

Teagasc National Equine Conference

Experts shun overproduction of young horses

► **Judith Faherty**

BREEDERS and producers at Thursday's Teagasc National Equine Conference in the Castletroy Park Hotel, Limerick, were advised not to overproduce their young horses and to get a veterinary assessment at a young age to make them a more marketable product.

Teagasc equine specialist Wendy Conlon chaired the 'Challenges and opportunities for event horse breeders and producers' session and was joined on the panel by Cooley Farm's Richard Sheane, Kate Rocher-Smith of Dasset Eventing in Britain and Team Ireland veterinary surgeon Marcus Swail, who earlier gave an insightful look into the importance of pre-purchasing examinations.

Rocher-Smith, who was in Ireland looking for horses, taking in the elite sales and visiting private yards, buys horses as three and four-year-olds and produces them for the amateur American market. "I come to Ireland because I think the Irish produce the horses the best," she said.

"The danger can be trying to force a young horse to do more than they are capable, it can break them down mentally and physically. The horses I buy, I like to see them produced as suitable. Some can go out and do the three-year-old loose jumping, others just need to be handled at home. Each horse needs to be produced to accommodate its needs.

"I need a platform to produce the horse on. The horse needs to arrive in good condition. Not always linking that more experience means higher value, that isn't the case. Sometimes problems come down to overuse of a horse at the early stages," Rocher-Smith added.

Sheane, who buys and sells 100 horses a year and has two-time Kentucky winner Cooley Master Class, among others, on his CV, agreed with Rocher-Smith. He encouraged producers to be mindful of over producing their youngsters.

"We are very lucky in this country, there is a real wealth of knowledge. However, sometimes you hear someone who has a four-year-old and they do the four-year-old classes, but sometimes they are better off to do some small shows," Sheane said.

"It is important to identify the weaker ones that are better to be left off. Some people are gunning for the young horse class, which are very good, I am not saying they're not, but you need to be careful. Try and assess them – don't just bring your four-year-old to the class because he is four."

Asked if there are changes he would suggest for those young event horse classes, he said: "I've been asked a few times to discuss those classes. I think in the four-year-old classes they ask too much. You can assess the horse over a lot less and run less risk of doing mental or physical damage."

Rocher-Smith added: "In the UK we have a four-year-old championship and



Richard Sheane (Cooley Farm), Kate Rocher-Smith (Dasset Eventing), Barry Caslin, Professor Gerry Boyle, director of Teagasc, Dr Kevin Hanrahan and Ralph Van Venrooij (KWPN) at the Teagasc National Equine Conference at the Castletroy Park Hotel \ PJ Corbett

they are getting rid of it because there are so few horses in it. UK put a big emphasis on not overdoing a four-year-old. So if you have that mind set – UK customers are not used to seeing horses doing so much early on."

Sourcing in Ireland

After a few days horse shopping, Rocher-Smith was asked what the standard was like. "Improving," she said. "A few years ago it was tough and I was questioning if this country would be a source of horses for my business.

"It is not that easy to find them and that is still the biggest problem to my business – shortage of supply. I am always finding it hard to find enough good horses to sell. There is always a market but horses are hard to find."

Sheane agreed. "Same, it is improving, but it is hard to get what you want that will pass the vet. I bought a lot of horses last week and only got half of them [because of vetting].

"The world is getting richer. The average American wants to buy a horse that looks like Cooley Master Class, it doesn't have to be the same talent as him but they don't want to buy a plain horse. They are probably training with a professional and they have to look like his horses. But the amateur market needs a very trainable mind."

Rocher-Smith looks for scope in the jump and canter as the most important component, especially important for the amateur market. "For the horses that can really be at the top, the real scope and range to their jump and canter is really crucial."

Sheane looks for a blood type, but doesn't measure a horse by their blood percentage on paper. "I am not a big believer of blood on paper myself. You need

a horse that wants to be blood. A lot of the very good horses I have sold have less than 50%.

