

TAIEX SEMINAR EQUUS 2005

INTRODUCTION

By Peter DOWNES

Breeding the event horse - Ireland

My name is Peter Downes. I come from Ireland where I farm and breed horses (mostly thoroughbreds). Ireland is an island on the most westerly side of Europe, with a population of about 4 million (increasing). We have a land mass of about 84,000 square kilometers of mostly limestone based land. Our climate is mild temperate, controlled to a large extent by the Gulf stream off our western shores. We rarely have temperatures of -10 or +30, degrees, the rainfall is a little less than 1metre per annum in the horse production areas, relative humidity tends to be high.

Such conditions ensure that we always have a plentiful supply of green grass for nine months of each year. We rarely have prolonged snow on the ground. Until very recent times agricultural products were our main exports.

As an agricultural producing country Irelands wealth was associated with the production of beef cattle, horses, and wool supplied to our various neighbors during war times. Irish farmers made money during such times.

My personal experiences involved working with horses in Germany, France, and Italy. I also spent a month working on a combine-harvester in your country near Linz which was a wonderful experience for me living with an Austrian farm family, and it is nice to be back.

The Event Horse

What are we looking for?

Eventing or Millitar in deutsch began within various European Cavalry regiments, I assume as a type of war game during peace time. The horse cavalry have disappeared, and in its place we have a modern form of eventing with civilians taking part. It is becoming more and more popular as a sport in Europe, and in other parts of the world.

Eventing takes place at different levels from 4 star to beginners. The common factor are the horses who must have the qualities of good movement- obedience - precision - speed - courage and - endurance, in order to deal with the different phases of dressage - cross-country - and showjumping. Much the same qualities are required for the riders, but they have to be the brains to get a clear round.

The Event Horse

What is he?

Question: Is he a special breed? Then what breed is he?

Answer: He is not a breed. He is a type.

Question: Then what type is he?

The event horse needs to be both – tough - good tempered and above all – sound i.e. free from restricting defects, inheritable or other wise. He needs to be big enough and strong enough with stamina to carry 70-80 kilo through the competition and pass a veterinary inspection afterwards. In practice he needs a lot of "jumping" thoroughbred blood.

In Ireland such young potential event horses will usually start their career in the hunting field as many young jump bred race horses do. As a good hunting horse he will learn to lookout for himself and his rider. He will learn to cope with what ever is in front of him, let it be a stone wall with an abandoned plough at the back or a double bank (sometimes stone faced) which divides one townland from the next, or he might be asked to jump through an un-trimmed hawthorn hedge, of course the rider must be able to stay in position during such maneuvers. A good hunting horse will acquire a fifth leg and use it to save himself and his rider.

The event horse must have the stamina and courage to complete a clear cross country round. The event horse must be able to jump two clear showjumping rounds. He must cope with the disciplines and precision of dressage.

To cope with all these phases a horse needs to have a good attitude, and be willing to comply with the riders wishes, and a trust needs to be built up between horse and rider. Your event horse is an all rounder, you will have logged many hours of work together before success. Hopefully you can have some fun together.

Breeding

The old adage **breed the best to the best to get the best** is probably a reasonable guide. In Ireland horse breeding has been part of the mixed farming scene for many generations of Irish farmers. Apart from the farmers sporting interests breeding horses for sale has very often been his economic life line, especially when demand for beef and wool has been poor.

To breed horses successfully it is necessary to have a clear objective of what you wish to achieve. It is a bit of a hit and miss game in any case, but with a clear unambiguous objective you have some chance of success. Breeding success will not happen in a short space of time but with common sense and perserverence you can get there.

There are a few people who specialize in breeding event horses in Ireland and some, with notable success. It is more usual for people to buy a type of horse that they hope will make an eventer. For the reasons one they can see what they are buying and two they do not have to wait for the horse to grow up. It must be explained that in Ireland there are a large number of horses to choose from.

Breeding

The Stallion

As a guide to any horse breeding operation, you must give very careful consideration to the stallion you intend to use and the mare you wish to send to him.

It is important that your mare is suitable for the stallion and that any confirmation faults that she has are his strong points. It is important to look at an older stallion's record to date--and see how his progeny are performing in eventing competitions - some stallions are more successful than others.

Ask yourself, why is he more successful than others? Is he passing on his qualities to different types of mares (is he stamping his stock)?

In the case of a young unproven stallion it will be necessary to go and have a look at him. See if he has the frame and substance for eventing himself. How well does he move, a good mover is a horse who swings his hips and gets his hind leg well under himself, " he tracks up well" quite like an attractive good looking confident girl walking down the street. He must pass your inspection for confirmation, and he should not be suffering from any serious hidden inheritable defects or disease, and of course he must be fertile.

