Charlie Swan’s 2026/27 Jumps Preview

As JP McManus’ trusted French talent scout, Charlie Swan has helped identify and secure some of the most exciting National Hunt prospects of recent years. With another jumps season gathering momentum and the Road to Cheltenham underway, the three-time Champion Hurdle-winning jockey sat down with Grosvenor Sport to discuss sourcing future stars, the growing influence of French-breds, this season's horses to follow, and the leading contenders for racing's biggest prizes.

Can you explain your role within JP McManus' team and what being his French talent scout involves?

My main job for JP is to buy the horses in France. Obviously, we go to try to buy champions, which is not easy, but if you don't buy a champion, he might win a graded race or he might win a decent handicap. I go there basically to buy some good horses. Not just horses that will win little small races, trying to buy horses that will win decent races. It's not an easy thing to do because sometimes you're buying horses out of races that none of the horses have ever run before. It's quite hard to judge that. But I've been lucky enough in the past and hopefully you can keep being lucky.

How does buying horses in France differ from buying in Britain or Ireland, and are there different traits you look for?

The horse's size doesn't come into it as much in France because a lot of their chasers, their fences, you can jump through a lot of them. So, a big horse doesn't have that much more of an advantage, not like in England where a horse, his size, it's a bit better if he's bigger to be jumping fences because the fences are a little bit taller, a little bit stiffer. In France, size doesn't really matter that much. But obviously, I'm buying them to come back to England or Ireland and so we do like to have them a little bit of size but if they're staying over hurdles it's not so bad. You know there's plenty of small horses I bought plenty of small horses that were quite good so you can't just miss a horse because he's small either.

Are there any stallions or bloodlines that have caught your eye in recent years, or do you cast the net wide?

There are stallions you'd like, and you don't like. You know the likes of Doctor Dino, No Risk at All, Goliath du Berlais, you know you'd really like those stallions. And there's other stallions that are on their way up, Nirvana du Berlais, Telecaster, stallions like that, that are coming along. There's lots of stallions in France. Then there's a couple of ex-Irish stallions like Pour Moi and a few of them that are down there now. You know, there's lots of different stallions, mostly you go on the dam side. You know, if you have a good dam side, you have a good chance of getting a decent horse.

Can you take us through the process of identifying a potential purchase, from first impressions to ultimately getting the deal done?

You have to be quite quick to buy them in France because mostly I'm buying horses with form so they all have to have run or about they could be running in their first race and there's a lot of big agents out there. The minute they go by the line there's people on the phone trying to buy them. So, you have to sort of have seen the horses maybe before they've run or see them in the pre-parade ring and see the height of them and see what they look like. The ones you sort of fancy, you know they're breeding, and they look nice and you're hoping they might run well.

The best horses in France are usually, they usually run in Auteuil or Compiègne. I mean they can run in other places, but we find the best horses run in Auteuil or Compiègne. So, before a race, I'd be looking in the pre-parade ring. I'd be looking at how they walk, the size of them, what they look like. And you'd have your favourites before the race starts, and you'd be hoping one of them might be involved in the finish.
Then also, there's a lot of owners in France that don't sell as well. So, you're trying to figure out the ones that would be for sale and the ones that aren't. And then you might see a horse that's been very unlucky, finished third, flying at the finish. And you think he was probably the best horse in the race, but he didn't get there during the race. And because he's a maiden, it's another race that you can win. And a horse can get more experience when you buy him. You're not straight into the deep end having to go for a group race.

So often we buy horses that finish in second or third or fourth even. But when the race is over, there's a little bit of a rush on. And I do have a French guy that helps me, Hubert Barbe. He helps me in France as well because he's good to help me do the deals because some of the French trainers don't speak English.

Of the horses you've purchased over the past 12 months, which are you most excited to see on the track this season, and what reports have you received so far?

That's fairly interesting because I probably bought five, six, or seven, but some of them probably won't run this season. They might run at the back end. I find if you're buying them from September onwards, it's hard to get them back, give them a little break, and have them ready for the season. By the time you have them back, it's after Christmas and you're struggling. Sometimes if we do buy them, we'd often run them in a Grade One if we think they're decent, so they get the experience. If they happen to win, brilliant, they've won a Grade One; if they get beaten, they can be a good novice for next year.

Most of the horses for the likes of the Triumph Hurdle, like Defi du Seuil and Majborough, I bought in April or May time. You buy them then, give them a break, and it's nearly like they're having a second season. To win the Triumph Hurdle, it's often important to buy the early ones, as they can sometimes be the best for that race. Obviously, you're trying to buy horses that will go on and do well in the future as well.