"In an ideal world, you have a blood type that wants to go and is also blood on paper. I strongly believe a blood horse who wants to go and do it will pass out the one with the blood on paper," he said.

Now his most famous sale, Cooley Master Class (Oliver Townend) has 61.2% blood on paper. Speaking about the horse who came from show jumper Cathal McMunn, Sheane said: "Lots of horses that have done well that I didn't really know if they would – but with him I knew he was a good one. He was very uphill, bit of fight in him, very active canter, blood, wanted to go, and very very good jumper. He's a good mover but not ridiculous."

Early x-rays are essential

Having touched on the issue of horses failing veterinary exams, the panel moved to discuss what breeders can do to inform themselves of the product they have. "Vetting, awkwardly is the biggest issue [stopping me buying horses]," Rocher-Smith said.

"I don't know what the solution is. Richard and I have talked at length together about having horses screened earlier so by the time we are looking to purchase you know a little bit."

Marcus Swail, who runs EquiVET Ireland alongside his duty as team vet for all senior High Performance teams, said having your horse vetted early in its life makes it a more marketable product. "If you are going to produce horse professionally... and it's a source of frustration to me and a lot of purchasers, that people will rock up and use the purchasing examination as an exercise.

"If you have a horse that looks trainable, a nice model, a nice steep, you



Take home messages

Richard Sheane: "The main thing we need to do is breed a good horse, regardless of what breed they are. If you can produce the thing, I am very happy to give a fair price. We are not expecting anyone to give away for nothing. Sometimes breeders think they get a bad price, and sometimes they do. Be realistic – they have to move, have to jump, be the right type and they need to be vetted."

Kate Rocher-Smith: "Learn from what you breed. Be open minded to which direction the sport is moving. Stay in contact with the horses you breed and you can choose your sires accordingly."

should have some kind of examination done on it where you do a screening set of X-rays, look at his heart and eyes, cover a good number of things you can control," Swail explained.

"You might stumble on some chips that were like little mistakes when they were growing. Many are correctable. It could be the difference of a sale working out, but secondly, it is adding value to your horse. You have a more marketable product, and the purchaser is thinking that this is a professional person I am dealing with."

Swail advised that horses can be screened and checked for chips any time after 18 months old. "You can frontload that information and try and control the knowledge a little bit. Purchasers don't like bad news or uncertainty very late in the process."

Sheane added that being upfront with purchasers from the outset is key to getting sales through.

"We would always say what this horse has. At least then you are not getting to the stage where the vet is surprising them. You would be amazed how many sales you get to go through by frontloading it," he said.



The danger can be trying to force a young horse to do more than they are capable, it can break them down



Equine industry of vital importance – Boyle

► Isabel Hurley

DIRECTOR of Teagasc, Prof. Gerry Boyle, welcomed all to the Teagasc National Equine Conference at the Castletroy Park Hotel on Thursday, including guests from Ireland, the UK, Belgium and The Netherlands.

"We have a very welcome diverse set of topics today. Last year a very important report was produced by Alison Corbally of Horse Sport Ireland and UCD's Dr Alan Fahey, summarising the economic value of the Irish sport horse industry which is worth €816m to the Irish economy. And we also have the highest density of horses in Europe at 135,000 in the country. We have 15,000 active breeders, providing 14,000 full-time job equivalents," said Boyle.

Acknowledging the industry as being of "vital importance to the social and rural importance of the country as well as part of our heritage", Boyle paid tribute to the breeders who delivered "such a great year at Kentucky, Burghley and Badmington" with Irish-bred horses scooping the top honours.

Mentioning the success of Irish-breds at the WBFSH World Breeding Championships and the fact that the Irish eventing studbook claimed the world eventing title yet again, Boyle said that the "standout success stories was the qualification of our three teams for Tokyo – show jumping, eventing and dressage."

Underlining the importance of strategy, Boyle said: "Strategy is all about identifying the trends and acting in a pro-active way. *The Reaching New Heights* report (2015-2025) provides a road map for the sector up to 2025. There is a lot in this strategy that remains to be implemented and is very relevant to the sector.

