

Chasing

NATIONAL STEEPLECHASE ASSOCIATION | 400 FAIR HILL DRIVE, ELKTON, MD 21921

Brown Advisory Challenge Provides New Allure for Rich Iroquois Meet

Heather and John Snook's Thistlecrack, England's dominant staying hurdler, crushed his opposition in Cheltenham Racecourse's £300,000 Ryanair World Hurdle (Gr. 1) on St. Patrick's Day and became the only horse with a chance to win the \$500,000 Brown Advisory Cheltenham Iroquois Challenge this year.

The second half of the challenge is the \$200,000 Calvin Houghland Iroquois (Gr. 1) at Nashville's Percy Warner Park on Saturday, May 14, and no decision was announced immediately whether the eight-year-old will take up the challenge.

The Brown Advisory Challenge, announced last fall, adds even greater allure to the 75th annual Iroquois Steeplechase, which offers the highest purses of the spring season, \$450,000, slightly more than the Virginia Gold Cup one week earlier.

The Calvin Houghland Iroquois received a 33% purse increase this year, from \$150,000, and is the richest spring stakes race.

The Brown Advisory Challenge offers a tempting target to any horse capable of winning both of the Grade 1 races in a 12-month period.

An even-money favorite in the Ryanair World Hurdle, Thistlecrack was always going well under jockey Tom Scudamore moved out of the pack to keep pace with front-running Cole Harden after two miles of the nearly three-mile contest.

Thistlecrack seized the lead before the next to last fence, and Alpha Des Obeaux made a move toward the leader. But Thistlecrack was going easily and opened a daylight lead into the final fence. He steadily pulled away from his only challenger up Cheltenham's sloping run-in and won by seven lengths. Longshot Bobs Worth finished third, 33 lengths farther back.

Scudamore, the son of legendary English jump jockey Peter Scudamore, described Thistlecrack



Jacqueline Ohrstrom's *Demonstrative*, at right with jockey Jack Doyle, won his second Calvin Houghland Iroquois (Gr. 1) victory in 2015 when he defeated *Mr. Hot Stuff* by a neck.

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as the best horse he has ever ridden. Thistlecrack also broke a zero-for-94 mark for the younger Scudamore at Cheltenham.

Now the winner of four straight races, Thistlecrack ran the Ryanair World Hurdle's distance in 5:42.60 on turf rated as good with spots good to soft. "He's gone from being a very nice horse to a superstar," said his trainer, Colin Tizzard.

Iroquois Chairman Dwight Hall said at least one overseas trainer is considering a run in the Calvin Houghland Iroquois with an eye on taking down its \$120,000 first-place purse and then taking aim on the Ryanair World Hurdle at next year's Cheltenham Festival to claim the Brown Advisory Challenge bonus. Altogether, the purse and bonus would total almost \$1-million.



Go Jump Racing!





Sam Slater retiring from HCP Sports

Sam Slater, who built HCP Sports from a self-described one-man band into a leader in live video sports programming, is retiring.

But don't expect the affable horseman to disappear from the jump-racing scene. Chairman of the National Steeplechase Foundation, he will continue to be a regular at many race meets and will serve as the non-executive chairman of HCP Sports, which he owns.

"It was just the right time," said Slater, 65. "I have a lot of other things going on, and I especially want to help non-profit organizations." At last count, he said, he is on 12 non-profit boards. "I like to help out, and I'm also hoping to relax a little bit."

National Steeplechase Association President Guy J. Torsilieri hailed Slater's contributions to steeplechasing over more than 35 years. "It is impossible to describe fully how important Sam has been to our sport," Torsilieri said. "He has been an innovator, and the service that he and HCP Sports have provided to American Steeplechasing has helped it to increase its popularity and prosper."

American jump racing is a highly visual sport, and since the late 1970s Slater has been at the forefront of providing the images seen by sports fans around the globe. As technology has advanced, he has adopted the latest tools to chronicle the world of jump racing.

Among the many innovations over the years have been the helmet camera to provide a rider's perspective, the use of a Steadycam to provide up-close coverage of races, and drone videography to create a unique view.

That he chose to apply his art to steeplechasing is hardly a surprise. Steeplechase racing is in his blood, inscribed indelibly in his DNA. His maternal grandparents were Miles and Joy Valentine, leading owners into the 1980s. His mother, Jill Fanning, was a prominent horse-



Sam Slater concludes a notable video career. TOD MARKS PHOTO

woman in eastern Pennsylvania, and his sister, Joy, was a top rider who once had a mount in the Grand National at Aintree, England.

While his sister was beginning her ascent in the sport, Slater took up the camera to record the races. He continued his film work while attending the University of Pennsylvania, and he subsequently landed work overseas with David Balding, a cousin of prominent British trainers Ian and Toby Balding. Based in London, David Balding provided independently produced footage to the BBC that included auto races, the Grand National, the Epsom Derby, and the Irish Derby. "The experience with David opened my eyes to the possibilities," he said.

Back in the States, Slater was asked to put together a film crew for the 1979 Maryland

Hunt Cup. "I said, 'Okay, that sounds good.'" The film crew he recruited was one of the best, from the Sabol family's Philadelphia-based NFL Films, and Slater was on his way toward creating Hunt Cup Productions, the predecessor to HCP Sports.

Helping to put together the 1979 crew was Damon Sinclair, who became Slater's business partner and now heads HCP Sports.

Slater entered the sports-video world at an auspicious time. ESPN was getting started, and it desperately needed content. Plus, the home-video revolution had begun, and affordable equipment was becoming available. Slater shot some early editions of the Colonial Cup, and in 1982 was asked by Foxfield race director Steve Groat to record that Virginia meet.

Perhaps the biggest breakthrough was the first Breeders' Cup Steeplechase in 1986 at Fair Hill, which Groat then was managing. Hunt Cup Productions was hired to provide live footage from the Maryland course as part of NBC's coverage of the third Breeders' Cup World Championships at Santa Anita Park in Southern California.

Steadily, Hunt Cup Productions added new clients, and late in the 1990s the National Steeplechase Association approached Slater about videotaping all of the race meets. The pace could be hectic, especially when three race meets are being run on the same day.

Slater said he and his wife, Lornie Forbes, will not miss the frenetic pace of race day and the worry about everything working as it should. Still, he looked back over those years and declared them to be time well spent.

"I won't miss worrying about whether everyone was paid and that I was paid," he said. "Through the years, we've employed a few hundred people. For the most part, we've had a good time doing it."

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