



It's hell for Cheltenham bookies as fans and favourites make light of wet

There was no hiding place for the layers on day one of the Festival as, despite the soggy conditions, punters cashed in and had a day to remember

Chris Cook at Cheltenham

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“When it's wet, don't bet,” says the old maxim, used by many a gnarled punter to warn youngsters against races run on heavy going. Not for decades has the Cheltenham Festival started on such a soggy surface as this time and it appears the old cliché has, on this showing, no wisdom in it whatsoever as one well-backed winner follows another up the famous hill.

“It's turned into a bloodbath,” grimaces John Hughes, a bookmaker from Warrenpoint in Northern Ireland who has long held the treasured “number one” pitch in Cheltenham's boisterous betting ring. In that position, he is the first of dozens of bookies that punters come across and he has queues in front of him all afternoon. Punters hand over their stakes and then, 10 minutes later, they come back for their winnings.

“It's the best betting I've ever seen in Cheltenham. It was colossal. Unfortunately, it just turned out, our punters backed the winners.”

How much had John lost? “I can’t say. Oh God, the wife would leave me.”

All types of punters appear to be celebrating. At the sober, form-studying end of the spectrum there is Robert McCullough, who has been coming here from Maybole, Ayrshire for half a century and who tells of winning £20,000 on Best Mate’s third Gold Cup. He has drawn his horns in these days but says before the Champion Hurdle that Buveur D’Air is the only possible play of the day.

“I probably bet too heavy for my means, if you understand,” McCullough says. “But I think the game’s more difficult now. It’s difficult to get on. The bookies are keeping everything short.”

Where’s the incentive to do anything else when even first-timers are finding the winners? Jubilant Dave, down from Middlesbrough, is on Summerville Boy because he was once a fan of Bronski Beat. He sticks the winnings on Mister Whitaker, having admired the horse’s trainer, Mick Channon, when he was scoring goals for England. “Fantastic!” is his verdict on the day, delivered as Elizabeth, his wife, returns from the ring clutching thick folds of £20 notes.

“Overall, we’ve done in about 12 grand,” says Geoff Banks, climbing down from his pitch in the Centaur, which during the Festival is a sort of mosh pit of betting, drinking and cheering. Banks, familiar from many a gig on Channel 4 Racing, is usually as effervescent as bookmakers get but the afternoon has been taxing enough to turn him serious.

“Once the punters get ahead in this game, they’ve literally got you by the balls. We’ve had a lot of each-way thieves winning and things like that. It’s not as bad as a few years ago, when all of the Rich Ricci horses were winning. That was particularly bad. If you hear any sob stories from the big firms this time, it’s just good PR. We’ll all have lost but we’re still going.”

“You can get such a run of money in here, it can be scary,” says Andy Geraghty, taking bets behind the stands, by the See You Then bar. Geraghty is the last bookie in the area to be offering 9-5 about the first favourite, Getabird, and mainly Irish punters congregate in front of him to take the offer. He gets that one beaten but it is not enough.

“I wanted the second in the mares’ race. That got me the absolute jackpot. And it went odds-on in running,” he groans.

Hughes gets a brief moment of encouragement in the next as Footpad plunges through an early fence just as the bookie is reeling off a long list of four-figure bets he has taken on the horse. But soon the commentator is calling the favourite as “cruising up to lead” and the crowd’s answering roar drowns him out.

Three Geordie lads are jumping up and down after Coe Star Sivola holds on by a neck, half an hour later. Darren explains why he stuck £100 on: “I had a couple too many drinks in Birmingham, had a dream about the horse and thought, I best back it big. I’ve never been so shaking in me life.”

“He had an epiphany!” shouts his mate, Jamie. “Right after he was sick ...”

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