Richard Johnson Interview: Imperial Saint has been our flag-bearer - his main target is the Becher Chase, never write off Paul Nicholls, nothing has changed at his yard & The Cheltenham November meeting has grown massively in last ten years

As the Jumps season ramps up, here are the thoughts of four-times British Champion Jockey, Richard Johnson, who has spoken in a brand-new interview with ***Grosvenor Sport.***

Now running a successful syndicate, Johnson gave his views on plans for the likes of Imperial Saint in upcoming meetings.

With the November meeting at Cheltenham this week, Johnson also expressed his excitement for the meeting, which is one of the first major stopping points on the road to the Festival in March.

What did you make of the King's former horse winning the Melbourne Cup, and the royal training setup letting it slip through the net?

It's brilliant that the King has taken on the mantle from his late mother and is enthusiastic about it. Queen Camilla seems equally keen to go racing, whether jumping or flat, which is great for British racing.

As for the horse, he didn't just win the Melbourne Cup; he absolutely bolted up. He's only a three-year-old, so you'd expect him to get better over the next couple of seasons. It would be interesting to see him come back here. If he ran in our Ascot Gold Cup, there would be a few people smirking if he won. He beat everything before him in Australia. You have to make decisions about horses, and while I don't know how many the King has, they would have been well paid for him off his English flat rating. Obviously, now that fee looks very cheap.

You're mostly syndicate horses now. What are the top three horses to follow from your yard?

We've got nine to run this year. Imperial Saint has been our flag bearer. He ran in the Grand National last year but didn't stay. His main target is the Becher Chase in about a month's time. Three miles on a flat, left-handed track ticks all his boxes.

Kikijo needs soft ground, but there's a very good staying handicap chase to be won with him in the middle of winter. He's a potential horse for the Welsh Grand National. He's only six and very unexposed over fences.

Finally, we have a new young horse with Olly Murphy called Miss Master. She's a four-year-old who won her Irish point-to-point. Olly took her to Lambourn to work today and was very pleased with what she did. She'll probably run in a bumper in the next two or three weeks.

Have any novices from other yards caught your eye in the first proper months of the season?

It's very early. We've had an amazing but very hot summer, but it means it is a frustrating time for National Hunt racing. Trainers are frustrated because you're not going to risk nice younger winter horses on good, fast ground. You really want good-to-soft. We saw some nice horses at the Welsh Festival at Chepstow, but realistically, even with Cheltenham approaching, we need

natural rain to allow the nice novices and bumper horses from last year to go chasing. We haven't seen as many as usual by now.

The Skelton team seems to have two runners in every race, but we really want to see the winter horses hit the track. One concern a trainer mentioned is that to run in the handicaps at Cheltenham, novices now need four runs. We're getting to a point where horses are going to struggle to get that many races in before the festival, which might make the handicaps even more open this year.

Do you think the BHA should look at making a concession at least for this year?

I think you need to keep looking at your rules and conditions all the time. Times have changed. People used to run their horses every two weeks. Now trainers run their horses less and try to pinpoint bigger races for them. Occasionally you'll get a blot in the copybook in a handicap but that is the fun of the system. It is up to the punters to try to work that out.

Which young riders are impressing you now?

There's some good young talent coming through. Jack Stenhouse, who I've seen quite a bit at the Hobbs yard, has just turned conditional. He's been an amateur for two or three years and has a lot of point-to-point experience. He claims seven pounds and rode a winner for Philip at Ffos Las recently. In big handicaps, he's going to be very good value for that claim.

Lucas Murphy, Timmy Murphy's son, is another. He's still at school doing his A-levels but gave a Paul Nicholls horse a very nice ride to win at Ascot on Saturday. Seven pounds is half a stone, which makes a big difference in a massive handicap.

Up north, there's Danny McMenamin. He's a fully-fledged professional now, but he's a very good young jockey who I think will be used more and more by bigger stables down south as well.

What's your reading of the situation at Paul Nicholls' yard, with several prominent owners leaving? Is it worrying times?

I'm sure it is frustrating for him. He's done amazingly well and is close to Martin Pipe's record of British winners. He still has a lot of years ahead of him. But that's the nature of being a trainer or jockey; you go through ups and downs. He's a brilliant trainer, and nothing has changed at his yard.

It's just a case of finding new owners. It's hard to compete when you haven't got the spending power for the expensive horses coming from Ireland and France, but you would never write off Paul Nicholls.

He still has a lovely bunch of horses. Managing a massive yard with lots of big egos is a challenge in itself, as Dan Skelton is finding out. Willie Mullins is about the only man who has managed to run four horses for different owners in the same race and keep everyone happy!

Nicky Henderson had a few quieter years before bouncing back, so I definitely wouldn't write Paul Nicholls off.

Looking ahead to the November meeting at Cheltenham, what are your thoughts, firstly in the Shloer Chase?

The usual crew will be around, and it wouldn't surprise me if Gordon Elliott brings something over. Willie Mullins doesn't tend to come over until Christmas. We're all hoping some novices from last year step up a grade, like Willie Mullins' Il Etait Temps did. On the British side, we're currently lacking some younger ones coming through in the two-mile chase division. We have to hope that something comes out and surprises us, maybe a handicapper that keeps improving.

At the moment the Irish are very, very strong. Kopek Des Bordes, who won the Arkle, was very impressive and looks like he'll improve as he relaxes. Dan Skelton's L'Eau du Sud will probably run, and Dan usually has his horses ready early, so the Shloer could be a good place to start him with not much to take him on from the British front.

What about the Paddy Power Gold Cup?

Dan Skelton has been very proactive, and he has horses ready early to go for these big handicaps. You're looking at horses who have already had a run and not many will have done this season.

