



## Cheltenham Festival 2020

# Should I have gone to Cheltenham?



**Sean Clancy** ponders his decision to travel to the Festival in the shadow of Covid-19

**Y**OU can't live your life in fear." That's what I said as I packed my wool suits, my Cheltenham overcoat, my camera, my stashed British pounds, my press pass and left for England.

I repeated that mantra until it weakened, until it lost its levity. It began to sound trite, flippant, ridiculously out of touch.

A week ago, I left for Cheltenham, the coronavirus, at the time, was a concern, a hassle, a nuisance. Or so we thought...or so I thought. I left without fear. Trepidation, sure, but not fear.

In what has felt like a very short and very long week, the heat has been turned up, a virus on the rise, the world is a strange place.

The Masters, the Carolina Cup, my son's Little League season, the London Marathon, horse sales, horse races, gatherings of any size are being postponed or cancelled or run behind closed doors. Italy is in lockdown, the stock market has plummeted, schools are closing, businesses pressured and stretched.

Cheltenham felt like the last dance as the lights went down. Surreal. The mind volleyed back and forth. Are we being stupid or smart? Reckless or resistant? Brazen or bold? Deadly or defiant?

I write from an empty row on a half-empty flight from Heathrow to Dulles. Maybe, it's just the plane ride. Or Springsteen weaving words and telling tales in his documentary, *Western Stars*, which plays on the pullout screen in front of me.

Some of us break down in hotel rooms, weep on long car rides, fall apart when we see an old friend or hear a favorite song. I get wistful and

introspective on plane rides. It's partly saying goodbye to my son, my wife, my life when I leave, thinking about what could happen while I'm gone, if the trip is worth it, if days when I'm away override days when I stay.

And on the journey home, it's saying goodbye to friends who I won't see for another year, if we're lucky.

**Cheltenham felt like the last dance as the lights went down. Surreal. The mind volleyed back and forth. Are we being stupid or smart?**

I guess this is the simple nature of travelling. When I leave, I wonder if I should go. I come home, glad I did. Usually. This time, it's different, we are living in a strange, dystopian time. Heathrow was eerie, the fear palpable as passengers trudged to destinations unknown. Sneezes like lightning bolts. Coughs, claps of thunder.

My wife, Annie, says I'm going into self isolation in the guest room when I get home, away from her, away from my son. I want to scoff, tell her she's overreacting, but can't.

Should I have gone to Cheltenham last week? Was this a barbaric move? An act of selfishness? Have I put myself, and more importantly, them and others at risk? I'll be content with the memories, the moments, content with the decision to go to Cheltenham, only when I know we are clear from an invisible virus that has the world reeling, wondering, questioning. Actually, content is too strong. Relieved is more like it.

Springsteen just finished with a three-word goodbye. "Travel safe, pilgrim."

## Letters from America

*Dear Jamie,*

Listen, you made a mistake, you probably should have sat still, you know that. Don't let the trolls on social media bring you down, they do not represent the majority of the people in the world who respect and appreciate what it takes to get out there and do it, to put your neck on the line, to put your skills to the test.

If Goshen doesn't snag his hind hoof on his front hoof, you're still okay. You will be back. Goshen will be back.

Brush it Off

*Dear A.P,*

Nice job consoling Jamie on the way to the jocks' room. Subtle and strong. Mentor

*Dear Mares Novice Hurlers,* Concertista went that-a-way. Domination



*Dear Coronavirus,*  
You nearly spoiled Cheltenham and perhaps you should have. Each day, it felt like the bear was gaining ground. In nearly 20 years of Cheltenham, I've never felt such dread, such fear, such impending doom as each day passed. The racing provided an escape, but only briefly, a bandanna in a blizzard. Friday evening, we stood around the Bathurst Arms in North Cerney, four friends, four pints, not a word uttered about the Gold Cup, knowing the world was about to be very different. Please Go

