



EDWARD WHITAKER (RACINGPOST.COM/PHOTOS)



progress, a member of the racecourse staff calls after him. O'Brien runs back but a couple of minutes later he has regained the lost ground. "The man told me not to hurt anyone with the ball," says the rugby-loving rider, who carries on running, throwing and kicking while Johnson digs heels into various parts of the track, concluding that the wide outside is the place to be on the hurdles course.

The preparation pays off in the finale. Going wide on the Vaughan-trained Sertao allows the horse to race on better ground, but just as important is Johnson's strength in the finish. Only on the line does the 6-4 favourite get his nose past the

O'Brien-ridden Mike Towey. Without Johnson's will to win the 6-4 favourite would be still a maiden. It was one of those performances that Daly had talked about in the morning.

"He looked my best chance of the day and that's how it turned out," Johnson says as we leave Ffos Las. It's another day gone, another day nearer to Cheltenham, nearer to Menorah.

Johnson has good reason to look forward to the festival. As well as Captain Chris, Wishfull Thinking and Planet Of Sound, there will be Dunraven Storm in the Supreme, Archtrave in the Triumph and Snap Tie in the County, one of many handicaps in which Hobbs is sure to

provide live ammunition. Yet when Johnson talks about Cheltenham, the Champion Hurdle is never far from his lips.

"When you think about having a really good Cheltenham, the fear is you are tempting fate," he says. "I know not to build myself up too much, but I do dream about winning the races. What I'm mostly feeling now is excitement because Menorah is one of the most exciting horses I've ever had anything to do with. He's a horse I love to bits."

Richard Johnson. Hates mushrooms, loves Menorah. Both horse and jockey go to Cheltenham as champions in waiting.

## VIEW FROM THE RING

Geoff Banks



**T**HERE are some days in the Racing Calendar that are just a pleasure, and Ascot a fortnight ago was a case in point. On arrival I was given, for free by a leading betting exchange, a classy scarf in an attractive colour. I like to be different, but 4,000 people wearing the same, luminescent scarf smacks of overkill. I wondered idly if we could all be seen from space.

Nevertheless, I wasn't going to let that spoil my day. The headline race involved Riverside Theatre and Pride Of Dulcote. Reports all morning suggested that Riverside was proving popular and Pride very weak. The market opened up on course with Riverside at 7-4 and this was quickly bashed into 11-10. Pride Of Dulcote was popular with the general public, but one had to go 7-2 to generate their interest. Some massive wagers were seen for the favourite. Tragically, Pride took a fatal fall some way out, so we'll never know if he could have bucked the market.

Business through the day was substantial if not overly profitable. It ran along the lines of win, lose, win, lose. The most remarkable victory was that of Iconoclast, who apparently blundered his way out of matters, but reappeared on the winning line. It was an exciting day out and I particularly enjoyed the tussle between Celestial Halo and Mille Chief from Wincanton, a classic.

One race in particular was noteworthy, that of Sprinter Sacre. Not because he won – few care about 3-10 chances. However, I arrived to bet ten minutes before the heat, which is fairly normal procedure. Looking at the win odds on offer from my colleagues, most of whom were betting win-only, I realised the place book was running some 30 per cent overbroke. What this means is the wider off-course industry, which has to accept each-way business on all races, is running at a loss on its place business on the race. Now, don't get me wrong, I appreciate there won't be wailing in the streets over this. However, it isn't a healthy situation for the industry. I can see a change coming in how place bets are handled in future.

### ▶▶ Gambles galore

THE following Monday was spent in the office watching the gambles that proliferate when the racing is poor. The first call we took involved Richie Rob in the bumper at Carlisle at 6-1; the second on a 5-6 chance, Erinjay, who won at 4-7 at Wolverhampton. Other notable gambles involved Crystal Sky at Wolverhampton, backed from 28-1 to 8-1; Strong Vigilance at the same track 11-4 into 6-4; Tax Break 3-1 into 7-4. Carlisle

## Place book a worrying trend for off-course industry

entertained us with Jammia in the first, 50-1 in the morning into 20-1, and Double Eagle in the last, 3-1 into 13-8. Hereford took its turn with Border Lad, never better than seventh in seven previous visits to the track, being backed from big prices into 11-1. I fear next year's levy will be 50p! Richie Rob won the bumper, of course.

### ▶▶ Cards fall right at Kempton

RAIN heralded the arrival of Racing Post Chase day at Kempton and perhaps this had an effect on what appeared a relatively modest crowd. The business was light but we turned over several punters and scooped up what fell out of their pockets. Not much in truth – just enough, though, to forego the last two races in favour of the dash home to watch the England-France Six Nations clash.

The cards fell right for us in the first race and then we ran with Quinz in the Post Chase, as he'd impressed at Ascot. It was odd to watch a race in which the ebullient Nacarar wasn't trying to bully the opposition into submission. He was brave, but Quinz proved a dour stayer.

Once you start off on the right foot as a bookmaker it changes your mindset. The focus is less on aggressive laying, more on the phrase, 'once you've found it – never let it go'. So we battened down the hatches.

### ▶▶ Good to see Ruby back

NEWBURY on Friday and an excuse to go to the Seafood Bar, which is excellent. Results were splendid, starting with the defeat of a 4-11 hotpot in the first and then the heavily backed and appropriately named (if you're a bookie) Our Father being worried out of the second.

The best news was the return of Ruby Walsh to the saddle. I will give you a tip – Ruby makes a bad horse look good and a good horse sensational. Tony McCoy, on the other hand, simply never takes no as an answer from anything he rides.

## THE BANKS JOBS

### ▶▶ Best moment

Defeating Jamie Spence at golf – he's lost the edge!

### ▶▶ Worst moment

A late penalty for Chelsea downing Manchester United and landing some nice touches.

### ▶▶ Horse to follow

Loosen My Load – a great jumper

who looks sure to appreciate the step up to 2m4f in the Jewson. He appeals as value at 14-1 considering his liking for the track.

### ▶▶ Horse to lay

Zarkandar, although impressive at Kempton, lacks the fluency in his jumping to come out on top in the Triumph.