At the moment his horse, Madara, who ran 13 days ago, is the favourite at 9-2, which seems quite short considering he got beaten on his first run back at Carlisle, but having a run is definitely a big bonus.

Meetmebythesea is an interesting one for the McManus team and trained by Ben Pauling. If they've had this as a target for a while, you'd expect him to go well. It will be painful watching for Paul Nicholls if one of his former horses, Blueking D'oroux , manages to win it for Dan Skelton.

Any early thoughts on the Arkle Challenge Trophy Novices' Chase?

We're looking to see which novice hurdlers from last year step up as they go chasing.

Sober Glory from Philip Hobbs' yard has schooled really nicely. He was unlucky in the Supreme last year, making a mistake at the last. He looks really well and you'd expect him to be more of a chasing type. The owners had a choice, but with Joe Tizzard having Alexei, a horse taking the Champion Hurdle route, they've sent Sober Glory chasing. Of the British horses, he's definitely up there with one of the best novices you'd expect to see.

And the Triumph Trial Juvenile Hurdle?

You don't really see the best juvenile Triumph Hurdle horses until around Christmas. Many won't have even run over hurdles yet. The winner of this race often gets a very short price for the Triumph, but the market is wide open, and you shouldn't make too many plans until closer to the time.

Finally, the Greatwood Hurdle, a race you've won three times. What do you look for here?

You're looking for younger horses that are going to step up to Champion Hurdle grade, like we did with Rooster Booster. You want a horse who looks like they'll have the most improvement off their handicap mark. Harry Fry's Idaho Sun is favourite; he missed the Festival with a small injury but looked very good in his three runs last year. He's rated 140 but could easily be 150. Jonjo O'Neill's Pioneer Pete, who won at the October meeting, did nothing wrong and is an improving type rated 133 and is fit and well. You want a horse that's still on the upward curve, novices from last year, rather than a seasoned handicapper who might run well but isn't ahead of the handicapper.

The November meeting is seen as the proper start of the National Hunt season. How is the atmosphere?

It's grown massively over the last 10 years into a busy three-day meeting with a lot of prize money. Just having a runner there is fantastic. After the Festival this is the one people want to be at.

The general public absolutely love it. For trainers, it's lovely to give a novice a run at Cheltenham without the hype or pressure of the March Festival. There will be a lot of trainers who, if they are hoping to go back there in March, will be keen to get a sighter in.

It is an important meeting for everyone and as a jockey, riding a winner there means the season has definitely started with a bang.

Does a jockey improve with a run and ride as well as the season progresses?

Confidence is the most important thing for any jockey. If you're riding winners, races just flow easier. I'd consider myself to be in bad form if I had no winner for two days, whereas lads are lucky if they ride a winner every fortnight.

Jonjo O'Neill Jr. is a great example right now; his yard is in form, and he's riding with a lot of confidence. Things just seem to go your way. If you're riding for a yard that is in form and you've been riding winners, going into a meeting like the Paddy Power, you'll be in a good place.

If you're looking to back big-priced horses, look for yards and jockeys in good form. Those 20/1 or 25/1 shots can often outrun their odds.

What attributes does a novice chaser need to show now to prove they could be genuine contenders for March? What do you like to see in a horse?

Everyone thinks about the hill at the end and stamina, but Cheltenham is a course with very few straight sections; you're constantly turning. They need to be able to jump and gallop left-handed, and travel. It's a quick track. If a horse doesn't travel, they'll suddenly find themselves a couple of lengths back. Nicky Henderson and Dan Skelton train horses which are good strong travellers with natural speed, which means they are in a good position.

Nicky loves fast horses which have won Champion Hurdle, Champion Chase and Arkle winners. A Champion Chase horse needs to be able to gallop flat out for two miles; that includes stamina, speed and accuracy in jumping. It is one of the hardest races for a horse to win. One bad mistake and you're gone. Two-mile chases are fast and furious, and any mistake will cost you badly.

What are the differences between riding on the Old Course and the New Course at Cheltenham?

The New Course is more of a galloping track and gives you a bit more time. The Old Course is faster and sharper, especially the chase course; you turn at the top of the hill and the fences come quicker. Generally, the New Course is for stayers, and the Old Course is about speed and natural talent.

You and AP McCoy locked horns for so many years. What was that competitive relationship like?

It was very strange compared to other sports because we actually got on really well. We sat next to each other in the weighing room for 20 years. We were highly competitive and probably as stubborn as each other, but we enjoyed taking each other on. We had a unique relationship.

We could moan at each other in the weighing room about getting frustrated at being beaten on a favourite or making a mistake at the last for instance, which I couldn't do with many others. It was great fun to ride against him and be part of each other's journey through all the highs and lows.

If you could go back in time and ride one of your past November meeting winners again, which would it be?

Fair Along when he won the Arkle Trial Novices' Chase. He was a great little hurdler but basically a pony, and he'd never run over fences in public. Philip Hobbs and I thought it would either go really well or very badly. He took to it like a duck to water and bolted up. He was a real little star, and you get a great kick out of riding a fast two-mile chaser.

Time for a quickfire round.

Aintree or Cheltenham? Cheltenham.

Fences or hurdles? Fences.

Night in or night out? Probably a night in now, but we used to love a night out, especially at Aintree.

Steak or Chinese? Steak, definitely.

The Beatles or Take That? The Beatles.

Billy Loughnane or William Buick? Loughnane.

Trainers or brogues on your feet? Trainers. I’m getting old and need comfort.

Skelton or Nicholls? Skelton.

Mullins or Elliott? Gordon [Elliott].

Champion Hurdle or Gold Cup? Gold Cup.

Native River or Rooster Booster? Rooster Booster, because he was an absolute legend.