Majborough arrived at Cheltenham as one of the leading hopes but didn't quite deliver. What are your expectations for him this season?

He had won the Triumph Hurdle the year before, and he's a very, very good horse. The problem with Majborough is he's quite a long horse, and he finds it hard when he meets a fence wrong. When he meets one in deep, he finds it difficult to shorten. Some days he'll go out in a race and meet every fence on a nice stride, like he did at Leopardstown when he won the big race [Dublin Chase] before Cheltenham. He met everything nicely, and he's very good when he's long and spot on, but when he's in tight, he finds it awkward.

Some days he'll meet most of the fences right and destroy his field, but the day you want him, he might meet them wrong and make a mess, so he's probably not an ideal horse to be backing at a short price. But he is a very good horse, and hopefully, he has a good chance in the Champion Chase again this year. Or they might try him to go further, as I think he will stay as well.

Looking back on the horses you've sourced, which would you consider your best value purchase, or the one that exceeded expectations the most?

I suppose a horse called Espoir d'Allen, who won the Champion Hurdle about four or five years ago. He was a very, very good horse. Unfortunately, at the start of the following season, he reared over backwards, broke his neck, and was fatally injured. We never saw him again, but he won the Champion Hurdle by 14 lengths.
When I bought him, he'd won a bumper in France and only by a neck. There was just something about him; he was tough, and by a sire that I like, Voix du Nord. I just liked him. He wasn't that expensive and he was a very good horse, but unfortunately, after he won the Champion Hurdle, we didn't see him again.

French-breds continue to enjoy enormous success in National Hunt racing. What, in your view, sets them apart from their British and Irish counterparts?

I've been going to France for the best part of 10 years now, and to me, it's totally the system. I don't think the French horses are bred any better than the Irish or English horses. There have been people who have put French horses into the Irish system and sales, and they haven't been any better than the Irish horses. But because they're broken early, it's like an athlete, you don't start an athlete off at 18 or 19 years of age and expect them to run in the Olympics. You start them off early, bring them up slowly, but you start them early.

That's what they do in France; they break them as yearlings, start jumping them at two, and they're way more forward. They condition better, their limbs are more used to it, and studies show that French horses are lasting longer because they're in the gym earlier. I totally think it's the system. That's why we've been trying to get these academy hurdles going in Ireland, because we are spending a lot of money buying French horses. In my opinion, Irish and English horses are just as well-bred as the French, but our system is all wrong and needs to change.

If that's the case, what changes would need to be made for Britain and Ireland to close that gap?

It's going to be a slow process. The Derby sale and the Land Rover sale will eventually have to be for two-year-olds to get things going a bit earlier.

Do you think there's still an overly traditional approach to developing young horses in Britain and Ireland?

It's an old-fashioned thing to say, ‘give the horses time." Actually, they're putting too much condition on them, and their shoulders are getting too heavy. It's like us, if we're not doing enough exercise when we're younger, we're going to get heavy and fat. To me, that's what's happening; the horses are getting too fat and getting injured. They get injured too much because you're starting them off too late. You definitely have to start them early.

The backward ones in France won't run until September as three-year-olds, which is the time they give them. But the likes of Majborough won in April. He was 16'2" or 16'3" then. They were able to run because they were in the gym early, and they're still going to keep going until they're 10, 11, 12, or 13, hopefully.

Is there a horse that got away, one you had the chance to buy but still wish you'd secured?

There's been a couple that have got away. I remember Allaho; I could have bought Allaho. He finished second at Auteuil in a race of first-time outers. He was quite expensive, and they were looking for a lot of money. I said to the boss that he looked like a really good, nice horse, but we decided on the day it was too much and didn't buy him. There was Lossiemouth; I could have bought her at the time, but she was quite expensive too, so we didn't buy her. State Man was the same. I had first refusal on him and I didn't buy him, which I probably should have.

State Man was recently retired. What are your reflections on his career and what might have been?

He was very unlucky, he struck into himself and can't race again, but he'll be fine in retirement. He was a very, very good horse. The reason I didn't buy him is that he finished second when he first came out, beaten by a horse called Busselton. Busselton is a three-miler who is winning cross-country races, and he beat State Man over two miles, so I thought on the day maybe he wasn't good enough. But I was wrong. He was expensive for what he'd done, and that was the reason we didn't buy him. I just didn't think he was going to be a Champion Hurdle horse. Harold Kirk obviously did.