*Dear Paul,*  
Congratulations on Indefatigable's win in the Martin Pipe and your first win at Cheltenham. Virgin No More

*Dear Steven,*  
To own a horse like Goshen, to be standing there with a dream about to be realised, only to be snatched away and then to have the wherewithal to put your arm around Jamie, console him and then to be bombarded by the press and calmly say, "It's racing. It's jump racing." Bravo. Beacon in the Storm

*Dear Champ,*  
That was awesome. I watched it next to a man and a woman I had never met, when you hit the wire, we spun around and rejoiced in shared delight. We hadn't met, we hadn't bet. That's racing. Shared Experience

*Dear David,*  
You nearly pulled it off with The Giant Bolster and now you have with The Conditional. Down on his nose at the second-to-last, he dusted himself off like he had tripped over a curb and you have your Cheltenham winner. The Little Guy



**Barry Geraghty kissing the trophy after the Champion Hurdle** \ Healy Racing.

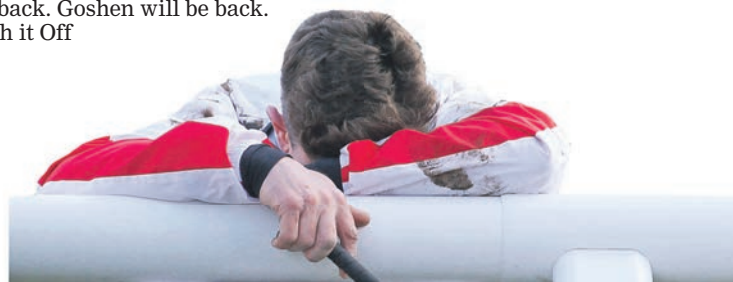
*Dear Barry,*  
Five wins. I know I don't have to tell you this, but appreciate it, relish it, savour it. You've battled back from injuries, like all jump jockeys. One day soon, you won't have that desire to come back. Ruby, AP, Noel, so many of the greats have moved on lately and you're still going strong. Long May it Last

*Dear Emma,*  
I loved your quote, "They're not machines," after Paisley Park's defeat in the Stayers. You're right and thanks for the reminder. Flesh and Blood

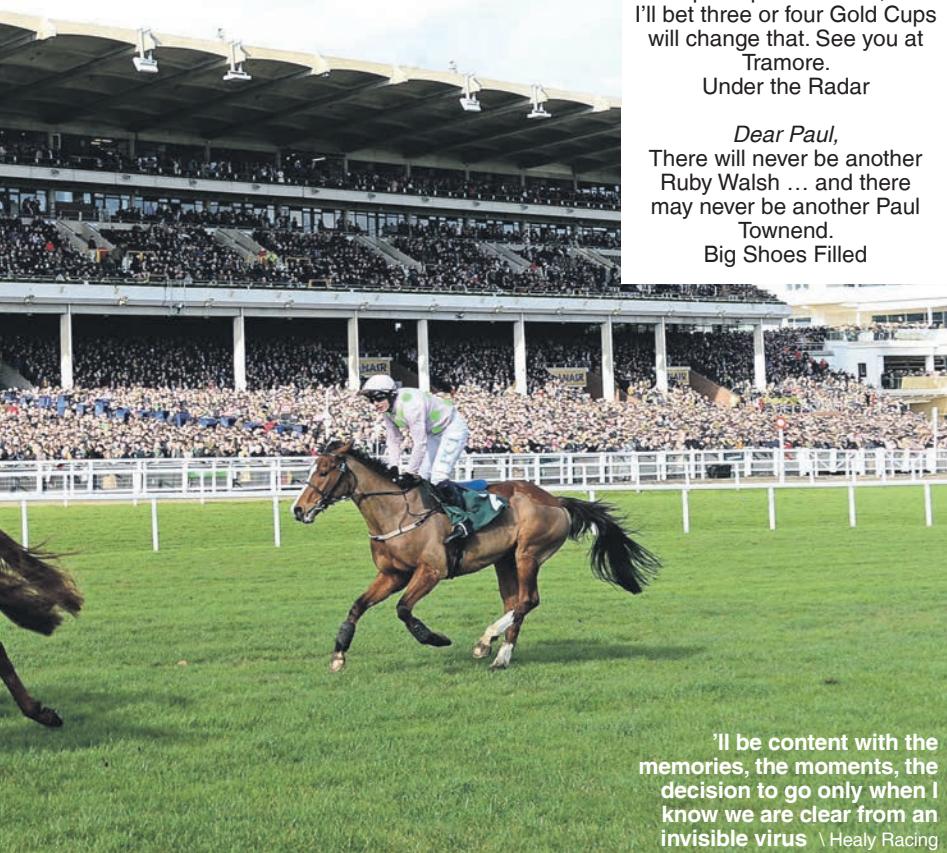
*Dear Min,*  
You've been beaten once at two and a half miles and that was by a neck to Politologue in the Mildmay. Tripped

