

WHY EARLIER RACING OF JUMPS HORSES IS A GREAT IDEA FOR NH TRAINERS

by Bryan Mayoh

SUMMARY

For years British and Irish-bred horses have been regularly beaten by French-breds in the top tests for Jumps racehorses, causing their breeders to agonise about the source of French breeding supremacy. More recently, British-trained horses have been outdone by Irish-trained horses at Cheltenham and Aintree; and, whilst some speculated on the superiority of Irish trainers, trainers here blamed the effects of higher prize-money and greater competition in Irish racing.

However, both problems may have a common cause: it is not superior breeding or different training methods or a better racing programme that has given horses from France and Ireland their advantage, but simply the way that Jumps horses are raised in these countries. What the French have been doing for years, and the Irish are increasingly practising nowadays, in racing Jumps horses earlier, seems to be giving them a major advantage in achieving top-level success.

If this is the case, the long-term cure for both ills may have already been identified and is about to be introduced. This is why the introduction of 'Junior NH Hurdles' in the 2022/23 season could be a long-term 'game changer' for British Jump racing and breeding.

THE DOMINANCE OF FRENCH-BREDS

Long before we began to worry about the successes of Irish-trained horses at Cheltenham, British and Irish breeders were concerned about the dominance of French-bred horses in major Jumps contests. As long ago as the 2008/09 season, 12 of the 15 horses with the highest Racing Post Ratings (RPRs) had been bred in France, headed by such as **Kauto Star**, **Master Minded** and **Big Buck's**. Although French-breds had been gaining increasing numbers of big-race successes for several years, this statistic was undoubtedly a shock to the Anglo-Irish breeding industry.

Over the following years the trend continued, with almost half of the horses gaining RPRs of 170 or more from 2009/10 onwards being French-breds. Even if all of the best such horses had raced in Britain or Ireland, which was clearly not the case, crop sizes in the relevant countries meant that no more than around 30% of the top horses could be expected to be French-breds.

This seemed to stimulate a strange combination of inferiority complex and denial among British and Irish breeders. Some came to view French-breds as having unique properties such that increasing numbers of French foals and yearlings were imported into Britain and Ireland – many with pedigrees that would conventionally be considered quite ordinary. Others argued that, whilst French-breds might succeed initially, they would not have the longevity of British or Irish-breds.

Neither of these viewpoints held much merit. Whilst the French-breds were more likely to have been sired by stallions that showed good form over obstacles, this was not sufficient to explain the difference in results - particularly when far fewer of the French sires of 170+ horses showed the top-class middle-distance Flat form that is widespread among corresponding British and Irish stallions. Neither were there any significant differences in the quality of the mares producing the best runners in the three countries.

Likewise, the belief that French-bred horses lack the racing longevity of British and Irish-bred horses is simply untrue. When the lifetime records of top-class (170+) horses from both backgrounds is studied, it transpires that the period of peak form of the French-breds is, if anything, slightly greater than that of their British and Irish-bred rivals – I found a time-span of 40 months between the first and last 160+ ratings for the former vs 38 months for the latter. The French-breds tend to reach

peak form rather earlier, typically as early 6YOs rather than as early 7YOs, and go over the top slightly sooner too – but their peak form persists for at least as long.

Although the Cheltenham Gold Cup successes of the GB-bred Sizing John and the IRE-bred Native River provide further evidence that it might well be a good idea to use stallions (such as Midnight Legend and Indian River) that were good winners over Jumps, the reason for the success of French-bred horses is not primarily a difference in breeding methods – it is a big difference in the way the horses are raised. When one looks at the racing background of French-bred 170+horses vs similar GB & IRE-breds from 2009/10 to 2019/20, a key difference stands out:

Racing Background of FR-bred, GB/IRE-bred 170+ horses from 2009/10 to 2019/20

First Race over Obstacles	Fr-bred	GB/IRE-bred
Raced by end of 3yo year	60%	2%
Raced by middle of 4yo year	83%	22%
Raced by end of 4yo year	94%	53%

Basically, top-class French-breds are far more likely to have run over obstacles at the age of three or by the middle of their 4YO year. These horses had probably been schooled over hurdles several months earlier. The early racing of FR-bred NH horses, rather than any differences in pedigree, appears to be the single biggest factor generating the superior results of FR-breds in recent years.

To take some examples: **Kauto Star** first appeared in a hurdle race in March of his three-year-old year, almost three weeks before his actual third birthday. He first ran in a chase (by now trained in England) just before his official fifth birthday. Over six years after his debut, Kauto Star became the first horse ever to regain the Cheltenham Gold Cup and almost nine years after his first race he won a record fifth King George VI Chase.

Kauto Star wasn't the only Cheltenham Gold Cup winner to make his Jumps debut as a 3YO. **Long Run**, another dual winner **Al Boum Photo**, and the most recent winner **A Plus Tard** also fall into this category; whilst **Neptune Collonges**, who won the Grand National at the age of eleven, made his racecourse debut when winning a 3YO chase in France, the first of four such wins in two months. Other recent top-class FR-breds to begin racing over jumps as 3YOs but enjoy long-term success include Bristol de Mai, Clan Des Obeaux, Frodon, Min, Politilogue, Twist Magic and Vautour.

British and Irish horses bred for Jumps racing are most unlikely to race over obstacles at three; the only GB/IRE-bred 170+ performer to do so was **Tiger Roll**, bred be a Flat horse and considered only a modest hurdles prospect when he made a winning debut in a 3YO hurdle at Market Rasen in November. Looking at the results above, it hardly seems that this more 'patient' approach to developing British and Irish-bred horses is doing much to enhance their prospects!

