

It's a big weekend for the yard, with several runners over Irish Champions Weekend, including Now Or Never who runs in the G1 Matron Stakes at Leopardstown on Saturday. For the Sapphire Syndicate, Sunday is our big day, with Randall Stevens running in the Tattersalls Ireland Super Auction Sale Stakes at The Curragh. It's great to have the opportunity to run Randall in such a valuable race, which is an excellent addition to the programme book. Most importantly, it's nice to have a horse that I feel can be competitive in a race like this, especially with great prize money all the way down to 10th place.

I couldn't be happier with Randall. He is training well, looks great, and has had plenty of time to recover from his Galway exertions. He's really bouncing.

I had hoped that Moral Fibre could have been in there, too, but as you know he has suffered a slight fracture. It's a bit like being slightly pregnant – a fracture is a fracture, so he needs three months off. Thankfully he's very comfortable in his stable and he just needs time.

Mary Cockerill is back doing plenty of cantering and I'm very happy with how she is progressing.

With regards to my recent flagging of the possibility of extending the syndicate into next year, I want to thank

everybody for their feedback and suggestions on our WhatsApp forum. I am looking forward to continuing the conversation next week, after Randall's run at The Curragh.

During one of our WhatsApp 'chats' recently, one of the members asked about the system of handicapping horses. Sapphire member Matt Bisogno stepped forward and offered to answer the question by writing a guest column for our newsletter, which I know you will all enjoy. Matt is the U.K. - based racing mastermind who writes the acclaimed Geegeez blog (www.geegeez.co.uk). Thank you, Matt!



I know that Matt can't be at The Curragh on Sunday, and our American members will be watching the race from Tommy Healy's kitchen (and whiskey bar) in Pearl River, but I look forward to meeting everybody else in parade ring on one of the biggest weekends in the Irish flat racing calendar.

We have booked one of the best jockeys for the job, in Colm O'Donoghue, and I am very hopeful that Randall Stevens is ready to run the race of his life.

Michael O'Callaghan



Handicapping, an introduction.

By Matt Bisogno

Some context

In 2010, 39% of Irish races were handicaps. In the same year, 59% of British races were handicaps. Last year, handicaps represented 42.5% of Irish races, and a whopping 65% of British heats.

The rise in the number of Irish and British handicaps – 9% and 10% respectively over that five-year period – is something which all racing fans, be they owners or bettors (or, in most cases, both), need to be acutely aware of.

So what is a handicap race?

A handicap is a race where horses of approximately equal ability are offered a theoretically equal chance of winning by the allotment of weight – more for the perceived best horses, less for the supposed lower ability runners.

Such races are split into bands, where the ability range is much narrower than maiden (open) company.

How is the weight allocated?

Weight is allocated according to a horse's official rating. So the better question, then, is how is that rating awarded? All horses have to qualify for an official rating, usually by either winning a race or running three times in maiden company.

This is the (often flimsy) evidence on which the official handicapper – employed by the racing jurisdiction's governing body – has to base his decision. To give a very loose estimation of the full ability range, a bottom grade winner on the flat may be rated 55 while a Group 1 winner would normally be 120+. Like humans, there is a vast ability spectrum!

Exploiting the system!

Understanding the system is entirely necessary for all trainers, owners and punters. The likelihood of the handicapper having a horse's correct mark increases as it displays more racecourse evidence of its ability. Thus, a ten-race handicapper has probably found his level; but a three-race maiden runner making its first handicap start may be nowhere near the finished article.

Trainers can look after their owners with an early campaign mindful of this, and they can do that entirely

within the rules of the game. For instance, a horse bred to be a mile and a half racer can have three runs over the minimum five furlong (5/8th of a mile) trip to receive a rating. It should be no great shock if this horse then becomes much more competitive when stepped into a handicap for the first time over a distance twice as far and more!