*Dear Davy,*  
I've got a safe to crack, a bomb to disarm, an egg toss competition, can you come over? Great to see you win three, especially when leading home a tripping trifecta in the Johnny Henderson Grand Annual. Touched

**Jamie Moore after parting company with Goshen at the last in the JCB Triumph Hurdle** \ Healy Racing.



**March 10th-13th**



*Dear Al Boum Photo,*  
And that makes two. They say you don't attract a following and perhaps that's true, but I'll bet three or four Gold Cups will change that. See you at Tramore.  
Under the Radar

*Dear Paul,*  
There will never be another Ruby Walsh ... and there may never be another Paul Townend.  
Big Shoes Filled

'll be content with the memories, the moments, the decision to go only when I know we are clear from an invisible virus \ Healy Racing



**Put The Kettle On ridden by Aidan Coleman being led in by Stephen Dunphy after winning the Racing Post Arkle Challenge Trophy Novice Chase \ carolinenorris.ie**

*Dear Put The Kettle On,*  
I was impressed with your pace and panache, even if I bet a straight exacta of Fakir over Rouge Vif that would have kicked my week into gear quicker than a Tuesday Guinness and a winner in the Supreme. I looked back at your form after the race, yeah, I know, I know, 20/20 hindsight, and realised how strong it had been.  
Tea is Ready

*Dear Jamie,*  
At a Cheltenham Preview Monday night, Kim said you spun him from a call on Newtidge to ride Ravenhill in the finale Tuesday, I guess I should have known. In hindsight, the 12/1 price was a gift, maybe send a bag of crisps and a note to Kim.  
First Called

*Dear Stewards,*  
Did you take a look at Asterion Forlonge's path in the Supreme? He racked up rivals like they were empty cups in Guinness Village, outright knocking two of them to the ground and certainly interfering with Heaven Help Us who finished seventh.

It wasn't Paul Townend's fault, one could argue it was the jockeys to the right of a horse going right the entire way who were at fault, but should Asterion Forlonge been disqualified from fourth?

Right Turn Clyde



**Faugheen – the fans recognise when a horse lays it on the line year after year \ Healy Racing**

*Dear Faugheen*

I remember my first Cheltenham, when See More Business finished third in the Gold Cup and was cheered like the winner as he walked into the winner's enclosure for the third time in his heady career. The crowd knew it might be the last time. And it was.

Your reception this year, when you walked in for the fourth time, was as good or better. The fans recognise when a horse lays it on the line year after year.

A Champion Hurdle winner returning as a 12-year-old novice, tapped for a bit of toe is all, before finishing third. That's National Hunt racing. That's Cheltenham.

Young at Heart

*Dear Cheltenham Board,*

We know it's coming and we know why it's coming but a five-day festival is a mistake. When you peruse the form of a Cheltenham race and need to go back to the top of the page to figure out the name of the race, it's been watered-down and lost its urgency, its essence. Be careful.

