

COUNTDOWN TO CHELTENHAM

RACING POST
THE KEY TO THE FESTIVAL

Morning vibe that feels like it could end in RSA glory



Pat Fahy talks to **Jessica Lamb** about the highs and lows of his training career and why he's relishing a return to the festival

FIRST impressions are important to Pat Fahy. He acts on instinct – and it's a mindset that found him Morning Assembly, 8-1 third favourite for the RSA Chase.

He might not have seen all that talent in the seven-year-old the day he was bought for Clipper Logistics' Steve Parkin, but the County Carlow trainer saw something in the horse he couldn't leave behind.

"If I like a horse, get the vibes, I take the chance," Fahy, 53, says. "I go a lot on vibes; on humans and animals. If I get a nice feel and good feedback I love to go with it."

Morning Assembly heads to the RSA on the back of a Grade 2 win over Don Cossack at Punchestown and a close second to Carlingford Lough in the Grade 1 Topaz Novice Chase at Leopardstown last time out in December. And the trainer has a decent second string to his bow in Western Boy, a 16-1 shot for the Supreme Novices' after putting it up to

Name Pat Fahy

Age 53

Main Cheltenham hope

Morning Assembly, RSA Chase

Other contender Western Boy,

Sky Bet Supreme Novices' Hurdle

Best Cheltenham moment

When Publican came down the hill in the 2005 Supreme Novices' Hurdle we thought he was going to win – for about a minute we looked home and hosed [eventually seventh]

leading fancy Vautour on his last outing; he has been purposely kept fresh for the job in hand.

But there's no doubting who carries the main stable hopes, although Fahy is relaxed when asked about Morning Assembly's Cheltenham chance. "We hope it's worth going for. It won't be the end of the world if we don't succeed this year though."

Perhaps that response is born of experience. Morning Assembly is his first live festival hope for a while, although Fahy, who took out a licence in 1992, is no stranger to Cheltenham raids. He embarked on his initial journey to the track with Nuaffe, his first top staying chaser, 20 years ago. Irish trainers tended only to cross the Irish Sea in March and April, but Fahy identified a pot he thought he could win and owner John Doyle agreed. So they went.

"We went there in December for the



Pat Fahy with Morning Assembly: "If he's a good horse, we don't want to mess that up," says the trainer

Tripleprint Gold Cup," Fahy explains. "It used to be the Massey Ferguson and it was a major race, but by the time it became the Tripleprint it was losing it. It was still a big thing for us when we went though and we were only beaten a short head."

Nuaffe returned to Britain the following year to win a long-distance handicap chase at Haydock. He ran in Master Oats's Gold Cup and almost made it to Becher's second time round in the Grand National at Aintree, where Quadco would reward the Doyle-Fahy partnership with a Grade 2 bumper win in 2000. In short, they weren't scared then.

"John was only a young fellow like me at the time and we weren't afraid of anybody," Fahy smiles. "He had no problems with travelling and he would go anywhere. There was a fair cost at that time, but it wasn't an issue."

"Mariah Rollins ran in the Supreme and the Arkle. Publican was seventh in the 2005 Supreme and Washington Lad ran in the Albert Bartlett the same year, but I haven't had a runner at the festival since because there was no Publican or Washington Lad coming along. The quality wasn't there any more. It's very hard to keep filling a yard with horses like that."

In the early days things just fell right for Fahy. He kept good friends, met his wife Natalie and grabbed every opportunity, for there were plenty.

"I was only training for about a year when I got Nuaffe," he recalls. "I didn't start out with the intention of training. I used to prepare horses for Goresbridge Sales, that's how I got my first good horse. I had two for Martin Cullinane to do."

"By the time it came for him to pay me for the horses he had very little to give me so I ended up with this little horse he'd bought cheaply at the sales and he ended up winning the Heineken Gold Cup. He was Butches Boy."

Cullinane had already sent him three horses, answering a plea for one horse to work with Cobblers Rock, the first horse Fahy trained, who arrived, to his surprise, one September.

"A friend, a teacher, had been on to me about a neighbour, Mary Brennan, who had a horse she didn't know what

to do with," Fahy recalls. "It was summertime so I explained to her I only had a licence to train point-to-pointers so she could bring it back in September. I didn't expect to see her again, but she did come back."

There have been some dark days too. Four years ago 21-year-old apprentice Ronan Lawlor, who had become like a son to Fahy, was killed in a freak accident on his gallops, right before those kind, grey eyes. His three runners in Lawlor's memorial bumper recently shows exactly how much he still thinks about the well-loved rider. It's perhaps tougher now as his own son Connor, who was also great friends with Lawlor, is in Australia and daughter Niamh is busy at college.

STILL, Fahy keeps on rolling, building up that powerful diesel engine in Morning Assembly. "He doesn't give up," he stresses. "I know he was beaten in the Topaz by a very good horse in Carlingford Lough, but it was only a length and a half. The way he can finish out the last half-furlong of a race seems to be unique. I never had a horse like that."

"He was bought in August [2011] unbroken and won the following February. It wasn't that he was flying or winning bits of work. He'd be hacking along, but at the finish of a race he stays hacking."

"The main thing is we don't ruin the horse, that we don't over-face or over-race him because if he's a good horse, like everyone is saying, we don't want to mess that up."

Fahy on . . .

▶▶Western Boy

Vautour did Western Boy's form no harm winning the other day, so if it works out in the Supreme then we're geniuses and if it doesn't, well hopefully no-one will notice.

▶▶Schooling

I have a background in showjumping and it's probably surprising I never school over big poles. A lot of people think if they have a problem jumper the way to cure it is to school them over big jumps. That horse is usually then destroyed for racing.

School them over little jumps. Give them confidence and teach them how to respect a little jump –

that works great for when they go racing. They don't jump too big, but they have respect and fold their knees. That seems to work for me.

▶▶Riding

I was going to make a comeback on our pointer Battle Bound last year, but the first time I got on him he wanted to drop me. Every time I went to the front and the back he'd want to pull up, and I'd go upsides and he'd want to run away. I said to my son Connor, 'I thought he was so easy, but he's horrible. He's not nice at all.' He said that's what he'd told me for years. He just looked so nice, but it was other riders who made him look nice.

▶▶Breeding

We bred the two point-to-pointers we have now but we've got rid of all the mares. I'm not really interested in it, although I would like to have a good mare, simply because there are so many nice stallions on our doorstep; we have Shantou and Arakan for the National Hunt and Joe Foley has a heap for the Flat at Ballyhane too. They are two minutes down the road and I could nearly go in and cover them myself. Imagine? 'By the way Joe, was it that horse there I was supposed to cover the mare with?', 'Oh Jesus no!' he'd say, 'That's Roderic O'Connor'.