The Mare

She should also possess most of the attributes mentioned for the young stallion. In her case you need to know her family background and their breeding record. If the dam and grandam only had one foal each, her chances of being a successful brood mare are diminished, then find another mare no matter what they say.

History of Eventing in Ireland

Unlike many European nations Ireland only had a small cavalry unit "The Blue Hussars" they were formed in 1931 for use on state occasions, and they no longer exist. Prior to world war two The Irish army concentrated very successfully on showjumping.

Eventing in Ireland sprang from the hunting field, in fact the first Irish Olympic team at Helsinki in 1952 included a master of Foxhounds. It is probably true to say that eventing in Ireland began as occupation for fox hunters during the closed hunting season "a summer occupation." Horses bred in Ireland seem to do better when they are ridden by other nationals for two reasons. The most promising young horses in Ireland are sold on so that their owners can pay their bills and continue to live, and perhaps buy another horse. Secondly most Irish riders regard dressage as a chore, and, as there is no excitement involved, it does not suit our temperament. Dressage is nearly always our worst score in Olympic Event competitions, much to the advantage of our competitors, maybe this will change with our young "pony club" competitors as they become more European .I believe it will happen.

I would like to go through some of the achievements of Irish bred eventers at the top level (in so far as I have records available).

The first record of Irish riders representing Ireland at Olympic level in three day event was in 1952 in Helsinki (Finland). They were Harry Freeman Jackson M.F.H. Ian Dudgeon and Mark Darley. They did not win any medals but the winning Swedish team had a double gold medallist, Baron Hanz von Blixen Finecke he rode the Irish bred horse JUBAL. At Stockholm four years later Col. Weldon led the British event team to victory riding an Irish bred horse named KILBARRY.

In 1960 at the Rome Olympics Eddie Harty was ninth on the Irish bred horse HARLEQUIN. The name Harty is probably the most famous name associated with Irish horsemanship for the last hundred years. Grandfather M.J. (boss) Harty was the first Irish race horse trainer to train horses outside the Curragh headquarters. Their father Captain Cyril Harty was a member of our famous army show jumping team in the nineteen thirties. His son Eddie was subsequently first jockey to Fred Winter a top UK National Hunt horse trainer, his youngest brother John qualified as a lawyer but rode as a professional N.H. Jockey in Ireland and represented Ireland as part of the Irish Olympic team at Tokyo in 1964. Eddie's son has already trained a two year old winner of a breeders cup series in the U.S.A.

Such are the traditions of Irish horsemanship. In one family it spans the traditions of show jumping, eventing, jump racing, and flat racing all within four generations. 1984 Olympics at Los Angeles Karen Stives the first woman to win an Olympic medal silver and gold rode the Irish bred Ben Arthur. Likewise the British silver winning team included Irish bred Windjammer 1988 Seoul Olympics fifth placed Australian team included Shanagh.

1992 Barcelona Olympics Ralf Ehrenbrink riding Kildare were on the bronze medal team. In the 2000 Olympics there was gold for Irish bred Custom Made ridden by David O'Connor USA. Likewise in 2004 Ringwood Cockatoo won gold (ridden by Bettina Hoy), was also Irish bred, but was subsequently penalized and as a result the German team lost the gold medal.

The Irish Breeding Scene

Irish country people have always had a passion for a challenge and a bet - what better way to sort matters than to match my horse against yours - thus began Steeplechasing. The first recorded steeplechase took place in 1752 in Co.Cork in the south of Ireland over about 7 kilometres. It was a cross country race from one church steeple, to the church steeple in the next village, and gave its name to the present day hunt races known as Point -to-Points. Nowadays they are run in a farmers field over about 5 kilometers and 15 jumps. The jumps are slightly lower than on a park type racetrack and in these races the horses must be ridden by amateur riders and who carry 75 kilo. Hunt races are in effect for the most part the training ground for riders and horses of the future. Today "Chasing" takes place on a fully organized regulated basis on park type racetracks, average distances are a bit shorter and the jumps are a regular height etc. except for the Grand National. Irish bred and ridden horses won all the major National Hunt (jumping) championship races in England in 2005. These are the type of horses we use for top class eventing, especially the ones that are not fast enough to win races.

For top class eventing it is regarded that the nearer your horse is to thoroughbred the better your chances of making it to the top, but of course there are exceptions, with horses this is always the case. Irelands traditional sport horse was bred using a suitable thoroughbred stallion on a quality light-draft mare, in order to combine the thoroughbred qualities of speed, courage, and endurance, with her qualities of temperament and substance. The resulting product is referred to as half-bred. When you cross this half-bred mare with a thoroughbred stallion you have the ideal type, known as three-quarter bred, for an event horse.

