

Been there and done it: Ruby Walsh and Barry Geraghty on Cheltenham glory and who they're backing this year

No-one boasts more experience of winning at Cheltenham than Ruby Walsh and Barry Geraghty, with the pair boasting a combined 102 winners at the Festival. With both now retired from the sport, the sheer magnitude of their achievements has sunk in, and it's clear that few will know more about what makes a potential [Cheltenham 2021](#) winner than the two Irishmen.

Indeed, emotions run high for both men as they recall their maiden triumphs at the Festival, when the pair were just beginning their voyages in racing careers that would ultimately lead to major success. For Walsh, his first Cheltenham win came in 1998 on board *Alexander Banquet* in the Champion Bumper, and the now-retired jockey still remembers the euphoria as if it was yesterday.

"The last 100 yards," Walsh reflects as he and Geraghty sit down to watch their respective Cheltenham highlights, "it's just a feeling you get, that I got that day and a few other days as well, the last 100 yards seems... to... take... forever. The emotion at the end was a little bit of disbelief. You've watched something for so long and you've envisaged yourself being there and all of a sudden it happens to you.

"You know it's enormous, you know it's incredible. It's just disbelief that it's actually happened. I'd ridden a couple the day before and it was my 3rd ride of the Festival. My dad had ridden four winners there in his life."



Photo by Jeff Griffith on Unsplash

Geraghty's first win at the Cheltenham Festival came four years later with *Moscow Flyer* in the Arkle Challenge Trophy, and the jockey holds similarly fond memories as he reminisces on the race that would spark a hugely successful career as far as the Prestbury Park festival was concerned.

"It's the best," Geraghty says. "Your most important winner is your first at Cheltenham. You haven't reached the real heights at that stage of your career, so to get a winner in one of the Grade Ones is even better. It was brilliant."

The sight of Walsh and Geraghty emerging victorious in races at the Cheltenham Festival became so familiar that it's easy to overlook the scale of their achievements. At last year's Festival, Geraghty recorded an impressive five wins in what would be his final outing at the famous meeting – proof of his enduring class. Walsh also managed to land a winner on his last Cheltenham Festival appearance, and the longevity of the two great jockeys is something to marvel at.

Frankly, there is no-one better placed to offer their opinions on the 2021 Festival than the two most successful jockeys in its history. With Geraghty having triumphed in last year's Champion Hurdle with *Epatante*, he's the obvious choice to give his opinion on whether the defending champion can get the win without him in the saddle.

"*Epatante* can improve. Physically now she's twice the size [compared to last year]. Can she beat *Honeysuckle*? I fancy her, definitely. But if *Honeysuckle* gets good ground, I don't fancy *Epatante* at all. It's the same with *Goshen*, she's a good-ground horse. If you watch the replay of *Annie Power's* Champion Hurdle [in 2016], on that ground, I can't fancy *Honeysuckle*. On this course, especially. On the other course you can make a case.

"But I don't think *Epatante* has the natural fitness that *Annie*

Power had to put in a performance like last year on good ground.”

```
<iframe width="560" height="315"
src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Ko_SBGxSL4s"
frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-
write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture"
allowfullscreen></iframe>
```

As a two-time winner of the Cheltenham Gold Cup with *Kauto Star*, Walsh is well placed to give his opinions on this year's [Gold Cup odds](#) and how the race will unfold, but it will not surprise many that he is backing the pre-race favourite *Al Boum Photo* to succeed.

“It will not be straightforward, but *Al Boum Photo* is the most likely winner,” [he states](#). “You may not want to back him now, but I would be getting on him before racing starts on Tuesday because if Willie Mullins gets on a roll at the Festival – and he’s got a lot of really well-fancied horses – he will be plenty short enough, whether the public get into him or not. If it goes the other way, you can always back him again, but if he rolls in then you will have missed the price.”

If there’s anyone reliable for Cheltenham tips and advice, it’s the two men who have been there and done it countless times before. While the horse racing community would love to be watching Walsh and Geraghty out on the course at Cheltenham this year, we’ll have to make do with the pair’s expert opinions, and the memories they have given to so many fans of this great sport.