



Jockey claims he heard a shout telling him to miss final fence at Punchestown

. Paul Townend inexplicably steers leader round final fence . Shambles upsets Willie Mullins' Irish trainers title challenge

Chris Cook at Punchestown

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A raceday that was merely tense and exciting at Punchestown became submerged in inexplicable drama when Paul Townend took the wrong course aboard Al Boum Photo in the Champion Novice Chase, victory having seemed in his grasp.

The astonishing aberration, which could cost Willie Mullins his champion trainer's title, was apparently the result of a shout the jockey thought he had heard, which convinced him he had to bypass the final fence and which left him mortified and facing a 21-day ban for dangerous riding.

Seconds earlier, as the favourite, Monalee, crashed out at the second-last, this race had seemed set to cap an excellent day for Mullins, who had already won three others and had two contenders fighting out another finish. But the sprawling Monalee hampered his Invitation Only, who unseated David Mullins. Townend's extraordinary brain-fade on the other Mullins runner then followed.

Reacting to some call unheard by others, the jockey stood up in the stirrups and looked over his right shoulder. He tried to steer his horse to the right, round the edge of the final fence, colliding with Finian's Oscar and taking that horse with him out of the contest. Because of that bump, Al Boum Photo crashed into the wing of the fence, unseating the hapless Townend.

And so, instead of being a Mullins benefit, the race was dropped wholesale into Gordon Elliott's lap, the challenger ending up with the first three home, led by The Storyteller under a nonplussed Davy Russell. "I'd have to have another look at it, I don't know," Russell said, when asked what had happened. "It's great to get a rub of the green."

For hours mystery surrounded the reason for such an extraordinary climax. Mullins and Townend left the racecourse without offering a comment. But the jockey was first hauled before the stewards, whose damning verdict was he was guilty of dangerous riding, a rare offence.

For that, his punishment starts a fortnight from now with a 21-day suspension but will not end there. "I'd say his head'll be fried by this," said one racing insider and there is speculation Townend may find it hard to return for the next four days of the festival meeting after such an experience.

The stewards published a skimpy verdict which shed no light on the reason for Townend's action. However, it is understood the jockey told stewards he thought he had heard a shout directing him to bypass the fence. He accepted that none of the formal bypass procedures were in place.

It was the concluding act to a long day of drama, in which the centrepiece ought to have been Un De Sceaux's victory over his stablemate Douvan in the Champion Chase. Both are Mullins-trained stars and the immediate future was bright, at that point, for the man who has dominated Irish jump racing for the past decade, as he had hacked Elliott's lead down to €226,000, half what it had been before racing.

"For a horse that wasn't going anywhere in the first half of the race, he just seemed to warm up," Mullins said of Un De Sceaux. "Considering the busy few weeks he's had, I thought that was a hell of a performance."

And the trainer gave an insight into what this week's defence of his title means, describing the tunnel vision he has forced on himself in order to keep his focus. "I honestly didn't look at the racecard from the time I declared them at 10 o'clock yesterday morning. So I hadn't a clue what way it was, I didn't look at the opposition, all I knew was we had what we had going. I was only hoping for the best and keeping my fingers crossed and so far it's working."

One hour later Mullins was badly let down by luck, or by the judgment of his jockey. Elliott's lead is back to €405,839 but there are four days left in this Irish jumps season and it is evidently no exaggeration to say anything can happen.

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