GRAND NATIONAL: NARROWING THE FIELD

With a couple of weeks to go until the race that has many a once-a-year punter scratching their heads, I thought I'd give them a helping hand with a run down of some statistics that could point the way to the winner this year.

Having looked through the last ten winners, and using my own ideas of what I believe you need to be a National winner, I've come up with seven key points to focus on:

A top 2 finish in a chase of 3m 2f+
The ability to perform well in a chase where emphasis is on stamina seems an obvious prerequisite for a Grand National winner. Even with the reduced distance these days, it's still the longest race in the calendar and if you can't stay you won't win.

A top 2 finish in the Hennessy, Becher, any 'National', 3m+ chase at the Cheltenham/Aintree Festival or 3m+ Grade 1 chase
The National day, and the race itself, creates a lot of buzz. Therefore, the ability to deal with the big occasion is extremely useful when attempting to win the National. So previous stand out performances in similar scenarios can prove useful.

A top 2 finish in a chase with 16 or more runners
The helter skelter nature of the National can catch some horses out if they haven't experienced something similar before. A history of coping with a crowded field can only be a plus.

At least 10 chase starts
Knowledge and experience are very useful tools coming up against the demands of the National. With horses all around you and unusual fences to negotiate, being streetwise is a tick in the right box.

Number of runs during current season (from October)
With the National being in April, there's been plenty of time to build up to the day during the season. You often find winners of the race have had a handful of runs (3 to 6) in the lead up. Not too many races as to have burnt themselves out and not too little as to be lacking the robustness needed for the fight.

The month during which the last run occurred
Winners of the race tend to have had their last prep run during February or March. This way they are kept ticking over nicely, just at the boil and ready for their effort come early April.

A top 2 finish in the last three starts
Coming into the race I'd like a runner to have shown some kind of form of late. To attempt to win the National having shown very little enthusiasm for the game in recent times is a tough ask.

Using the criteria above, the below table shows how the previous ten winners matched up against these points heading into their Grand National:

		Top 2 – 3m 2f +	Top 2 – Similar/Quality race (listed above)	Top 2 – 16+ Runners	At least 10 Chase Starts	Runs In Season	Month Last Run	Top 2 Finish in Last Three Starts	Starting Price
2016	Rule The World	1	2	1	Yes	5	March	Yes	33/1
2015	Many Clouds	1	1	1	Yes	4	March	Yes	25/1
2014	Pineau De Re	1	1	1	Yes	6	March	Yes	25/1
2013	Auroras Encore	1	1	1	Yes	5	March	No	66/1
2012	Neptune Collonges	1	3	0 (14)	Yes	4	Feb	Yes	33/1
2011	Ballabriggs	1	1	2	Yes	3	March	Yes	14/1
2010	Don't Push It	1	1	2	Yes	4	March	Yes	10/1
2009	Mon Mome	2	2	3	Yes	6	March	Yes	100/1
2008	Comply Or Die	1	1	1	Yes	4	Feb	Yes	7/1
2007	Silver Birch	5	3	3	Yes	4	March	Yes	33/1

As you can see, the ideas formed above lend themselves quite well when coming up with what you need to be a National winner. Clearly there are many other statistics available and many people don't like the idea of using statistics at all. This is just my personal opinion and above all else, it's an enjoyable way for me to narrow down the field.

All the ten previous winners pass the seven criteria, apart from Neptune Collonges having a top 2 finish in a chase with only 14 runners and Auroras Encore having had no recent good performance to speak of. However, a 97% strike rate across the 70 individual cells is decent and there's bound to be the odd anomaly that crops up.

Looking at the class of 2017 I decided to initially apply the first three columns (as these seem quite key) to the current list of entries all the way down to number 45 (excluding Vics Canvas). If there was a runner who came very close to meeting one of the criteria I have highlighted it in orange and allowed it through to the next stage.

	Top 2 – 3m 2f +	Top 2 – Similar/Quality race (listed above)	Top 2 – 16+ Runners
Carlingford Lough	0 (3m 1f Gr1)	6	2
The Last Samurai	4	1	1
Blaklion	1	1	0 (13)
The Young Master	1	0 (Top 3 Chelt Fest)	1
Cause Of Causes	4	4	4
Vieux Lion Rouge	2	1	1
Houblon Des Obeaux	1	1	2
Ballynagour	1	1	3
Highland Lodge	4	2	2
Saint Are	1	2	1
Vicente	1	1	1
Raz De Maree	4	5	4
Pendra	1	1	1
Rogue Angel	1	2	3
Thunder And Roses	2	1	1

Immediately we are down to 15 runners from the initial 45, with 3 of those having an orange marker against their name. Following on from this, using the 15 that passed the first stage, I pitted them against the next four criteria which produced these results:

