

Mullins lets loose his trump card Douvan

Trainer's stable star gets to stretch his legs at Punchestown today, writes **Donn McClean**

IT IS A big day for Douvan today. Every day that Douvan runs is a big day. It's another D-Day. Another Douvan Day. When Douvan races, expectation levels are high, victory is demanded. And when expectation levels are high, the magnitude of the potential downside is far greater than the magnitude of the potential upside.

The prohibitive odds on offer about Douvan winning the BoyleSports Tied Cottage Chase at Punchestown today tell you that anything less than an easy victory will be disappointing. Like when a player takes a 21-yard free, the expectation is that he will score, the pressure is on the

taker. When you risk your ace, you expect to win the trick. You don't want to blow your Ace on a trick that you do not win. And Douvan is an ace. He is the ace. He has never lost since he joined Willie Mullins in the summer of 2014. He has raced in four hurdle races and eight chases, and he has won all 12 races.

He has won eight times at the highest level, eight Grade One races. He has bagged a Supreme Novices' Hurdle, an Irish Arkle, an Arkle, a Maghull Chase, a Ryanair Novice Chase and, in truth, he has never really looked likely to lose. And of the 12 times that he has raced since his arrival in Ireland, he has been

sent off at odds-on 11 times. There's your expectation level there. There's your ace.

And your ace takes on a heightened level of importance when you have lost your Queen and when you haven't played your King in a while. It was a blow to Willie Mullins' Cheltenham team when Annie Power was withdrawn last week. The ligaments in her knee would take between six and nine weeks to heal, the trainer told us. She might get back in time for Punchestown at the end of April, but Cheltenham was definitely out.

Then a slight setback to Faugheen meant that plans for his return in last Sunday's BHP Insurance Irish Champion Hurdle had to be shelved. It was only a minor setback, he just tweaked a muscle behind, but the timing couldn't have been worse.

It was frustrating, the Germany gelding was all set to run, he was among the final declarations on Friday morning for the race, but he

had to be scratched on Saturday afternoon. It meant that Susannah Ricci's horse did not get the chance to defend his Irish Champion Hurdle title. As importantly, it means that Faugheen has not raced in over a year, and that there is not enough time now for him to have a prep race before Cheltenham.

Consequently, when he lines up in the Champion Hurdle on 14th March, all things being equal, he will not have had a race in 415 days, he will not have run since he won the Irish Champion Hurdle in January 2016.

On the negative side, it is a massive ask for any horse to win any race at the Cheltenham Festival on the back of such an absence. On the positive side, he is trained by Willie Mullins.

Mullins regularly took Quevega to Cheltenham for her seasonal debut and won the Mares' Hurdle. We rarely saw the Robin Des Champs mare between Punchestown in April and Cheltenham the

following March. Six times she won the Mares' Hurdle at the Cheltenham Festival, and five times she was racing for the first time since the previous spring.

The champion trainer also took Annie Power to Cheltenham in March 2015 for her seasonal debut, and she would have won the Mares' Hurdle doing handsprings had she not come down at the final flight. Of course, the Champion Hurdle is a step up from the Mares' Hurdle, but if you were to choose one man to whom to entrust the arduous Faugheen task, you would choose Willie Mullins.

Min also missed his intended engagement at Leopardstown last Sunday, he was all set for the Frank Ward Solicitors Irish Arkle when he banged his knee. Again, as with Faugheen, it wasn't serious, it was just bad timing. He remains on track for the Arkle at Cheltenham.

There were lots of positives too for Mullins last weekend. Un De Sceaux put up an



Great expectations: Douvan has never been beaten in 12 races

impressive performance to win the rescheduled Grade One Clarence House Chase at Cheltenham on Saturday, Melon lived up to his tall reputation when he danced away with the opening maiden hurdle at Leopardstown on Sunday. Let's Dance was impressive in winning the Grade Two novices' hurdle, Royal Caviar ran a cracking race in the Grade One Irish Arkle, Footpad was only beaten a length in the Irish Champion Hurdle.

It has been an

interesting season so far for Mullins, no question. Yet despite the sad losses of Vautour and Avant Tout earlier in the season, and the headline-grabbing loss of the Gigginstown House horses, he still has a formidable team for the Cheltenham Festival. Of the 14 Grade One races at this year's Festival, Mullins is responsible for the ante-post favourite in seven of them, and he has the second or third favourite in five others. He still holds the strongest hand, and he plays his Ace today.

Skydives and a burgeoning new career help trainer to keep living on the edge



Denis Walsh

When Robbie McNamara was in rehab in Dun Laoghaire in the summer of 2015 they organised a trip to an equestrian centre in Bray. They wanted him back in the saddle. A pony was produced. "A big old slob" that refused to break into a canter. It was like sitting on a child's tricycle. No speed. No danger. No buzz. Nothing.