The Golden Goose

*Dear Handicapper,*

J.P. McManus, Gordon Elliott and a few others are making a mockery of the system.

Bluffing

*Dear Politologue*

You deserved that.  
Fifth Time's the Charm

*Dear Altior,*

Come back quick.  
Missing in Action

*Dear Tiger Roll,*

Just in case that was the last time we see you, thanks for the memories. You have convinced us and captivated us through six ventures to Cheltenham. And to think, we got 16/1 in 2017. I still have the money.

Curtain Closed

**Dear Friends, Hopefully, I'll see you again next year. Hopefully, all of you are safe, healthy and sound and we'll look back with a laugh – and a perspective – from this year's apocalypse. Counting the Days**



**Envoi Allen ridden by Davy Russell being led in \ carolinenorris.ie**

*Dear Envoi Allen,*  
How does the sky look when there is no limit?  
Gold Cup

*Dear Samcro,*  
Welcome back, kid. Sorry we doubted you.  
Second Act

*Dear Registry,*  
Please reserve the name "Self Isolation" for me. Thanks.  
Gallows Humor

*Dear Kim,*  
Welcome back. So glad to see you with a winner at the Festival. Your rise and fall and rise again would make Shakespeare dip his quill. Imperial Aura was imperial.  
Down but Never Out

*Dear Immigration,*

Not that I'm complaining necessarily, but I did expect some measures in place during a world pandemic. All international passengers at Dulles descended into the same line, there wasn't a quarantine area, nobody took my temperature, asked me if I had a cough, asked me if I had been with 60,000 others over four days.

Hell, I used to worry about the "have you been near livestock" question on the customs form, I was worried about returning. This year, during a pandemic, not a restriction beyond a sheet of paper with a list of countries.

"Have you visited any of these countries since leaving United States?" I looked at the U for United Kingdom, didn't see it listed and said, "No, sir." I was waved through the gates, grabbed my bag, called an Uber and was home. Contagious.  
Contagious

*Dear Apple's Jade,*

Sorry, we lost you in the shuffle. You have been brilliant over all these years and deserved a proper sendoff, instead of a drift off the backstage. Enjoy retirement.

Thanks for the Memories

*Dear Epatante,*

I watched the Champion Hurdle from the corner, I haven't seen many going so well and so smoothly as you when you sliced through the field. And tell your trainer he's the best I've ever seen.

Hot Knife through Butter

*Dear Lisnagar Oscar,*

Over four top-heavy days, when Gordon won seven and Willie won seven and J. P. won seven and Barry won five and Paul won five...you reminded us why they run the race. 50/1.  
Upset

*Dear Dickie,*

Rough week. Rough season. You battled back from a broken arm to make Cheltenham and try to wrestle back your championship from Brian Hughes. You wound up winless at Cheltenham, on the floor twice, and now the season is over because of coronavirus. Get some rest, brother.

Still Awed

*Dear Brian,*

Your championship is not tarnished. Congratulations. Well deserved.

The First Crown

*Dear SSP Number Twentytwo,*

What a thrill, huh? When Darver Star turned for home and opened up, it was there, the chance, the shout. That's all any of us want in this game, just that moment when it's possible, when it's palpable, when it's on the cusp.

Moment in Time

*Dear Puppy (can I call you Puppy?),*

I think you thought Honeysuckle was Benie Des Dieux. Moments before, it was your stablemate drafting behind you, a plan about to unfold, she went out, Honeysuckle went in, yeah, you know what happened. Maybe not, but that's the way it looked to me, live from the corner and on the replay.

Mistaken Identity

*Dear Maxine,*

Now that's a story. What a ride. Positive. Out of trouble. Draw it up in the playbook and play it. So happy for your family to recoup the Foxhunters' trophy.  
Family