

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