Months later, in the outside world, his friend asked him to look at a horse he'd just bought. The invitation to sit on him was made in jest and accepted in a flash. Unlike the time before, this wasn't a controlled environment with safeguards and concerned observers; it was a simple thing from the normality he used to know.

McNamara tucked his pants into his socks, grabbed a helmet, levered himself out of his wheelchair and clambered on board. The horse was a Galway Festival winner with a flighty nature but that day he was sensitive to his jockey's commands and there were no alarms. Then it was done.

Before the fall and the paralysis McNamara sat on a horse's back every day. It was his daily crust and the pulse of his existence. That life ended. He needed to know if he could get up on a horse again and manage it. The knowledge was put on deposit.

There was a fluid checklist of things he needed to re-do. No rush; no flinching. About five months ago he found himself at a loose end one weekend. To fill the dead time he decided to do a tandem skydive. "I'm petrified of heights. I get dizzy and everything. I don't know what possessed me to do one the first time. I'm the same with roller-coasters. I hate them but I keep going on them... Landing was the only bit of trouble [with the skydive], I had to hold up my legs with my arms, that was it."

Last month he spent five days in Dubai with his girlfriend, Maeve. There was more than enough sunshine in which to do nothing but that temptation was resisted. One day they tried canoeing; a day later McNamara wanted to see if he could still swim with stabilising bars on his back and without the use of his legs. The back-to-front sequencing only dawned on him later.

Anyway, he did it. Done.

There were about 10 days in the Mater Hospital when McNamara was overwhelmed by negative thoughts. The



Life goes on: Robbie McNamara spent 154 nights in hospital after the fall which paralysed him in 2015 but the 28-year-old, with Dasmihoss, above, has since found a new lease of life as a trainer

calmness that had always been a protective bubble in his life was missing. He felt as if his personality had been taken away. He says he woke up every day with his heart in his stomach and it never moved. He wasn't coping.

Once his life had been saved and the operation had been performed and his condition had been stabilised there were a few weeks of bright stoicism. On his Twitter account was a stream of upbeat bulletins and defiant photographs. It was a smile for all the world to see.

It couldn't be that simple. For six weeks he lived with the small hope that his paralysis might be the result of spinal shock and that it would pass. Around the time when that possibility died they started to reduce his painkilling medication. The coincidence of one thing and the other was too much. It was like they had opened a sewer in his mind. All kinds of waste rushed in.

"The medication kept reality at bay for a little while. I was whacked out of it for five weeks. I'd be halfway through a sentence and I'd fall asleep for five hours. I was like a junkie. It just hit me when I came off it that mentally and physically my body wasn't able to cope with it. I didn't have any energy. I wasn't able to push myself around the hospital in the wheelchair, I had to get my mother to push me. I went

down [to the hospital restaurant] one day and looked into a cup of tea for an hour. I couldn't even take a sip my stomach was so sick. That's what drug addicts go through when they're coming down off it."

When McNamara needed help he didn't need to look for it. His friends were in and out; his parents never left. Between the Mater and Dun Laoghaire McNamara was in hospital for 154 nights; in that time he reckons his parents missed one day, right at the end. They left their home in Limerick and were holed up in hotels for five months solid.

"I don't know how many times I told them to go home. They never went. There were times when it was hard having

them around when I was struggling. I didn't want to see them feeding off my bad form. But if they weren't there or my friends weren't around there wouldn't have been a hope I'd

I'D NEVER WALLOW IN THINGS. I HAVE MORE GET-UP-AND-GO NOW

BUVEUR LOOKING GOOD FOR FESTIVAL

Buveur D'Air is on course for Cheltenham's Champion Hurdle in March after a comfortable victory at Sandown yesterday. The 1-4 favourite, ridden by Barry Geraghty for trainer Nicky Henderson, took the Contenders Hurdle by a length and a half from Rayvin Black. Buveur D'Air is now as low as 4-1 with bookmakers for the big Cheltenham race behind 2-1 favourite Faugheen.

Henderson sealed a double in the next as Top Notch won the Scilly Isles Novices' Chase. Jockey Daryl Jacob was winning the race for the third consecutive year and Top Notch looks set to be aimed at the JJI Chase at Cheltenham. Diego Du Charmil, trained by Paul Nicholls, was an impressive winner of the Scottish County Handicap Hurdle.

have got through it. But even when I was down there was never any 'Why me?' I know what I went through wasn't easy but I'd go head on into stuff and come out the other side of it. I don't know if everybody else would have that. I remember one day my mother was in the hospital and I wasn't having the best of days. She said if she could change positions with me she would in a shot and that snapped me out of a funk straightaway. Not a hope would I swap. It would hurt me more if it happened to any of them."

Long before McNamara left Dun Laoghaire he had moved on. Life was restarting. Rebooted. He looked at his cousin. John Thomas McNamara had been paralysed from the neck down in a fall at Cheltenham in 2013. He passed away last summer but it had been clear for a long time that there was no way out for him. His response to those circumstances was a monument to courage. For McNamara, that was the standard.

