



GREATWOOD HURDLE AN OPTION FOR McCAIN AND WILLIAMS

Meeting: *The Open*

Dates: *Friday, Saturday & Sunday - November 13, 14 & 15*

Gates Open: *10.00am Friday & Saturday, 11.00am Sunday*

First Race: *1.15pm Friday, 12.50pm Saturday, 1.10pm Sunday*

Admission prices from £9. Go to www.cheltenham.co.uk for further information

Donald McCain and Nick Williams are considering their options ahead of the £100,000 Grade Three Greatwood Hurdle (2.20pm) at The Open on Sunday, November 15, with the trainers eying the lucrative handicap for **Whiteoak** and **James De Vassy**, respectively.

Whiteoak landed her greatest triumph in the extended two and a half-mile Grade Two David Nicholson Mares' Hurdle at The Festival in 2008, and McCain's crack mare could bid for another Cheltenham triumph in the extended two-mile contest.

The six-year-old raced only three times last term. After an eye-catching second to Ashkazar over two miles in the Grade Two Kingwell Hurdle at Wincanton in February, Whiteoak failed to fire and was 12th of 23 behind Punjabi in the Smurfit Kappa Champion Hurdle at The Festival the following month. A respectable sixth to Solwhit at Aintree in April ended a frustrating campaign.

McCain revealed today: "The Greatwood Hurdle is one option under consideration for Whiteoak. I wanted to go to Wetherby this week but decided against that and she is also in the Morgiana Hurdle in Ireland. She is very well and desperately wants a run, there has just been nowhere to run her

"She had an injury early last season, which was unfortunate, and then came back and ran a blinder in the Kingwell Hurdle. To be fair to her, she probably left her season there. Without having a hard race, she managed to give herself a hard race that day and that was probably the end of her for the season. Saying that, she still ran respectably in the Champion Hurdle and was sixth of 16 in the Aintree Hurdle when she wasn't quite herself.

"At the moment, the Greatwood Hurdle is under consideration and the ground as it is will not be a problem to her."

Nick Williams enjoyed great success with Diamond Harry last term and the Devon handler has another exciting young hurdler on his hands in the shape of James De Vassy.

The four-year-old was having only his fourth race when making a winning start to the season in a limited handicap hurdle at Chepstow on October 10. Despite racing from 4lb out of the handicap in the extended two-mile contest, James De Vassy won impressively by four lengths from the smart Classic Swain.

Williams is not keen to compete from out of the handicap again and is hoping for a high-profile defection so that the weights will rise.

He reported: "The plan is to go to the Greatwood Hurdle with James De Vassy but he will not run if he is out of the weights, so that means we need **Celestial Halo** to come out. I don't want to run him out of the handicap again - at the moment it is out of my hands.

"We were 4lb wrong at Chepstow and he won very well but it is different once you are rated in the 130s. You don't want to be running from out of the handicap when you move up a grade.

"He is very good and I am really happy with him. You would definitely hope that there is a bit of improvement in him.

"He wants it on the soft side of good. We just about got away with it at Chepstow and we would not want to do that again, so he would not run on good to firm, especially at two miles. I do see him stepping up in trip at some stage."

The Nicholls-trained Celestial Halo is the highest rated horse among the 56-strong entry after his runner-up finish in the Grade One Smurfit Kappa Champion Hurdle in March.

The fantastic contest is the highlight of Sunday's excellent card, which is the third and final day of The Open - Friday, November 13, to Sunday, November 15.

Saturday hosts The Open's feature contest, the prestigious £150,000 Grade Three Paddy Power Gold Cup, staged over an extended two and a half miles.