

Diversification

Cuffesgrange sport horses – excellence in breeding

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Eamon Sheehan and his wife Lois from Cuffesgrange, Co Kilkenny, have a passion for breeding and producing sport horses. They also run a 191-cow dairy herd on 240ac. Their children, Rachel and Julia, are passionate about ponies.

“It’s thanks to my father Eamon Snr and brother Ronan that the horse business at Cuffesgrange was established,” Eamon says.

“It’s a family affair – my brother Brian and sister Orlaith are also involved with horses, and there is very little that gets decided on without us consulting each other.”

After studying agriculture at Teagasc Kildalton, Eamon spent two years on the show jumping circuit in West Palm Beach, Florida, working for Robin Sweely, jumping her young horses while gaining a wealth of knowledge.

“The US is brilliant in the production of horses and they have a great forward style. There is a very good potential market for Irish horses there. The majority of imports currently

come from Europe. Running costs to keep and raise horses in the United States are very high.”

Returning home in 2002, Eamon began jointly managing the farm, then in sucklers, with his father. They had 120 cows and were also foaling down between 10 to 12 broodmares a year.

“I was producing all of the three- and four-year-olds for the sales and we were doing a lot of buying and selling too,” explains Eamon.

“During the recession in 2008 and 2009, beef prices were becoming increasingly marginal and I was looking for a better option, so I decided to go dairy farming.”

Eamon received the New Entrant milk quota and started milking 64 Holstein-Friesian cows in 2013.

Foundations

As Eamon’s dairy numbers increased, he decreased his broodmare herd to between five and six mares and focused more on superior breeding mares.

“We had two families that were really good, so we decided to concentrate on them.”

Cuffesgrange Millennium was one of the mares retained: “She was a mare that my father and brother



Ronan purchased from Tom Brennan.” Cuffesgrange Millennium has had several successful progeny, but the most successful was Cuffesgrange Cavalidam.

Eamon says: “She was bred to be a horse, but stayed small after being covered with a Section B Welsh Pony as a two-year-old. She foaled down at three.” She had three foals before being broken and produced. She was then sold to Clare Hughes, who took her through the ranks.

“We were really fortunate that Clare purchased this mare. It’s important to get your horses into the right hands to realise their true potential,” Eamon says.

In 2019, Cavalidam’s second foal Cuffesgrange Cavadora was ridden by Seamus Hughes-Kennedy to win the WBFSH seven-year-old final in Lanaken.

Cuffesgrange Cavalidam has also been hugely successful in the show jumping ring. Her first success was with Seamus Hughes-Kennedy, who won the Michelin World Cup and was also on the European team. Last year, Tipperary’s Max Wachman and Cuffesgrange Cavalidam won team and individual gold medals at



Cuffesgrange Cavalidam (by Luidam x Cavalier Royale).



Eamon and his father Eamon Snr.



Eamon Sheehan (left) and Alan Hurley.

the Pony Europeans at Strzegom in Poland.

The pair won the silver medal in the championships in 2017. Cuffesgrange Little Ric is another highly successful pony bred in Cuffesgrange. The pony was on the medal-winning British pony eventing team for three consecutive years.

Eamon's advice

Breeding:

"First and foremost, you need to have a plan and a defined breeding goal, be it eventer, show jumper or show hunter. You also need to know your target market and at what stage you are going to sell. Some people think they are breeding a show jumper and if it doesn't jump, it can go eventing. That's not going to work and inevitably these decisions will hit you hard financially."

"The dam is hugely important. It's easy to look back through a mare's pedigree on CapallOir, where you can ascertain their pedigree. For example, our breeding goal is to breed top level show jumpers and if I look back on the performance of a mare line with only a few 1.10m or 1.20m horses,

that's not good enough. You need to be looking for a line that produces 1.40m to 1.60m horses back through the pedigree."

Eamon says that if he were to begin his breeding career again, he would start by sourcing the best genetics by buying into a proven line.

"You are much better off having a dam line that has a lot of competitive 1.40m horses rather than having one flash stallion for appearances' sake."

When selecting stallions, Eamon's advice is to use proven sires with successful progeny.

"I use proven stallions that I know complement a particular mare. Using an unproven stallion with a proven pedigree is a risk. I would rather wait until they are proven producers."

Eamon promotes his stock through social media: "Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are excellent marketing tools for the business," he says. The Cuffesgrange Sport Horse page has grown to almost 2.5k followers.

"If you can sell your story and market your horses properly, you will get more customers."

"One important tip for breeders is to register their prefix. Our 'Cuffesgrange' prefix is very important to

us from a marketing point of view. It also makes it much easier to look-up and evaluate the performances of horses previously sold."

Grassland management:

"You need a good paddock system and proper fencing to manage grass effectively. We have 30 separate acres for the horses. We use store cattle or cull cows to clean off the horse paddocks. This will ensure good-quality grass. Mixed grazing of horses and cows works particularly well for the horses, in terms of parasite control and keeping the pastures clean and well grazed.

We keep on top of soil fertility by testing paddocks every two years. Making sure the soil is balanced in terms of soil nutrients. Lime is very important to correct soil acidity and fertiliser is applied as required."

It is evident that Eamon is hugely motivated to continue breeding. "It was incredible last year to be in Lanaken to see Cuffesgrange Cavadora win the seven-year-old final – you cannot buy that stuff. My next ambition is to have a horse in the Aga Khan team and once you have done that you would love to have a horse in the Olympics – that would be the pinnacle."

Costs

Teagasc estimates the average cost of producing a foal for auction to be in the region of €1,500 to €2,250, while the average cost of producing a three-year-old for auction can be €4,000 to €4,500. These figures can be highly variable and the final cost can be considerably higher.

These estimates include basic costs of production, but do not take account of stud fees, mare depreciation, professional training fees and barren years. Breeders need to critically assess breeding strategies, remain critical of their mares, breed for a particular market and consider upgrading poorer breeding mares.