Cheltenham – The Greatest Festival on Planet Earth? – What’s it all about?

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The little town of Cheltenham plays host to one of the biggest annual sporting festivals in the world. Each March the racing world unites in Gloucestershire for four days of top-class National Hunt (jump) racing. Ahead of this year’s mighty festival buzz, SPILLERS caught up with racehorse trainer Ben Pauling to find out what makes it so very special.

Why is Cheltenham so special and what makes it jump racings’ global superstar festival?

Not only is it the crème de la crème of our sport but it has the most incredible atmosphere in the most beautiful setting. There are many things which make it unique, the Cheltenham track itself is very undulating, there are no actual straight sections, so horses have to be very balanced, and it takes a really special horse to win there. It’s simply the biggest meeting of the year and always will be.

If someone is visiting Cheltenham for first time, what would they need to know? Any bespoke tips for a better visit, any bar/restaurant or viewing areas to know about?

Get there early, go to the Guinness village for a sharpener, enjoy the atmosphere and then make sure you head out onto the lawns in front of the grandstands for the first race. The “See You Then Bar” above the parade ring on the second tier is a great place to grab a drink, watch the paddock and get out front for the races.

Is there a specific dress code for the Cheltenham

festival?

Well, it’s pretty much anything goes. But stay warm, comfortable and wear something you’re proud of would be my idea of a dress code.

How did you start with horses Ben?

I’m a farmer’s son and grew up riding, I took it more seriously from 11/12 years old and started eventing, showjumping, hunting and then point to pointing which gave me a love for everything horses can do. As I got older my concentration went to the training side of racing. I love working with the horses every day and achieving the best possible results with each individual.

Who was your inspiration growing up?

Jockeys really – Richard Dunwoody and Adrian Maguire were top of my list when I was a little boy. Since I began training, I have a huge respect for a lot of trainers but obviously Nicky Henderson has had a huge influence on how I train and what I do.

We reminisce about great horses such as Desert Orchid, Kauto Star, Denman etc - but which racehorses past and present are your heroes?

Without doubt my racing heroes are the ones I worked with at Nicky's – Sprinter Sacre, Burton Port, Bobs Worth, Long Run, Finian's Rainbow, Riverside Theatre, Binocular. They were some of the real class individuals who really taught me what top class racehorses were made of.

What are your personal Cheltenham highlights?

My personal highlights would be A Hare Breath – he was my first winner there in my second season. Then Willoughby Court was my first festival winner, he won the Grade 1 Neptune Novice Hurdle over 2 ½ miles. Any Cheltenham win is special, any Festival win is even more special so all my festival winners would be very memorable.

Which race would you most like to win at the festival?

Probably the Queen Mother - very exciting 2-mile chases make me tick. Obviously, the blue-ribbon event, The Gold Cup, would be lovely and I quite like the idea of having a Champion Hurdle winner as well.

What horses are you most excited about running at the festival this year?

I’m looking forward to running them all to be honest, any horse we get there will be horses we hope will have good chances. I’m particularly excited to see Diva Luna returning to top form and Pic Roc looks in good order, Henry’s Friend, Jig’s Forge … you can’t not name them all, but Diva seems to be coming back to her best in the nick of time.

Which other four-legged superstars can the public expect to see there this year?

Galopin Des Champs in the Gold Cup heads the list, with Constitution Hill in the Champion Hurdle. They are two outright champions, Jonbon fits into that mould as well. There are lots of exciting novices, but they would be the three household names lots of people would love to see win.

When you have the chance for a horse free day what do you enjoy doing to chill out?

I love playing tennis when I’m not racing in the summer. Sundays are good fun with the family, lunch with friends, just socialising as much as possible when it fits in with the daily regime.

SPILLERS quick Cheltenham Festival guide

If you want to head down to Cheltenham to soak up the atmosphere live there are numerous ticket and hospitality options and gates open at 10.30am each morning. Seven top class races start at 1.20pm daily through until 5.20pm. Whether you're on course or watching from the comfort of home, here's what to look out for:

- Tuesday 11th March – Champion Day – Four fantastic Grade 1 races kick off the festivals first day, be prepared to roar home the Champion Hurdle winner at 4pm.
- Wednesday 12th March – Style Wednesday – Wednesday offers the chance to step up your fashion game but don't miss The Queen Mother Champion Chase (4pm).
- Thursday 13th March – St Patrick's Thursday – There are three feature races today with The Ryanair Chase (3.20pm) the highlight of this Paddy's Day prequel.
- Friday 14th March – Gold Cup Day – Three topflight races raise the excitement to fever pitch before the most anticipated race of the week, the Cheltenham Gold Cup (4pm) crowns the top steeplechaser in jump racing.

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