Trainers have a duty of care to owners to this end; and punters enhance their own winning prospects by keeping this simple notion in mind: EXPECT a horse to improve its finishing position markedly on first run in a handicap, especially if there is a significant material difference in the race conditions (e.g. going, distance, jockey booking, days since a run).

Our Sapphire Syndicate horse, Randall Stevens, like most horses, came on a bundle for his first run. The experience - and the education he was given by Kieren Fallon - enabled

him to improve plenty from first to second run. Michael was obviously confident RS could get competitive in maiden company, hence we 'kept no secrets' from the handicapper. His three subsequent maiden runs, culminating in that great win at Roscommon, showed steady improvement and, in my opinion, the handicapper's assessment was fair enough. It is particularly tough for the

handicapper to assess the ability of two-year-olds at the start of the nursery (2yo handicap) season so, sensibly, he tends to err on the side of caution. It is very much a measure of a trainer (in my opinion) how early he/she knows whether to campaign for a maiden win or a handicap score later on. Michael's record speaks for itself in this regard!

The above introduction to handicaps is necessarily streamlined. For a deeper discourse on this fundamental subject google 'geegee handicap'.

Good luck!

Matt



Racing expert Matt Bisogno with Sea The Stars.

David's deliberations.



Who could have foreseen at the beginning of the season that Randall Stevens would have won a maiden, been placed twice, given us a day out at the Galway festival and be headed for a €300,000 sales race at The Curragh on Champions weekend? I dropped into

Crotanstown earlier this week and, as you can see in the picture (with Michael), Randall looked wonderful. The sore shins have subsided, the rest has done him good, and he seems ready to rock.

Sure, he's up against it in a 30-runner field where a horse like Medicine Jack, rated 17lbs higher, carries just three-pounds more than he does, and over half the field are overseas raiders – many of them on the up - intent on plundering our precious euros. On our WhatsApp forum, Brian Collins and Matt Bisogno expressed disappointment with Randall's stall-eight draw, suggesting a higher draw would have been more advantageous, but Matt also pointed out that the likely pace in the race is with the horses drawn low-to-middle and that could work to our advantage.

Brian mentioned, too, that horses with high ratings have tended to underperform in this race since its inception, and that a horse with the same rating as ours – 86 – won the race in 2014. To give us further hope, last year's second and third were rated 76 and 70 respectively. So maybe it's best to accept that this is a very open race, and our 15.2 hands terrier goes there with as good a chance as any. I'll sign off on the subject with Michael's latest thoughts.



Michael with a gleaming Randall Stevens last Monday.

'Having studied the race in more detail this evening, and given that the rain will not suit several of the better-treated horses, I think we may be closer to running a top-five finish than I first thought. He still needs to run the race of his life, and get a lot of luck in running, but here's to hope!'

The photo (left) with Moral Fibre, was also taken last Monday. As Michael says, he is comfortable in his stable, with no lameness to contend with, despite the fracture. I think we all have a soft spot for 'Bubbles' and it was a real disappointment when his injury was announced on the day he was due to make his debut at Roscommon. However, when you consider the physical and mental shifts that this big horse has made throughout the year, added to the fact that he is still maturing, I think he could

well benefit from the rest-and-grow period that his enforced layoff will allow and make into a cracking three-year-old. That's just my opinion.

Those of you keeping in touch with the upcoming yearling sales will have spotted Moral Fibre's half-brother, by Excelebration, in the Tattersalls Ireland September Yearling Sale catalogue (Lot 1). I'm sure Michael will be checking him out. Lot 348 is also a Sapphire sibling, being the

Zoffany half-brother to Randall Stevens who fetched €40,000 as a foal. This colt could be a hot ticket, but Michael will no doubt be keeping a close eye on him, also.

As Geraldine has mentioned, Tattersalls have kindly invited all of the Sapphire members and friends attending on Sunday to avail of their hospitality suite. I think that's a yes!

See yis on Sunday.

David Donohoe