THE INCREASING DOMINANCE OF IRISH-TRAINED HORSES

The **2021 Cheltenham Festival** saw such reduced levels of success for French-breds that the French breeding magazine, 'Jour de Galop', ran an article asking what was going wrong. The answer was simple: the dominant factor at Cheltenham 2021 was the success of **Irish-trained horses** – and many of these had been raised via a similar early racing programme to that benefiting the French. Nine of the 15 winners of Grade 1 or 2 races over obstacles began in point-to-points, eight (including the British-trained Chantry House and Shiskhin and the British-bred Honeysuckle) as 4YOs.

In all, 13 of the 15 winners of these races had raced over obstacles as 3YOs or 4YOs, eight in point-to-points and five in hurdles races. At the **2022 Cheltenham Festival** 12 of the 15 Grade 1 or Grade 2 winners first raced over jumps as 3YOs or 4YOs, five in point-to-points (all as 4YOs) and seven in

hurdles races. The earliest winner over obstacles was **A Plus Tard**, whose first start came in a 3YO hurdle in October, followed by four other starts by the April of his 4YO year. His first chase appearance came on his Irish debut in the November of his 4YO year. Among former 4YO point-to-point winners were the British-breds **Constitution Hill** and **Honeysuckle** and the French-bred **Energumene** (who first raced as a 4YO in a British point-to-point).

Amongst the **leading Anglo-Irish performers by RPR from 2018/19 to 2020/21** (here taking 160+ as the measure), over 40% (52 out of 121) made their jumping debuts in point-to-points, the vast majority as 4YOs, reflecting the growing importance of the 4YO point-to-point programme in Ireland.

To an extent these developments were simply catching up with what the more enlightened had already worked out. Tom Costello, who developed six Cheltenham Gold Cup winners, employed the regime of breaking young stock at two and loose-schooling them over point-to-point fences at that age, so as to attune their developing minds and bodies to the way obstacles are jumped. His triple Gold Cup winner, **Best Mate**, was sold after winning an Irish point in the early spring of his 4YO year.

WHY JUNIOR NH HURDLES WILL HELP BRITAIN COMPETE

So British-raised horses are facing a twin threat, not only from French-breds coming via the 3YO and early 4YO programmes in their native country, but increasingly from Jumps horses developed by the Irish 4YO point-to-point route. To 'level the playing field' by starting our horses earlier, we have until now had only one option – and that a pretty poor one: run NH-breds in 3YO NH Flat races dominated by Flat-breds, followed by Juvenile Hurdles in which they often face experienced Flat horses or those that have run in French 3YO hurdles. However, the new Junior NH Hurdles will at last provide a real possibility of eliminating our traditional disadvantage against French juvenile hurdlers and a rapidly increasing one with Irish 4YO point-to-pointers.

WHAT ARE JUNIOR NH HURDLES?

Junior NH Hurdles will have a special status in the Racing Programme, in some ways equivalent to NH Flat Races. They will be open to horses that have not previously run before October 1st of the season in question, nor previously started in a flat race or more than 3 hurdle races. Accordingly, horses will be allowed to run in a maximum of four Junior NH Hurdles, there being a penalty structure for wins in previous hurdle races.

In the 2022/23 season there will be 10 Junior NH Hurdle races open to 3YOs between mid-October and the end of December (some being Any-Sex and some Fillies-only) and a similar number for 4YOs from January to the end of the season, all run at Classes 2 to 4 under WFA terms. Wins by British-bred fillies nominated to GBB (NH) will generate bonuses just as they would for Novice Hurdles (£20,000 for GB-sired fillies winning Fillies-only races and £10,000 for those winning Any-Sex races).

A key advantage of NH Junior Hurdles is that wins in these races will not preclude winners from competing in Novice Hurdles during the following season, just as for NH Flat races. This stipulation is so that inexperienced young horses are not forced into Open company prematurely, which would act as a major deterrent to participation in races intended to aid their development.

Ideally, potential candidates for Junior NH Hurdles would be identified as 2YOs and broken, schooled at pre-trained at that age, before going into full training as 3YOs. Accordingly, sales of 2YO NH prospects are likely to become an increasing feature of the sales programme, such as those to be held at the Goffs August NH Sale and Goffs Yorton Sale later this year.

However, this being the first year of the Junior NH Hurdles programme, it is entirely possible that some initial winners are fillies still with their breeders, or 3YO stores now being prepared for the May and June Store sales or readied to go into training. Some may even be unraced Flat-bred horses with the potential to succeed over obstacles. Given that all such horses should have been well handled, it should be perfectly possible to get many ready to race in Junior NH Hurdles either late this year or early next.

Whatever their source, the potential of these horses will be enhanced by early jumping education and by racing over obstacles. The long-term prospects of British-trained jumps horses in general will be boosted when Junior NH Hurdles are viewed as an important element of their development programme, just as are 3YO hurdles in France and 4YO point-to-points in Ireland.

So British trainers have a choice: (1) Find owners able to buy horses that have shown ability in French 3YO hurdle races or Irish 4yo point-to-points; (2) Carry on as before, smiling through gritted teeth when you lose to such horses; or (3) Use Junior NH hurdles to develop your future stars.

N.B. Dr Bryan Mayoh is Chairman of TBA NH Committee and co-breeder of five black-type NH winners, including Cheltenham, Punchestown and Leopardstown Gold Cup winner, Sizing John. He has numerous statistics with which he can bore anyone wishing to challenge his conclusions.