

of Cheltenham



MEMORABLE: Victorious Dawn Run and jockey Jonjo O'Neill return to the Cheltenham winners enclosure amid Irish cheers, after winning the Tote Cheltenham Gold Cup in 1986

A magical week full of fine memories



says *Evening Echo* racing expert **DAVE CRONIN**

THE Cheltenham Festival is the be-all and end-all of the National Hunt season. The Anglo-Irish jousts and the age old rivalry between bookies and punters make the four-day extravaganza incomparable to any other week in the sport.

The gambling is legendary, millions changing hands, as the creme de la creme of each generation from both sides of the Irish Sea do battle over four high-octane days.

Put simply, Cheltenham is the Mecca. It's the place where dreams and reputations are shattered and a few, just a few, come true.

Hardly surprising then that the Festival continues to grow in popularity each year.

Crowds of 50,000 for the first three days, rising to a capacity 65,000 on Gold Cup Day on the Friday, bear testament to that.

Thousands of those proportions bring their own special atmosphere and the substantial Irish contingent, who embark on the annual pilgrimage to the foot of the Cotswolds, provide the perfect compliment to the gathered masses of British National Hunt enthusiasts.

An amphitheatre packed to the rafters will, by its very nature, generate a noise



MEMORABLE: Imperial Call leads Rough Quest to victory in the 1996 Gold Cup

level that will sent the decibel levels reaching for the sky.

And so it is at Cheltenham.

Any horse that gains top honours is guaranteed to receive a heartfelt and rousing reception on that glorious walk back past the grandstand, with the very heartiest roars usually accompanying the Irish-trained heroes.

Few races staged elsewhere can make the hairs on the back of the neck stand to attention, but the memory alone of certain Festival highlights can do that very thing —

Dawn Run's (1986) and Imperial Call's (1996) Gold Cup triumphs especially spring to mind.

The Irish have had plenty to crow about in recent years, 19 winners in the past two seasons, including a record-breaking 10 in 2006.

What this week holds for the Irish only time will tell. What is certain, however, is that punters, home and abroad, will be spellbound by the magic that is Cheltenham.

● *Read all about the latest Cheltenham news in sport.*



ROBERT O'SHEA

A yappy dog story

THERE was a man on TV last night with a Fabulous Willy.

It's not every week you get to type an intriguing opening sentence, so when the opportunity arises you've got to grab it.

Grab it was exactly what the woman did last night on BBC2, pre-watershed. If you tuned in you would have seen her fondling this Willy for almost a minute.

As one of the commentators said: "She really has to feel him underneath his coat. We don't get the sense looking down from up here but with her hands she can really get to know him."

This week I nearly wrote about horses. Cheltenham is my favourite week of the year but there is a bit of overkill with it so other than the obligatory tip (Lennon in the second race tomorrow) I'll move on to today's important subject, those other four-legged creatures we invest optimistic amounts of money in: dogs.

Now I don't mind dog-racing; it's not as enjoyable as the gee-gees but there is a start and a finish and by the latter we know who is the fastest dog. That is the only sound way to judge dogs in competition — in some sort of race.

Yet in the same week that saw Europe agree to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 20 per cent from 1990 levels before 2020, we also saw hundreds of dogs and their owners fly from across Europe to Birmingham (carbon emissions), all armed with hair dryers (wasted electricity), to take part in the Crufts Dog Show.

And yes, Fabulous Willy was the name of the winning dog.

The BBC broadcasted live from Crufts the previous four nights. This, I find perverse. No one who has seen the fine comedy film *Best In Show* can fail to get some pleasure from a brief tune in to hear such gems from last night as: "Amazingly, everything in this dog's head is round"; or talking of a dog who was walking, nothing more: "She is really pulling out all the stops here"; and my favourite: "Nerves can transmit down the lead."

I do enjoy the assault course race they usually do at Crufts, but instead last

night we were shown five minutes of a dog trainer with her "Amazing James Bond" dogs. The "James Bond" dogs proceeded to do little more than dance around to James Bond movie songs and the only truly "amazing" thing about their performance was that two dogs in such close vicinity didn't at any stage attempt to sniff each other's backsides.

You may be thinking: this guy doesn't like dogs. I do. But there are two types of dog: Big dogs, and those small, yappy dogs that tend to win at Crufts and may as well be cats for all the use they are.

My dog is a big dog. Harry is a labrador and the sad news is that he is sick. The vet says it's food poisoning but that he should be better in a couple of days. I suspect it be the remote control. It has gone missing, and while we're not certain he ate it, when you rub behind his ears the channels start re-tuning.

It's plain to see he is sick though, because yesterday I shouted "Walk!" and Harry barely lifted his head. If you've never had a labrador you probably don't understand the significance of this.

When I change my shoes, Harry thinks we are going for a walk. When I get off a seat, he thinks we are going for a walk. Like all labradors, Harry gets very excited by the W-word. It doesn't even matter what the context is. I may even say a word that sounds like the W-word, such as "work" and he will go into spasms of ecstasy and leap up and down like an "Amazing James Bond" dog. Perhaps I will say something like: "Walker Texas Ranger is on tonight, it's a pity the dog ate the remote control." He will bypass the snide remark and focus on the one syllable that triggers spasms and saliva. I merely have to rest my finger over the key "W" on my computer and he will leave out a bark, even when asleep.

What is so exciting that happens on these walks? I have run out of space, but I promise to return with an update on Harry's health next week and will also propound my theory: Walkies — the doggie internet?