

Teagasc National Equine Conference

Market for good horses 'strong and growing'

► Isabel Hurley and Judith Faherty

DEMAND for good horses has never been stronger although concern was flagged up on the over-reliance of the key North American market, last week's Teagasc's National Equine Conference at the Castletroy Park Hotel in Limerick was told.

Under the chairmanship of renowned horse breeder Dr Noel Cawley, the expert panel of Galway's Richard Bourns of Bourns Sport Horses, KWPN's breeding director Ralph van Venrooij and Harrie Theeuwes of Stud 111 and Auction 111, gave the audience an insight into some key marketing and commercial considerations of the global equine business.

Operating Lisbeg Farms in Galway, Europe and the USA, Richard, an established beef farmer, his wife Deirdre, along with their son Andrew, have built up a very successful horse breeding and production business model.

"I'm from Ballinasloe, we are cattle and horse farmers. We buy foals and breed foals, buy three to six-year-olds and put them in a programme. We are lucky to have some very good riders and my son based in the USA. We bring the horses as far in the sport as we feel is economically viable and then present them to our clients," Bourns explained.

"The current market is exceptionally strong and growing all the time. We see more countries coming into the sport and enjoying the sport. What concerns me is the reliance on North America. We have a very busy trade to South Africa

and Scandinavia. The demand for a good horse has never been stronger," he added.

Ralph van Venrooij said: "I worked for a long time as a rider and a selector of young horses. This is a growing market but there is a big separation of the top horses and those underneath it. That's a big problem. It is not easy to breed a top-quality horse while making the selection for your young horses is the most difficult."

A former rider of young horses including many stallions, Harrie Theeuwes commented: "I had better earnings when I was riding than breeding but I enjoy the breeding more."

The panel agreed that the basic characteristics of breeding mares should be a sound, nice type with quality. The mares do not necessarily have to have been performers themselves but their quality must be evident.

As Dr Cawley pointed out that Ireland does not have many international competitions, and only one at five-star level, Bourns agreed saying: "We don't have that many good competitions and people are looking outside of Ireland for these mares. That's the reality. You have to look everywhere for those good mares."

Young horse production

Referring to our young horse classes in the five, six and seven-year-olds division, Dr Cawley asked the panel, "are we overdoing it?"

Bourns replied: "I have no doubt our five and six-year-old horses are being put under too much pressure. I was in

ring, they (Americans) won't even jump a fence for us so the trial is over. The early production of the horse is hugely important to ensure a good value. At 1.50m level plus, top horses can be difficult and the price goes down."

Genomic selection in cattle has been ongoing here for years and the panel was asked whether it was a factor in the equine industry or not.

KWPN breeding director Ralph van Venrooij said: "We started years ago, building up a big database. We are on the point of researching genomics on individual qualities like scope, technique in an in-depth way.

"We have a breeding value for OCD already. It's a big tool for the future but is different from cattle or dairy as there is so many things involved such as the character of the mare for example."

Harrie Theeuwes of Stud 111 and Auction 111 commented: "I don't believe in it so much. Every horse gets a different rider. It is going to be a very difficult job. With a cow it's milk. With a horse, there is so many different stallions and riders so it's very difficult."

Panel chairman Dr Noel Cawley pointed out that using semen from quality young stallions could be a way forward for Irish breeders as it was not too expensive.



Galway's Richard Bourns (left) with son Andrew Bourns (standing right) and Kate Leggit at their Lisbeg South 10-acre farm in Wellington, Florida \ Judith Faherty

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Belgium and Sweden this year and our young horses are jumping 10cms higher than horses on the continent are. I have never seen an eight-year-old horse that I could say would be better if it had jumped more as a five-year-old. We are burning up the young horses too early."

However, Theeuwes said: "I think it is important to start early. Like a top tennis player if he starts at 18, he will never become Roger Federer and with horses, it is the same thing. I think it is important to teach a horse to go fast.

"The sport is going so fast and every horse is an individual and needs a different programme and some four-year-olds need to do 15 shows and for others, three shows is enough. A spooky horse needs more mileage than an easy one. That's my experience."

Putting a large amount of young horses through auctions each year, Theeuwes said that the fillies from top families are making good money, quoting prices of between €12,000 and €17,000 for well-bred and athletic youngsters.

Bourns added that he has a preference for buying horses in Ireland. "I think the

quality is improving all the time. The two best horses in my stable I bought in Ireland and I'm keen to keep buying them here. It's competitive here for the top end of the market. I'd have a preference for them for sure."

Beef vs Horse

Asked for his view on the sustainability of the horse business, Bourns said: "We have a foot in each camp. We finish cattle and we produce horses. For the last few years, our horse business is supporting our beef which is a bad business model.

"Beef is a commodity, there will be a requirement for it, it can be sold every day. It's going through a bad patch now. Irish farmers have a great background with stock, they are fantastic stockpeople and have a great understanding of it.

"They have a way with animals and there is a place for them to keep good mares. If you are really committed to this business, the top breeders are really serious, they are doing a very good job and outperforming most other agricultural systems in this country."

Good production of young horses vital for sales

► Isabel Hurley and Judith Faherty

WHEN it comes to the potential future sales of young horses, key factors such as their rideability, temperament and good early production all come into play, the panel told a packed room at the Teagasc National Equine Conference in Limerick last Thursday.

No matter how talented a horse may be, if he/she is difficult, the price will fall, whereas there is always a very good market for responsive horses with good temperaments that can carry amateur riders around a 1.40m track.

Asked how he values a horse at a certain level, Richard Bourns of Bourns Sport Horses said: "How long have we got? That's a very good question. I suppose you benchmark him against a few others you sold of similar ability. No two horses are the same.

"Our bread and butter is the amateur horse and if we get a crack out of those, it is like winning the lottery. Get a horse that is willing to work. I have a horse jumping 1.45m and will carry an amateur; those are rare and valuable.

"The American market is the one we are working towards and the horse has to tick a lot of boxes. If that horse can jump 1.60m but has a horrible canter or a difficult mouth, after two circles around the

ring, they (Americans) won't even jump a fence for us so the trial is over. The early production of the horse is hugely important to ensure a good value. At 1.50m level plus, top horses can be difficult and the price goes down."

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Harrie Theeuwes of Stud 111 and Auction 111 with veterinary surgeon Marcus Swail (EquiVET Ireland) and Teagasc equine specialist Wendy Conlon at the Teagasc National Equine Conference \ PJ Corbett

Van Venrooij concurred with this and pointed out that with genetic selection, each stallion should be better than his own sire.

Dr Cawley said: "Genetics definitely play a part. In Irish terms, we were very backward in cow production for a long time until we brought genetics in. Genetics play a part in every animal production and we need to use genetics more in Ireland or we will not have top-class show jumpers in a few years' time."

Bourns was asked from the floor if a horse needs to leave Ireland for Europe at a certain point. "There is not a point in a horse's career that he has to leave Ireland. From a production level, Ireland is a great country to produce horses but

not up to five-star level. We have the (Lisbeg) yards overseas as our shop window.

"The customer is on the spot but as Harrie (Theeuwes) said, they will come from anywhere for a good horse. The season is short here (in Ireland), there is significant shows only from May to October. Ireland is a dead duck from November to May with no shows, whereas on the continent, there is shows right up to Christmas Eve and they start again on December 26th.

"We cannot afford to turn off the tap while there is no shows for five months. We have quite a few staff and have to keep turning out the horses to pay the wages," Bourns explained.

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