

# DAVID ASHFORTH



**I**T'S always difficult. On the one hand, you need a good day today to set yourself up for Royal Ascot. There's nothing like facing up to the Queen Anne Stakes with a few hundred pounds in your top hat.

On the other hand, a bad day can quickly replace eager anticipation with a determination not to have another bet in your life, ever, or at least, not until Tuesday, or when the cash machine next accepts your card.

Professionals (what do they know?) will seek out a horse full of value, wherever it may be found, which is stupid, because who wants to wait until the 8.20pm at Lingfield when the first at Sandown is at 1.45pm? That's a tricky handicap and it would be prudent to be patient and wait for the first at York, at 2.05pm.

That's the Queen Mother's Cup, although it's no use to her any more, so she's giving it to whichever lady amateur rider wins the one and a half mile handicap, plus their weight in Pol Roger champagne. If only Gary Wiltshire was eligible.

I've got a soft spot for the Cup, partly because it reminds me of the good old days when, for a while, I actually made it pay by taking the trouble to discover which of the lady amateurs rode well, and which rode badly.

In those days there was a bigger gulf between the two and most of the races were conditions events. Nowadays, they've ruined it by improving the quality of the riders and turning most of the races into handicaps.

The first race, in 1988, was won, appropriately, by the Princess Royal, on Insular, at 14-1, by 12 lengths. Insular was bred and had once been owned by the Queen, as was the 1998 winner, Whitechapel, trained by Lord Huntingdon.

You see, it's a race with a bit of class. Michael Stoute, before they 'Sir'ed him, used to fire off a decent three-year-old, with Maxine Cowdrey (nee Juster) on board, although not as often as he did with that ladies race on Diamond day at Ascot.

In 1994, the Stoute-Cowdrey combination won the Cup with Sadler's Image but there were only four runners, so they turned it into a handicap, and had four runners, again. Tethys won for Les Eyre, ridden by the excellent Diana Jones. The year after, it was Make A Stand who, nine months later, won the Champion Hurdle.

In recent times, it's been a race for racing dynasties – the Easterby mob and the Cumani clan, although the Cumani have given the race a miss this year.

Sara, whose husband Luca did the training, won on Mephisto in 2004 while Francesca, their daughter, won twice, on Idealistic in 2005 and on Soulacroix the year after.

Mick Easterby had won with Flower

## Amateurs the perfect warm-up for royal jamboree

O'Cannie in 1999 and Sporting Gesture in 2003, both ridden by the very capable Serena Brotherton, while Tim Easterby won with Bollin Nellie in 2002.

Mick and Tim both have runners today, Shadows Lengthen and Twisted for the former, and Crackentorp for the latter, but Brotherton rides Bothy for Brian Ellison.

Perhaps it's because two of the three Easterby runners will be ridden by Mick's granddaughters, Jacqueline Coward and Joanna Mason, with Sophie Staveley riding Twisted. I've no idea who she is, but I expect she's someone.

**N**OW, they've gone from one extreme (a four-runner condition race) to the other (a 19-runner handicap).

Sorting them out is difficult but it's got to be done.

The first thing that catches the eye is Nina Carberry, riding Spirit Is Needed for Mark Johnston, who won the race two years ago with Step This Way.

Unfortunately, the second thing that catches the eye is his draw, 17. Hopefully, Carberry will cope with that, and Spirit Is Needed is lightly raced, and improving. I've often backed horses like that – lightly raced, and improving. It's usually enough to stop them improving.

After him, I like Crackentorp, who sounds as if he's spelt wrongly but, even so, ran well when second over course and distance last month, and respectably over further last time, and has Coward to help, but stall 18 to hinder.

Trip The Light likes York (who wouldn't, it's a lovely city?), Bothy and Conquisto are interesting, and would be even more so if there were hurdles, Bow To No One has a chance and so does the sole three-year-old Desert Recluse, who will be a popular bet but may not be good enough. Oh, and there's last year's winner, Mull Of Dubai, 4lb lower now and, although held by Trip The Light on recent form, is finding his and has probably been aimed at this race.

So, what's going to win? I don't know. What price are they?

**'It's been a race for dynasties – the Easterby mob and the Cumani clan'**