The odds on the day

By Sebastian Smee

Once again they're off and running in Australia's best-known, most controversial prize — the Archibald. With the early weather making track conditions hard to predict, it's likely the pack will stay closely bunched.

It's not a strong field. Few contenders look to have the goods to break away. Although if it's to be anyone, it could be last year's runner-up, Adam Cullen, who has slapped onto canvas a likable likeness of actor David Wenham.

After Cullen, the best chances belong to the veteran stayers: Garry Shead, Elizabeth Cummings, and Ann Thomson. On the other hand, if the track turns out to be quick and the judges go hard on the breakfast champagne, there's a good chance that horses like Michael Bell (ridden by the Sandman), Keith Looby (ridden by Anne Summers) or Jenny Sages (ridden by someone resembling her mother) will get up in the final stages.

The betting is fierce, and the absence of much talent — not to mention the inclusion of some genuine goodies — the bookies are rubbing their hands.

Adam Cullen, portrait of actor David Wenham

The one to beat. Pitted at the post in a photo-finish last year, popular with the punters and with the stewards. But what about the judges? Not carrying much weight. Jockey has speed, local knowledge and television on his side. The favourite at 3-1.

Elizabeth Cummings, portrait of sculptor May Barne

Unsentimental starter, but should be a sentimental favourite with the judges. Not used to this distance but form good after a freshening trip to Broome. Ageing jockey shouldn't buster. Dull-coloured silks might inconvenience caller, but in a photo-finish expect the judges to favour. 7-2.

Garry Shead, portrait of art writer Sidney Grishin

Another veteran with top chance, Leprecan-like jockey, very way in the final stages, may lead them a mercy chase. Respected and a little hard by fellow jockeys. Worth more than a flutter at reasonable odds. 6-1.

Ann Thomson, self-portrait

Seasoned campaigner. Jockey knows not to get caught on the rails but better on a wet track with the going show. Could get up if others afraid to push the pace. 6-1.

Michael Bell, portrait of comedian The Sandman

Sure to be crowd favourite. Jockey may have overplayed hand — or some other unanswerable appendage — in pre-race publicity but quick on the uptake. This popular horse is likely to finish strongly in fast field. Prefers a fast track. 9-1.

Keith Looby, portrait of journalist Arnie Summers

Occasionally cranky old stallion from same stable as Ian Smith. Too much riding with Paddy McCaulness (Mulholland's jockey) might have worn Ian out. Needs plenty but looks in good shape. Has lost weight, but will be carrying a great deal in the handicapping. Unlikely jockey makes for surprisingly good match. 11-1.

Jenny Sages, self-portrait

Veteran mare in fine fettle. Distance not a problem. Weight a worry. Best on a heavy track, so praying for rain. 12-1.

Ian Smith, portrait of gallery owner Tony Hughes

A slim chance, but on a muddy track with the mud flying, hard to rule out. Jockey carrying prodigious weight, looking decidedly deplete (likes to use the whip). But has presence and is something of a stayer. 14-1.

Peter Wegner, portrait of professor Germaine Greer

Only an outside chance, but best of the traditional stayers. Jockey "the bionic man," so could come up with anything. Good bet for a place. 15-1.

Barbara Lichaa, portrait of art critic Bruce James

A wild card. But looks in decent form. Surprise jockey to be on either side of the rails. Should arouse curiosity of the judges. Worth a flutter. 16-1.

John Walker, portrait of gallery director Bill Wright

Gutsy, galumphing, long-haul type unlikely to gobble turf on the day. Bon vivant jockey looking a tad pasty, but watch for cunning slight of hand in final stages. A wily veteran. 16-1.

Bill Leak, portrait of diplomat Sir Lex Patterson

A real trier. Brings tears to your eyes. Popular with the crowd. Jockey loves the mud flying. Could surprise on a good day. 20-1.

Branca Uzur, portrait of film critic Paul Byrnes

Trim, attractive looking horse, sharp-looking jockey with aerodynamic helmet. Hypnotic silks could put caller off his game; may even befuddle the judges. Not likely to go the distance but has to be considered. Outside chance for a place. 25-1.

Geoffrey Dyer, portrait of writer Christopher Koch

Flooding stayer. In mulba could do well. Talented, underrated rider. Will struggle for start, 30-1.

David Fairbairn, portrait of performer Victoria Helm

Honest horse, lacking in grace. Got up by a nose in Dubell last year better suited to a distance. Hard to have. 30-1.

Julie Fragar, portrait of herself, artist Chuck Close as security guard

On the flashy side. Likely to stand strongly and fade away. The jockeys tattle likely to wo
He Archibald

The front runner is... Adam Cullen's portrait of actor David Wenham (left); other Archibald contenders include Elizabeth Cummings's portrait of sculptor Max Barry (above top), Garry Shead's portrait of art writer Susan Grinstead (above) and Ann Thomas's self-portrait (top right). And the truth is out there (top left)... Paul Byrne needs to update his byline picture (see facing page). Portrait by Branca Uzar.

Michael Snape, portrait of gallery owner Stephen Morri

The joker in the pack. Jockey up to all sorts of funny business and likely to throw his pet horse off with a smile. Likely to return to racing. Can't tell, will likely struggle in the final stretch, 35-1.

Melissa Beovill, portrait of artist Ken Done

An earnest, straightforward type with reasonably good form. Ridden by luckless jockey, but better than any other in the race. Should run his own race with a bit of luck. Others have better prospects in this, 40-1.

Tom Carment, self-portrait

Sure. Tom, sure! A lovely looking horse with no prospects in this horse race. Sad, because a worthy little horse, but this entry is sure to be outclassed. Not him, Tom. Not here. Tom? Can you hear me? 30-1.

Max Cullen, portrait of artist Geoffrey Rush

Has got plenty of form in other races and will win in the race. But as is usual in new role here at home, seems hopelessly misguided. Despite an internationally revered (and overworked?) jockey, it will be better to catch on another day. 50-1.

Henry Mulholland, portrait of columnist and editor Fanny McInerney

Good recent form, but not his best foot forward. This one is the horse that needs blinkers, not the jockey -- eye on the game, 60-1.

Anne Spudvilas, portrait of illustrator Leigh Hobbs

Likely horse and rider, better suited to the little leagues. Will be outclassed in this field. Not for minor, 60-1.

Lewis Miller, self-portrait


Colin Husband, portrait of designer Paul Bennett

Another dark horse used to different forms of racing. Not likely to trouble the favourites, 100-1.

Robin Lawrence, portrait of activist Andrea Dauten

Worth a run, but worthiness not a good strategy on the day. This race isn't for the faint-hearted, 100-1.

Matthew Lynn, portrait of John Yu

A sure one for the judges. This much-admired jockey (and recent Australian of the Year) is on the Art Gallery of NSW Board of Trustees. What's the problem? Will the jockey leave the room? Too complicated to rate much of a chance. Besides, a little too airbrushed. Will struggle in the rough and tumble, 100-1.

Kim Spooner, portrait of current affairs host Ken O'Brien

This dark horse likely to frighten the kids. Not the scariest jockey and pass the green. A longer-than-long shot on any kind of day, 200-1.