

CONTRACT REARING SPORT HORSES

Introduction

Contract rearing, put simply, is when an equine owner (i.e., breeder or producer) hires another farmer on contract to raise horses. Farmers typically take stock on as foals, sending them back to the original farm after a specified period. This period can be approximately 36 months; however, the actual duration depends on individual contracts. When run efficiently, contract rearing can be quite profitable.

Advantages for contract rearer:

- provide a steady cash-flow with a stable monthly income – farmers are not



Contract rearing may return a higher profit than your existing enterprise.

- dependent on volatile markets – the 'norm' is that the contract rearer is paid by direct debit on a monthly basis;
- provide a means of using land and buildings without investing in stock – reducing the investment risk involved;
- it can often be possible to run the enterprise

on a part-time basis;

- utilise existing knowledge for profitability;
- the business may return a higher profit than the contract rearer's existing enterprise; and,
- the need to buy and sell stock is reduced.

Advantages for owner:

- frees up labour for other jobs;
- helps free up housing for other stock;
- relieves pressure where rented/leased land is scarce or too expensive;
- could suit owner where young stock accommodation is limiting or will be limiting; and,
- allows main focus on their niche, i.e., focus on the sport (they are not stockmen).

Foal to three year old contracts

There should be a written agreement between a contract rearer and the owner. This contract should indicate where both parties are liable and decide who pays and how this will be done. Every individual contract rearing agreement will be different; therefore, the fee per head per day will vary.

Year one

The contract rearer usually receives the weanling foals at six to eight months of age. After weaning, foals should never become

too thin or overweight. Intake should be adjusted accordingly. A lean condition is preferable. Correct nutrition is critical to avoid rapid growth rates. Body condition should be evaluated continually. The ribs of the foal should be felt by applying minimal pressure but should not be visible. Crucially in year one, it is important to monitor each individual foal and adjust rations accordingly. Forage, ideally grass, should always make up the bulk of the diet. Pasture is the ideal environment for a growing youngster, providing good nutrition and natural

exercise. Foals should be group housed for company over the winter. A general guideline is to feed weanlings 450g of concentrate for every month of age until nine months. This should then be decreased by half (225g per month of age) and continued until the horse is two years old. However, this level of feed is too excessive for ponies, native types and youngsters with access to good grass. In spring, as yearlings these horses should be put to pasture to grow and develop naturally. Ideally, yearlings should be lightly handled in year one to reinforce previously learned lessons. They should stand to be haltered,

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lead correctly, stand to be administered vaccinations, loaded onto a horsebox, and allow grooming. Foals should also allow their feet to be trimmed/picked up by the farrier. The farrier plays an important role in ensuring correct trimming, which helps to maintain good foot shape while growing. It is important to be alert to the foal's conformation and discuss it with a farrier and vet. A foal's limb angle may be influenced. Any uneven weight bearing will cause a distortion of the hoof capsule, and if ignored, can restrict the even growth of the growth plates, creating an angular limb deformity. The success of any horse is dependent on its genetics and its environment. As yearlings, their mind is developing quickly and they will start testing boundaries. At this point, it is important to emphasise leadership, which is developed through repetition. Consistent interaction with horses develops trust and respect with their leader.

Year two

Nutrition is important as the horse continues to grow and body condition should be evaluated continually. An obvious indicator is if the ribs can be felt with minimal pressure. The ribs of the horse should never be visible. Careful monitoring of body condition is necessary to ensure that a steady, even growth curve is achieved in the first two years of life. The objective is to attain moderate steady growth. Avoid periods of low growth followed by periods of rapid growth. The aim for young stock should always be to attain a steady increase in bodyweight and height. Rapid growth rates must be avoided by adjusting the rations. Proper nutrition for young horses provides a foundation for future soundness and long-term health. The importance of carefully managing young horses cannot be overemphasised. Pasture is an ideal environment for a growing youngster, providing good nutrition and

natural exercise. Forage should be tested to ensure imbalances can be identified and corrected with supplementation. Horses should be kept on a good worming programme. Faeces should be tested to evaluate faecal egg count. The teeth of horses should be evaluated. Assess young horses' teeth often as they are continuously growing. This could be a source of pain for them. Depending on the contract and the skill of the contract rearer, two year olds can be trained to show in hand. If so, these horses will be required to use a bridle instead of a halter.

Year three

The horse is still growing but at a reduced rate, as the majority of its growth is done. Depending on the breed, some horses will continue to grow in height for a few more years. Generally, after three years, the growth plates of the horse have closed and it is safe for them to be loose schooled.

International contract rearing

There is an opportunity for international contract rearing of horses. Gerry Marron from Co. Monaghan made the switch from dairy farming to contract rearing sport horses to now breeding elite show jumpers. Gerry contract reared mares for Belgian show-jumping breeder Luc Henry. Gerry says: "Luc sends over recipient mares carrying embryos. Once these mares have reared their foals they are returned to Belgium. Foals stay on the farm until sold, which could be as foals/yearlings/three year olds, etc.". Is there an opportunity for others to offer international contract rearing?



Gerry Marron (left) and Alan Hurley pictured at Kinmar Stud.

"Definitely there is an opportunity for farmers. The financial returns are very good for full board grass livery (usually €35-40/week or €2,000/year). People in Europe, particularly Belgium and Holland, will send animals over. You naturally do need some horsemanship skills".

Summary

Before entering into a contract-rearing relationship, it is advised both parties enter into a written agreement. This will eliminate potential future conflict and will give the contract rearer more concrete knowledge of what is required. In addition, a Teagasc cost control planner is essential. Profit depends on good technical performance, animal husbandry methods, nutrition and training. For contract rearing to be a success it must be a win:win situation for all parties involved. A level of trust, honesty and flexibility must exist between both parties. Events may change and things will go wrong, so good communication and a give and take attitude are required.

Further information

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The following resource is also helpful
🌐 <https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/rural-development/equine/>