

Racing at Musselburgh this week to begin the National Hunt season



Musselburgh Racecourse kicks off its National Hunt season with double header meetings this week on 7 & 8 November and a pledge that for the first time ever race will be worth a minimum of £5,000.

The East Lothian course is putting up a prize fund of more than £600,000 over the 10 fixture season and on peak days prize money for each race will average £10,000, while no race will fall below £5,000. (National Hunt Flat races will be £3,000 minimum)

In another first, the BHA has confirmed Musselburgh will stage its first Listed jumps race during the John Smith's Scottish Cheltenham Trials Raceday on 2 February 2014 with the John Smith's Scottish Triumph Hurdle Trial granted elevated status.

The Scottish Cheltenham Trials, which this year attracted champion chaser Overturn, is now firmly established as a bona fide trials day for the Cheltenham Festival and all eight Musselburgh races will offer key opportunities to prepare for the Festival.

With five £20,000 races and prize money in excess of £130,000

on offer, Musselburgh's premier National Hunt meeting also boasts one of 12 qualifying races for the Pertemps Final Handicap Hurdle at Cheltenham, the CGA Scottish Foxhunter Chase, which is the richest Hunters' Chase in Scotland and the north of England, and the Albert Bartlett Scottish Novices' Hurdle Trial which has been upgraded to a Class 2 race.

Musselburgh Racecourse general manager, Bill Farnsworth, said:- "We have focussed on getting key sponsors on board to improve the quality and prize money we can offer over the National Hunt season and for the first time every race will be worth at least £5000 and on average double that figure.

"The John Smith's Scottish Cheltenham Trials Raceday just gets better and better and gaining Listed status for the Scottish Triumph Hurdle Trial is confirmation that our hard work is paying off. All eight races have a like-for-like race at Cheltenham and our meeting is now widely recognised as a genuine trial for Cheltenham."

Musselburgh's other key jumps meeting is the New Year's Day fixture on 1 January, which features the £40,000 Hogmaneigh Hurdle and the £30,000 Honest Toun Handicap, and Farnsworth is confident he is on the path to creating a festive holiday meeting which will become a mainstay on the UK racing calendar.

"The 2013 New Year meeting was a great success and confirmed that racing fans will jump at the opportunity to blow away the cobwebs on New Year's Day. Our aim, as with all of our meetings, is to improve the prize money and quality as the race day grows in popularity."

Musselburgh gets the National Hunt term off to a generous start with the Saints and Sinners charity meeting on Friday (8 Nov) offering free entry to all in an initiative supported by the racecourse's bookmakers and the charity will be raising funds for Victim Support Scotland.

However, despite Musselburgh's upbeat National Hunt opening, Farnsworth sounded a note of caution about the long term prospects of jump racing in the north.

He said:- "Musselburgh and some of the other tracks are bucking the trend but the reality is jump racing in the north has declined over the past decade and this is causing great concern to the industry.

"The reason we are able to invest in the quality of our racing programme and in prize money is because we have worked really hard at strengthening our fixture list and attracting sponsorship.

"It means we now have race days which attract more racegoers and generates more betting turnover on-course and off-course but we are fighting an uphill battle. The number of jumps trainers in the north, with more than 50 horses, has dramatically reduced in recent years and the industry has to pull out all the stops to ensure National Hunt racing is a viable and attractive option for owners and trainers."