	Top 2 – 3m 2f +	Top 2 – Similar/Quality race (listed above)	Top 2 – 16+ Runners	At least 10 Chase Starts	Runs In Season	Month Last Run	Top 2 Finish in Last Three Starts
Carlingford Lough	0 (3m 1f Gr1)	6	2	Yes	2	Feb	Yes
The Last Samurai	4	1	1	Yes	3	March	Yes
Blaklion	1	1	0 (13)	Yes	4	Feb	Yes
The Young Master	1	0 (Top 3 Chelt Fest)	1	Yes	3	March	No
Cause Of Causes	4	4	4	Yes	5	March	Yes
Vieux Lion Rouge	2	1	1	No (9)	2	Feb	Yes
Houblon Des Obeaux	1	1	2	Yes	4	March	No
Ballynagour	1	1	3	Yes	3	Jan	No
Highland Lodge	4	2	2	Yes	1	Dec	Yes
Saint Are	1	2	1	Yes	4	Feb	Yes
Vicente	1	1	1	Yes	4	Feb	No
Raz De Maree	4	5	4	Yes	5	March	Yes
Pendra	1	1	1	Yes	1	March	Yes
Rogue Angel	1	2	3	Yes	5	Jan	No
Thunder And Roses	2	1	1	Yes	8	March	Yes

As all of the previous ten winners have passed at least 6 of the 7 criteria we are now left with nine runners:

Passed 7 from 7

The Last Samurai
Cause Of Causes
Saint Are
Raz De Maree

Passed 6 from 7

Blaklion
Houblon Des Obeaux
Vicente
Pendra
Thunder And Roses

Hopefully the winner of the Grand National 2017 is in the list above. To narrow it down even further though, I feel that once we reach this stage it's all about visual clues and trusting your gut. We have the statistics to back us up but now we can delve a bit deeper into what each has achieved.

The Last Samurai
Placed both times in races over the National fences; much higher in weights than when 2nd last year but carried 11st 12lbs around when a close 3rd in Becher back in December; Many Clouds proved big weights can now win around here and it's easy to see a big run as this will have been the aim all season.

Cause Of Causes
Has peaked in the Spring for the last four Cheltenham Festivals; lots of form in staying chases; had spin around Aintree as a 7yo behind Many Clouds (should be stronger now as a 9yo); trainer having a great season; obvious claims.

Saint Are
Had plenty of experience over the National fences; only 4lbs higher than when 2nd to Many Clouds; not getting any younger but if he gets the Good ground he loves he is a big price at his current odds.

Raz De Maree
Lots of fine efforts over marathon trips; twice a Cork National winner (including this season); almost caught Gold Cup 3rd Native River in the Welsh National back in December when thundering home; another with age against him but will see off plenty given his stamina reserves; chances.

Blaklion
Fails on the same statistic as Neptune Collonges did and comes here on the back of a 2nd in the National Trial at Haydock (also like Neptune); however while Neptune was gaining all the way to the line at Haydock, Blaklion was plugging on and the visual impression he gives is that he won't stay better than others; when factoring in the price he is now it means I'm happy to pass on him.

Houblon Des Obeaux
Fails on current form (as Auroras Encore did) but has the back form to potentially overlook that; Venetia Williams saddled Mon Mome in similar circumstances to win in 2009 (off the back of a Midlands National run); comes here from 4lbs lower than Welsh National 3rd early in the season and was a Grade 2 winner last year; another who could outrun his odds.

Vicente
Fails on current form; only 1lbs higher than for his Scottish National win last season but seems to be getting worse as the season goes on this time around; could excuse him that, as Auroras Encore showed, but he was 66/1 whereas you're only getting 25/1 about Vicente; for that reason he's a pass from me.

Pendra
Fails on number of runs this season (too few); wouldn't have qualified for any of the first three statistics were it not for his latest 2nd in the Kim Muir at the Cheltenham Festival; long time off before that run so has to muster another big effort in short space of time; overall profile doesn't appeal greatly so he's also passed over.

Thunder And Roses
Fails on number of runs this season (too many); Not the most consistent but has decent form in staying chases; Irish National winner (defeating last year's Grand National winner into 2nd place) who would probably be more at home in the Soft ground; folly to rule out should the rain fall.

Final Selections

Closer to Good Ground
The Last Samurai – 16/1
Cause Of Causes – 16/1
Saint Are – 50/1
Houblon Des Obeaux – 50/1

Closer to Soft Ground
Raz De Maree – 50/1
Houblon Des Obeaux – 50/1
Thunder And Roses – 40/1

N.B. Further down the list of entries Bless The Wings (49) passes all seven criteria and becomes interesting on Good ground at current odds of 100/1.

Extra N.B. Vieux Lion Rouge fails on two criteria but if he had run once more this season he would also pass all seven. Thinking about his form over the National fences, the fact he's now 6lbs ahead of the handicapper and the visual impression he gives, I would consider it wise to have a small saver on him to cover your entire National stakes should he win.

Happy punting and enjoy the race on 8th April.

Best of luck.