

Really valuable learning experience for Irish breeders



Susan Finnerty wraps up the Teagasc overseas tour with a visit to five Holstein stud farms

MANY of the Holstein greats were again intertwined in the farm visits over the following two days as the learning curve continued with five more stops on the Teagasc trip.

Two constant features at each stop were the sight of well-cared for horses bedded down on deep straw beds (German farmers, unlike their unfortunate Irish counterparts, face no straw shortage this winter), and daily turnout routines.

Paddocks, some with drainage grid mats installed to manage the region's heavy clay, and indoor schools are used to turn breeding stock out in small groups during the Baltic winters.

"Exercise and socialisation is important for the horse. Environmentalists also do not like the old way of horses being confined in a stable for five months," noted one owner.

X-raying youngstock, usually as two-year-olds, is a routine procedure at all the farms we visited and promising youngsters may have bone chips removed, particularly if the chips were acquired through accidental injury.

Culling is carried out too, either through selling to the leisure rider market or the factory. "I think it is fairer than sending them who knows where. You don't know where they end up then and what happens to them," said another breeder, with €250 being the typical factory price.

Holsteiner breeders are ambivalent

about mare inspections, with an average of one in three young mares being presented. Their mindset is by relying on breeding from only the best stamm lines and their own experience in assessing youngstock, they are already acutely aware of what they own.

An average price expected for a good colt foal, sold off the farm, is €10-12,000. Repeat customers and word-of-mouth advertising drums up the most business, although the younger breeders extensively use websites and social media. Some are also considering taking on the Benelux breeding powers by using embryo transfer, however the cost factor is a deterrent, plus some caution over what influence the recipient mare may have in rearing the foal.

The old adage of "How do you make a million from breeding horses? Start off with 10 million!" was also quoted.

Holsteiner breeders religiously guard their mare lines, they have no hesitation in using young sires and, similar to French breeders, have seen their bloodlines become the building blocks of other studbooks.

Their own studbook, similar to the Irish experience, has become more open and their marketing skills, revolving around its 'Charakter, Charisma, Klasse' tagline are fine-tuned. Branding is hugely important and seen at all the farms, from the Holsteiner symbol on barns to trademark red, white and blue-striped headcollars.

The green, white and gold breeders



on the Teagasc equine tour certainly got their money's worth and judging by the business cards and contact details exchanged, the event was a golden networking opportunity too.

"There is no way that we'd see as much, find the places and get to meet

these people in this space of time," remarked one of the Teagasc group members, summing up the benefits for the group, before being dropped back at Hamburg airport by Jan, the amiable driver of the 'Wanderly Wagon' tour bus.

THE ZUBA FAMILY

SILKE Zuba, a Holsteiner Verband board member, had an able accomplice and fluent English speaker to assist her with the Irish group visit in son Martin, an Agricultural Studies student. Their 200 acre farm produces everything from beef cattle, potatoes for German supermarket chains, rapeseed oil and Holstein horses.

Their farm is a mixture of new stabling, including a foaling block complete with CCTV and traditional German barns.

"A few years ago, this barn was only cows, then more foals came so the cows had to leave the farm!" laughs Martin, who also outlined other ways farmers in this northern region derive income, including the sale of land to wind turbine companies.

Nine foals were born this year, including two by the Plot Blue son Million Dollar, another hit with the Irish visitors on the Elmshorn tour the previous day. "The filly foals are kept and the colts are sold. We started off with one mare by Sacramento Song," said Silke, introducing her 'neighbour' Ute Witt, whose father sourced the famous thoroughbred.

Silke's favourite mare, Orchidee, is the dam of Castle Creek, by Casall, approved at the 2016 Holstein colt inspections. "The stamm of the stallion is irrelevant, only the stamm of the mare is important," say the family, who sell their foals to German and international buyers, including Belgium, Finland and Brazil.



Holsteiner Verband director Silke Zuba with her family at the farm's foaling boxes

THE WITT FAMILY

"WE had a stable full of black mares, not so big, every one of them by Sacramento Song and I thought 'What will we do with them!' but later it was a good decision," says Ute Witt, recounting the foundation stallion's early years.

"My father and mother went to England about 40 years ago and found him. It was difficult to get Sacramento Song approved, there were not so many mares in the first years and after seven years, he had an accident and died early."

When told that another esteemed breeder, Prof Dr Hartwig Schmidt, had said the previous day that he regarded Sacramento Song as probably the biggest thoroughbred influence in the Holsteiner breed, she laughed, responding: "If he says it, it's okay!"

The Witt family also stood the leg-

endary Capitol for a time, ("That combination was good, Sacramento Song and Capitol"), while Reimer Witt bred another powerhouse in Cardento. "We now do a little bit of everything," said Martin Witt, the third generation in this family business and who show jumps up to 1.50m level. "We sell foals, two-year-olds and we also sell the finished riding horse."

Amongst yet another group of resident broodmares with top-class Holsteiner lines, is a Cardento half-sister, in foal to the WBFSH top-ranked horse Halifax Van Het Kluizebos. In yet another 'sixth degree of separation' coincidence, the family also had a colt – the Cornet Obolensky-sired Corniolo – approved that weekend at the inspections, where the champion was the Sacramento Song descendant Sandro Junior.



