UCELLO CONTI
4. TIGER ROLL