



Rowan Cope showing skill and style



Jaffa keeping out of trouble for Yvonne Goss

# It's All About the Button!



The famous and sought-after Gold Ledbury Hunt Button

## *The run up to the 2018 Golden Button Challenge*

By Charley Snowdon

**C**&T Editor and thrusting enthusiast Charley Snowdon catches up with the hot favourites for this year's Golden Button Challenge including an interview with former Grand National winner Paul Carberry.

Just wow! The Golden Button challenge is most definitely not for the faint hearted and this year's competition looks to be as fierce as ever.

The race takes place this Saturday (10th Feb) in the heart of Ledbury Hunt country along the banks of the River Severn and consists of 25 natural, formidable fences.

Huge hedges with filled ditches on landing and take-off, upright timber and wide water will all be on the menu for a strong field of approximately 50 runners all battling it out for a gold, Ledbury Hunt button.

"You have to remember that horses want to stay on their feet and will do everything they can to do that", said ex Button winner Zoe Gibson. "I would never go for the hero routes but look for options that gave my

horse the best chance of staying on their feet if we messed up, I would look to jump a softer part of a hedge for example."

Zoe is not riding in the race this year but harbours a wealth of experience and triumphed at this year's Melton Hunt Club Ride.

"I would walk the course very carefully indeed and I would know the spots on each fence that I would choose to jump", said Zoe. "I will walk a natural country course at least three times to figure out the kindest and safest routes."

At the other end of the spectrum (but I'm not so convinced by his relaxed demeanour!) is former Grand National winner and too cool for school jockey, Paul Carberry.

"I've ridden the horse once last week", laughed Paul. "I popped him over a couple of cross country jumps and he felt okay!"

Past Button winner Paul takes on this year's Challenge in the quest for a second golden button for the back of his hunt coat. "If it doesn't happen I will just have to keep coming back, I want the pair!" jested Paul. "It's



Former winner Zoe Gibson takes on a formidable hedge

all about the craic and I just love my hunting."

Paul is most certainly hard core and will be hunting with the Ledbury the day before the race and then attending the Golden Button Ball in the evening. "I'll have to take it easy", laughed Paul unconvincingly. "I'm walking the course in the morning I think!"

Although Paul seems almost nonchalant about the race I have a sneaky feeling that this is bit of competitive cover up!



Paul will weigh in on minimum weight (11 stone, no mean feat!) and rides pointer Lighting Tunes. "He raced a couple of weeks ago and did okay", said Paul. "He is a three miler so should stay the trip on Saturday."

Paul came from behind on a horse he had never sat on before and even won after a refusal at his last attempt of the Golden Button, demonstrating his racing ability and the quality of horse beneath him.

I ask Paul if it's beneficial to follow somebody that knows their job and the best routes in the beginning.

"It makes the job a bit easier!"

Another hot favourite and a man that most certainly knows their vocation is Rowan Cope.

A joint MFH for the Pytchley, Rowan is also the lead man for the formidable team chasing team Relentless. "I don't do nerves", said a chilled Rowan. "I have ridden in about 700 races so I'm pretty used to it!"

Away from Relentless, Rowan is looking forward to flying solo. "It's nice when you ride in these hunt races because I am only responsible for my horse and myself", said Rowan. "I then only have myself to blame if it goes wrong!"

The ex-jockey took to hunting and riding in natural country races after struggling with his weight. "It was nice not to have to worry about my weight so much", said Rowan. "Although saying that, it still makes a huge difference, I will weigh a lot more than the other top contenders on Saturday."

One advantage that Rowan may have over the visiting contingent is the fact that he knows his horse inside and out. "He is a bit of a freak", said Rowan. "One week you can ride and lead a child out hunting on him and then at the weekend he'll lead Relentless. He is delightful horse with loads of character."

Rowan believes that the trust and relationship that he has with his mount Arthur is at the heart of their success. "Yes, he has a



William Fox Grant thrusting over a sizeable ditch/hedge combination

big engine and yes, he can gallop and he can jump, but if I say go long or go short he trusts me and does it", said Rowan. "I wouldn't want to swap him for any other horse that's entered."

Another team chase leader and force to be reckoned with is William Fox Grant. "It's the ultimate thrill and the ultimate test!" said William about the feat ahead. "You need a lot of luck and a lot of horse."

William is the only male jockey to have ridden and completed five Golden Button challenges and this year is aiming to be in the top ten. "I have borrowed the ride off of Johnny Morris", said William. "The horse is called Chefe and in preparation for the Button I hunted him with the South Dorset to see how he handled hedges and then took him out with the Wilton to try some upright timber."

Chefe is obviously something special and has been previously piloted around several natural country courses by his owner who is in his eighties! "He is a beautifully put together thoroughbred", said William. "He is an absolute machine and I expect him to be on the bridle the whole way round."

Flying the flag for the ladies and fancied favourite is Yvonne Goss. "I confess I am fiercely competitive", chuckled Yvonne. "I don't have much of a choice with my horse so if he decides we are leading on the day so be it!"

Indeed Yvonne expects to be a front runner from the off and just adores the horse beneath her. "Yes, he gets treats and kisses but he gives me so much he deserves it!"

Yvonne rides Untilla Legend aka Jaffa and has herself, been team chasing since the 1980's. "I just love the speed and the thrill of it!" said Yvonne. "You need a quirky horse that you trust, a horse that will take

on anything without risking their own life."

Yvonne, like Rowan has a horse that she knows inside out and can read like a book. "You get a bond with a quirky horse", said Yvonne. "When they are quirky you don't tell them what they need to do, you try and keep one step ahead and let them think they are calling all the shots."

Jaffa is the kind of horse that knows his own mind, if I get him on a stubble field for example, there is no point in trying to pull him up but I know he'll stop the other side."

Yvonne similarly to Zoe will walk the course in detail. "The aim of the game is to get safely round", said Yvonne. "I will choose the best part of a hedge with no knots in it."

Jaffa is a careful horse that does not like to touch fences and is so sure footed that Yvonne trusts her horse 100%. "He will take off a stride, a stride and a half early and wing it", said Yvonne. "When he lands he is very quick away so being careful does not slow him down."

There is no denying that the Golden Button is the ultimate horse and rider test.

Saturday's race promises to be quite something and it will be interesting to see whether the pro jockeys and visiting guests triumph over the team chasing and other bonded couplings.

Does the Golden Button course require jockey weight and guts, or will fearless trust built over time triumph the day?

Who knows, but the one thing that these top riders all have in common is their love of hunting, the adrenalin and the overall respect and love for a bold, resilient and quick thinking horse.

Oh, and we mustn't forget the craic of course!



Former Grand National and Button winner Paul Carberry