"He was always on my mind before I got the fall. It never affected my riding or anything but if something ever did happen I'd be going, 'What are you getting down about this for?' For my weight [when he was riding] I used to have to run 10 or 15k every day. Halfway through it you'd be struggling and I'd go, 'What would John

Thomas give to be out running?' It was just a reality check to cop myself on a bit. The way he kept his personality the whole way through until the very end – never once did he look for pity. I don't know if I'd ever have been able to cope with what happened to him. But his situation was different, it was a life sentence. I can live a perfectly normal life. I met people in Dun Laoghaire coming back for check-ups and they weren't living a life at all, their whole life was ruined by the wheelchair and that was it.

"I wouldn't be wicked positive about everything, I just wouldn't be negative about stuff. I'd never wallow in things. I'd be very laid back but I was probably more laid back before the fall than I am now. I have more get-up-and-go about me now."

After Dun Laoghaire he could have moved back home to his parent's house in Limerick but he was determined to strike out alone. He bought a house near Punchestown. Some of his friends offered to move in with him but for a couple of months he said no. The day-to-day awkwardness of getting by was something he needed to untangle by himself.

Launching his career as a trainer was the goal in the distance that kept the dog-days turning over. He located a yard near the Curragh that he could

lease but it was rundown and took months to wipe away its shabbiness. He recruited staff with scrupulous care, canvassed for owners at the sales and readied for lift-off. He picked the day for his first runners: July 8, in Cork.

There is only one chance to make a first impression. So he looked at the programme for Cork months in advance and targeted horses that would suit the races on that day: four ran, two of them won, another was second. Could he train? Nobody wasted time wondering.

McNamara has 40 horses in the yard now and room for 20 more but in his business plan that is only the start of it. There are 40 acres of paddocks on site and one day he hopes to buy this place and realise its potential. "I'm not looking to make big bucks in a couple of years, I want to be doing it for a long time. Do things the right way and build a good reputation."

Next weekend will be the biggest of McNamara's nascent career: he runs a mare in the listed bumper at Newbury on Saturday, his young stable star Quick Grabim runs at Exeter on Sunday with a view to the big spring Festivals and he has a talented newcomer for Leopardstown's biggest meeting of the year on the same day. That is the company he wants to keep.

He's made for it.

LETTERS

Send your letters to: The Sports Editor, The Sunday Times, 1 London Bridge St London SE1 9GF email: sportletters@sunday-times.co.uk

You are blessed with authoritative, provocative and witty columnists. Sometimes, as in the case of Rod Liddle, all in one with acerbic wit thrown in. His article on Lindy Delapenha (last week) was a wonderful tribute to a man I had not heard of, but wish I had.

Michael McCarthy, Frankenthal, Germany

My grandfather introduced me to Arsenal in 1954 when I was 12 and we played Middlesbrough. My main interest was in Wilf Mannion. However, I was privileged to see Lindy Delapenha. Arsenal won 3-1 but I recall was a fantastic goal by Lindy that left Jack Kelsey (a great goalkeeper) with arms looking like jelly.

Len Longuet, via email

Why is it that when I see Jose Mourinho interviewed when Man United haven't won, I am reminded of those lines spoken by Kenneth Williams: 'Infamy, infamy, they've all got it infamy?'

Mike Platt, via email

It is time to protect the fourth official from abuse by football managers. Every other sport respects officials. They should operate away from managers on the touchline.

Norman Mason, Widnes



As a Spurs fan I am frustrated by Mauricio Pochettino's attitude to cup competitions. Nine changes for a match against a lower league side is a disaster waiting to happen. Why not start with a better team, win the game early and take players off gradually? The FA Cup is being undervalued.

Chris Kessell, New York

My mind went back to when I covered Harlow Town as a sports reporter when I saw the 'Cowley brothers make history' headline (last week). I remember Lincoln City's boss Danny Cowley as an industrious, intelligent player who always spoke to fans after a game. I am not surprised he and his brother Nick have struck up a rapport with Lincoln fans.

David Rimmer, via email

I agreed with Stephen Jones (last week), especially his views on bonus points in the Six Nations being unnecessary. If we can only stop him obsessing over Lions' selections...

Dave Meneer, St Austell

What a pleasure to watch Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal in the Australian Open final, two tennis legends who gave their all without mouthing obscenities when they lost a point.

Alan Reynolds, Sudbury

It would be more meaningful if tennis ranking points were based on the current season and not how it compares with performance in the same event the previous year.

Martin Henry, Chelmsford

Why all the hype over the IPL value of Ben Stokes? He has played 21 T20 internationals for England, scoring 192 runs at an average of 14.77, and has taken 10 wickets while conceding nine runs per over. What price Geoff Boycott's grandmother batting with a stick of rhubarb?

John Lancaster, York