

Davy Russell
By Donn McClean

When Davy Russell was asked about his levels of expectation leading up to this year's Cheltenham Festival, he said that he would have been happy just to win the terrier race. He didn't win the terrier race, but he won four of the horse races, and he was crowned champion of Cheltenham.

And so continued a relationship that endures: Davy Russell and the Cheltenham Festival. Seamless as a river. When he was a child, his father Jerry would go to Cheltenham, and every year he would bring him back a small present. The youngster thought then that Cheltenham was a magical place. These days, the magic continues. Russell has now ridden at least one winner at every Cheltenham Festival since 2006.

That is not a coincidence. Davy Russell was designed for Cheltenham. When the pressure of competition is at its most intense, you need a cool head and soft hands. When the world is watching and the importance of victory is magnified, you need a strategist who can set out a plan and modify its execution as necessity dictates in a heartbeat at 35 miles an hour.

The start of the week did not follow the plan. Russell got to Tuesday evening, the end of day one, with no winners. Paloma Blue ran well, Petit Mouchoir ran well, Mick Jazz ran well, Midnight Tour ran well, but none of them won. Five rides, a second, two thirds and a fifth.

If that meant that the pressure heaped on Presenting Percy in the RSA Chase on Wednesday was intensified, you never would have known it from the rider's demeanour.

Presenting Percy had been there before. Philip Reynolds' horse had teamed up with Russell in the same place 12 months earlier and together they had won the Pertemps Final. Trainer Pat Kelly had plotted an unorthodox route to Cheltenham this time, a route that included a Grade 2 hurdle and a handicap chase. But we know about Pat Kelly now. While the route looked unusual to the untrained eye, you didn't doubt for a minute that the trainer would have his horse at concert pitch.

Russell rode him with confidence too. Softly softly, calmly, gently. He could have moved to the outside on the run down the hill, guaranteed a clear run, but he didn't. He chose to chart a path among horses. Precarious but also efficient. He had the confidence and he knew that he had the horse.

He hit the front on the approach to the second last fence, stretched clear of Monalee on the run to the last, and stayed on up the run-in all the way to the line.

It was magical, but it was also poignant, coming, as it did, so soon after the passing of Davy's mother Phyllis. The rider dedicated the victory to his mother and his family.

Russell had four rides on Thursday, and he won on three of them. All three were different too. Delta Work needed all of Russell's strength in the finish to get him home by a nose from Glenloe and Barry Geraghty. The Storyteller needed Russell's strength and balance to direct him straight when he wanted to go to his right up the run-in. Balko Des Flos just needed a rider who would fill him with confidence and allow him flow.

Balko Des Flos was special too, not just because it was a career-best performance from Henry de Bromhead's horse, a coming-of-age for the 2017 Galway Plate winner, confirmation of the fact that he belonged at the top table. But also because it was the first time that, after years of trying, a horse owned by Michael O'Leary's Gigginstown House Stud won the race sponsored by Michael O'Leary's Ryanair. Fitting that Davy Russell should be the man on board.

Russell ended the day with four wins, and it was enough to see him crowned leading rider for the week.

In a way, it was like Gold Cup day 2014, that remarkable day when Russell rode three winners, including Lord Windermere in the Gold Cup. But in a way, it was different too. Back then, expectations were relatively low. It was all very unexpected.

He had nine rides during the first three days of the 2014 Cheltenham Festival, and all nine were beaten. Then, Gigginstown House Stud's then number one rider Bryan Cooper had that sickening fall from Clarcam and Davy Russell, the man whom Cooper had replaced, got the call to ride the two Gigginstown horses, Tiger Roll in the Triumph Hurdle, the first race on the last day, and Savello in the last.

You know how that one ended. Russell won the Triumph Hurdle on Tiger Roll and he won the Grand Annual on Savello, bookends to his Gold Cup victory on Lord Windermere.

This week, expectation levels were high, and Davy Russell exceeded them. Leading rider at the Cheltenham Festival. One of the few blank spaces on his CV, now filled. Magical.