Four generations of the Witt family, who brought Sacramento Song to the Holstein region (Photo: Susan Finnerty)

HOF THIEDEMANN



Young Breeders Reunited: Klaus Thiedemann and Lina Preuss of Hof Thiedemann with David Bourke, part of the Teagasc equine tour, who all competed in the world young handler championships

"LINA [Preuss] and I took over from my parents last year. They retired from horse breeding last year and moved to the city," says Klaus Thiedemann, explaining how the young couple continued the family operation. They now own 30 horses, including nine in-foal mares, mainly from the 2543 stamline.

Lars Nieberg's Loreana, Edwina Tops-Alexander's Caretina de Joter and Shane Rose's CP Qualified, are just three of their international performers, while Lavello, later sold to Paul Schockmoehle, and Unlimited, last year's champion at the Holsteiner colt inspections, are two more bred here.

"We are thinking of doing embryo

transfer for the first time next year for one or two mares that we think are worth the investment. We never take a mare to the stallion or the stud like we would have done 20 years ago, it's a big improvement to inseminate at home."

The couple are adept in online marketing, utilising Facebook and Instagram, although they still find it difficult to get feedback on horses sold to South America. "That's a huge problem, trying to get information, they will say 'I don't know'. Nothing comes back when you make enquiries."

"In this modern time, it's important to know what the offspring of this mare or dam line produce," added Klaus.

AHSBAHS FARM

AS outlined in last week's article, it was Georg Ahsbahs who first encouraged breeders to record family lines. "That was five generations ago when the system, which was actually quite unique, of giving numbers to each family began. So then you know what the family produces. It's where the passion comes from, it's in the genes," said Deike Ahsbahs.

The family currently have 120 horses with 28 foals due in 2018. "The youngstock are kept out all year round, they don't mind the cold at all. They have big barns with straw where they can go in and lie down but rarely do," she added.

"Most of our business is word-of-mouth, we don't really do that much advertising but have customers from all over the world, including Switzerland and the USA."

Zeremonie, ridden by Laura Kraut, is their current equine billboard in the States and the family have retained his Quiran half-brother, the last foal out of his Quick Star dam Toulouse, which they are aiming at the January inspections.

"She [Toulouse] died when he was three months old. An old breeder said 'Put him out in the group, he's going to find a mother.' We were a bit scared but it worked! We put him out in a group of three mares and



The latest generations of the Ahsbahs family, Deike and Hans-Joachim Ahsbahs, breeders of Laura Kraut's Zeremonie

foals and it happened, a young four-year-old mare with her first foal adopted him. Sometimes there are mares that are born foster mares.

"There's not many places like this farm, that do the breaking, raise the foals properly. The number of places that do

this are very small and getting less, we are completely filled at the moment. It's pretty hard work and often you can end up with riders that are cowboys or people who think they can ride but can't really," she added, with a wry smile!

STALL HELL

THE final stop is an appropriate one. It was the late Maas Johannes Hell that brought the great Cor de la Bryere to Holstein from France, where there was a lukewarm reaction to his early crops.

However crossed with Holsteiner mares, he then became an icon. Not only did he produce Cavalier Royale but Maas Johannes also bought and reared youngstock, including future Olympic and world-class show jumpers in Calvaro, Libero and another later Irish import, Lux Z. An advocate of adding thoroughbred bloodlines, Maas sourced Lauries Crusader and Mytens too.

Bernhard Porten, who now manages the day-to-day operations at Stall Hell, showed the visitors around

the stallion barn, which houses their great servant Calido I, Cash And Carry and Acorado.

"It is purely a stallion station, no resident mares. The most popular is Cash And Carry and Calido, then I think the next stallion coming up is Central Park, he's coming up very popular," he explained.

The farm also serves as a competition yard. "We have maybe 35 horses under saddle and now have seven horses competing in Spain, aged from five to seven. Everyone is looking for the really super horse. The normal horse? Not so much."

The average monthly bill for breaking and producing young horses is €700. "When they get to the going to shows stage, then it's



Teagasc equine advisor Wendy Conlon, who previously worked at Stall Hell, with Magdalene Hell and Bernhard Porten

€1,000." The upscale indoor arena and spectator gallery also cater for shows during the winter season while a

stallion show is planned for local breeders over Christmas.

"March is too late to

hold such an event as many breeders already have made their minds up."

Finding any performance

descendants of the Irish show jumping mares sold abroad in the past has drawn a relative blank, especially in the Holstein region. "Maybe down in southern Germany or Switzerland, there may be Clover Hill mares," suggests Porten.

"It was hard to get a mare approved by the Holsteiner Verband, unless she had competed at top level. Now it is easier. I think it is a good thing that the studbook is more open now."

The end of the five-day tour also provides Teagasc equine advisor Wendy Conlon with an opportunity for a reunion with Maas Johanne's wife Magdalene, yet another hospitable host, and the Cantus son Calido I, in her care when she worked here in the mid-1990s.