Which recent purchases are you most looking forward to seeing this season, and are there any under-the-radar names that racing fans should keep an eye on?

We bought a couple of juveniles. Some of them might not run this season, but they might. One that will probably run is a filly called Nathalie Jolie. She's with Nicky

Henderson. She's not overly big, but I really like the way she won in France. She really galloped to the line. You know, she looks exciting. Hopefully she looks exciting. But it was one of those races where none of them had run before, so it's a bit of a guessing game. But I thought she looked very good on the day and was a must-have, so I'm hoping she does well.

Then there's a couple we bought recently. A filly called Doctor River. I'm not sure yet whether she'll run this season, but she's a nice filly to look out for. And a horse called Nagurski. He looked a nice horse. He actually unseated his jockey at the second last but looked to be travelling really well. He's a fine, big horse, so we might not see him until next year, but he looks exciting.

M'As Tu Vu Lord, he's gone to Willie Mullins as well. He looks like a horse that might make a nice novice hurdler. And there's a horse called Murmure d'Etoile. He's gone to Ben Pauling. He's a No Risk At All horse that won a bumper very easily, so we're hoping he might make a nice novice hurdler. Then there's a half-brother to Iroko called Majisco. He's with the Greenall's, so hopefully he might be worth a watch. He should make a nice novice hurdler as well.

More broadly, did you notice any trends in the market this summer, and was it different from previous years?

The ground was quite quick during the summer. So, I didn't really buy much during the summer because I sort of bought horses from April to the beginning of June, and then after that, the ground got very fast. I just don't like buying horses on really fast ground because we've done it before: you buy them, you get them vetted, they seem perfect, you bring them home, and the first good piece of work the following season, next thing they have a leg injury. So, whatever it is, it's often not great to buy them after winning on fast ground.

Harry Cobden was appointed as JP McManus' retained rider at the end of last season. What qualities make him such a good fit for the role?

He's a very good rider. He's got a great pair of hands and a very good racing brain. I think it was a case of JP having to get him at the moment he did because Mark [Walsh] is now 40 years of age, and Mark has been a brilliant rider for us. But obviously, if we didn't take Harry, then somebody else could have snapped him up.

He looks like a real team player. He's a very good rider and he's not a fella that's going to be very hard on a horse. So that's what you want for your stable jockey. You don't want them killing the horse every time they go out; you must think of the future. He looks like a good stable jockey, and I think he's a good benefit to the team, definitely.

If you were putting together a 'Ten to Follow' list for the season ahead, who would make the cut?

For the juvenile hurdles, I would have to put Nathalie Jolie in because hopefully she'll do a sequence and do well. For the Champion Hurdle, it's hard to know. Narciso Has was a very good juvenile last year; he got a bad stone bruise and didn't run for the rest of the season, but he looks a very good horse and could be a Champion Hurdle horse. He looks like a horse that will stay further and might be more of a Stayers' Hurdle horse or a Gold Cup horse. But obviously, Lossiemouth, you'd have to put her in as your main one for the Champion Hurdle. I'd definitely like to put those two in, Lossiemouth and Narciso Has.

For the Mares' Chase, maybe Dinoblue, I'd put her in. She's really tough and consistent. There's another one called Countess Tara; she won at the Curragh the other day for Joseph O'Brien. Sue-Ann McManus owns her, but I really like her, she could make a nice novice hurdler.

Then two horses in Gordon Elliott's yard: Skerries Hill and Karma Kid. They look like two nice horses for novice hurdles. And the horse of Willie Mullins', M'as Tu Vu Lord, I'd put him in as well. For the Stayers' Hurdle, Teahupoo is there, but he's getting older. We have Honesty Policy, who's a nice horse. But I might put in a horse like Jimmy Du Seuil. He won the Coral Cup last year, went novice chasing, but didn't jump fences that well. So, I'd imagine they're going to go for the Stayers' Hurdle with him, and he could be one that's going to be a bit of a price.

- Nathalie Jolie
- Lossiemouth
- Narciso Has
- Dinoblue
- Countess Tara
- Skerries Hill
- Karma Kid
- M'as Tu Vu Lord
- Jimmy Du Seuil
- Old School Outlaw

We're giving you a £200 ante-post charity bet for the Cheltenham Festival. Where would your money be going and why?

For my £200 charity bet for Cheltenham, I'm going to go for Witches Familiar in the Mares' Novices' Hurdle. I've backed her already, so I hope I haven't taken the price, but she's about 7/1 and I think she's going to be very hard to beat.