In Ireland we have a type of horse called the Irish Draft horse, which is an interesting type. The show standard Irish Draft was a clean limbed horse suitable for light farm work, carting, and spring farm work etc. The same horse could travel forty or fifty kilometers to a meeting with his owner, and back again in the evening. It pulled a trap to take the family into the local town etc. It also took his owner for a days hunting, and there would have been a race for it at the local point-to-point.

The Irish Draft was the foundation for Irelands success as a horse breeding nation. Its temperament and versatility were its assets.

In 1918 the department of Agriculture introduced the Irish draft horse stud book and the first steps were taken to record pedigrees and create an identifiable native breed of horse. The breed standard guidelines required that the Irish Draught horse be an active, short-shinned, powerful horse with substance and quality. It is proud of bearing, deep of girth and strong of back and quarters.

Standing over a lot of ground, it has an exceptionally strong and sound constitution. It has an intelligent and gentle nature and is noted for its docility and its good sense. Any strong whole colour, including grey is acceptable. Stallions should be between 160-170 cms. Mares should be between 155-165 cms.

Since 1846 to the present day the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) has been running the famous August horse show in Dublin. They have acted as guardians and benefactors to encourage sport horse production. They encouraged the use of thoroughbred stallions on farmer's half-bred mares by way of premiums. They had a scheme whereby a stallion had to travel in areas stipulated by the RDS and cover 50 mares. They encouraged the production of sound horses. The Irish department of agriculture also supported the half-bred sector by purchasing and locating stallions around the country. Later they gave stallion farmers a grant of 13,000 euro equivalent to purchase a suitable stallion.

In Ireland we are now producing 11,000 thoroughbred foals about the same number as is produced in total for the other principal European producing countries. Our T.B. horses are all registered with Weatherbys Ireland. They are a private company who keep the stud book on behalf of breeders. Half-bred horses are registered with the Irish Horse Board (a government agency) who have certain criteria for entry. They register about 6000 foals each year. The Irish horse board are currently offering a premium of 635 Euro for mares that can pass a specific veterinary examination. They have a program for the genetic evaluation of showjumping horses in Ireland. Things are changing in Ireland and there is controversy between those who want to import warm blood breeds from Europe and those who wish to remain with the more traditional native stock. The jury are still out.

The increase in prosperity in Ireland has seen a huge increase in the numbers of people who go riding, and who compete at the various events organized around the country mostly at weekends.

Eventing Ireland, the governing body for Irish event riders have about 1000 members, they can have up to 300 competitors at any one event competition.

The Show Jumping Association of Ireland have about 7000 members. Most of our half bred breeders are aiming to produce show jumpers.

Dressage Ireland has about 600 members and is for those interested in competing in dressage competitions to the highest level.

Riding clubs cater for those who love riding but have a full time job, who may not be very good riders, but who like to ride for fun. There are currently about 3000 members, they hold competitions for all the riding disciplines at all levels from elementary to advanced. They are becoming a very important element in the industry, as their members buy the horses who do not make the top grades as an eventer or show jumper.

The Irish Pony Club is for those under 21 they have 4000 + members in branches all over Ireland. They are principally a teaching and fun riding organization for youngsters from eight years old up, most of Irelands top riders be it for racing, eventing, or show jumping have started off in a pony club. Each branch organizes rallies and a week long camp which is the highlight of the year. The IPC has sent teams to compete successfully in England, the UAS and Canada.

Sales Companies

TAIEX-Seminar EQUUS 2005
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The principal sales of sport horses are as follows:

Goresbridge Horse Sales: Situated in Co Kilkenny and run by the Donohoe family this company holds regular auction sales of ponies, sport horses and thoroughbreds.

Cavan Horse Marketing Centre: Situated in Co Cavan there are sales of ponies and sport horses held here every second month throughout the year.

At some of the above sales horses can be seen jumping prior to being sold.

Ballinasloe Fair Held the first weekend in October this famous horse fair take place on the green in Ballinasloe town in Co. Galway. Here one can find every type of horse and they are sold directly by their owners to the buyers.

The principal auctioneers for thoroughbred horses are **Tattersalls Ireland Ltd.** who hold sales at Fairyhouse, Co Meath and **Goffs Bloodstock Sales Ltd** who hold sales in Kill, Co Kildare.

Conclusion

I have tried to outline my thoughts on breeding event horses and on the situation as it is in Ireland. I hope this has been of interest to you and I will gladly answer as best I can any questions you may have.

Thank you.

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