"I'm happy to say that some of the recommendations have been progressed. I'm particularly pleased that the Knowledge Transfer Programme has been delivered to about 300 participants over the last three years. Teagasc very strongly advocated this based on our success in other areas."

Commenting on the National Equestrian Education Pathway, which is in the pipeline, led by the RDS, supported by Horse Sport Ireland and Teagasc, Boyle said: "I passionately believe that education is vital. I think funding will be found if the direction is correct for the industry. The key strategic leader for the future has to be our breeding sector, based on science. I say this because I can point to the hugely strong sectors like dairy that have progressed on the back of solid science and a cost benefit ratio of close to 20:1. I'm convinced we can do this in the equine sector as well."

Boyle paid tribute to all the speakers involved in the conference, singling out Teagasc equine specialist and chief conference organiser Wendy Conlon who put a great programme together.

Barry Caslin,
director of
Teagasc
Professor
Gerry Boyle,
Wendy Conlon,
Fintan Phelan
and Dr Noel
Cawley at
the Teagasc
National
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Swail gives insight on pre-purchase vetting

► Isabel Hurley

WELL-known equine veterinary surgeon, EquiVET Ireland Ltd founder Marcus Swail discussed the pre-purchase examination (PPE) of horses for sale at Thursday's Teagasc National Equine Conference. Explaining why the PPE is done at all, Swail said it is an exercise driven by the requirements of the purchaser.

"They are spending X amount of money and want to know what they are buying. It is an exercise in risk-assessment. There is no such thing as no risk. As a vet, you are looking for something approaching a 'normal' risk. What you want to avoid is increased risk," explained Swail, who is also Ireland's senior High Performance team veterinary surgeon in all disciplines.

"Broadly speaking, the vetting examination is a five-stage procedure. There is a resting part and a moving, or dynamic, part of the exam. Both during the exam and subsequent to it, you have additional procedures like flexion tests or trotting the horse in a circle. Most purchasers would have an expectation that flexion tests would be done. Similarly, you'd declare whether the horse was trotted in a circle or not.

"As a profession, we have to be very clear of what we knew about the horse beforehand. A lot of the horses I vet, I would know them or they may even be a client of my veterinary practice. There is a declaration to be signed. You have to be very clear to the purchaser about what we know about the horse, it's a perfectly reasonable thing to do," said Swail.

When it comes to the opinion, there can be misunderstandings. Veterinary surgeons aim to put all the relevant findings in this part of the PPE.

"I start at the nose and end up at the tail. It is an exercise in looking with your eyes and feeling with your hands. Work your way down the neck and the forelimbs.

"Look at the back and the hindlimbs. It can be easy to miss sarcoids or scars if the horse is hairy and not clipped. Finishing up at the tail and looking under the tail is particularly important in a grey horse.

"Sometimes you are already concerned before you are leaving the exam room. The horse might have a thick tendon or a windgall type thing," said Swail. Showing pictures of horses with sheared heels and clubby feet, he advised the delegates to pay attention to young horses's feet in particular.

Well handled

Moving on to the dynamic or moving part of the examinations, this involves trotting the horse up and before and circling the horse on a hard surface.

"The surface the horse trots on is important, the horse should have confidence. Trotting a horse in a circle is trainable, you should have the horse well handled, able to trot up and down and trot in a circle in a calm, balanced, manner. Otherwise you are not doing yourself any favours," said Swail.

"Moving on to the wind part of the examination, in Ireland, we ride the horses for this part of the exam. This is what the purchaser wants – particularly in the five to eight year olds. The market for the North American/UK will expect to see the horses ridden.



Marcus Swail of
EquiVET Ireland
\\ PJ Corbett

That is what they are used to.

"There is quite good evidence that there is a small number of horses that you look at in-hand that are not lame yet that are lame under saddle."

Another part of the PPE is the eye and heart examination. Showing images of a horse that had suffered a penetrating injury to his eye and another with an odd pupil, Swail explained it was discovered that this horse's eye suffered a bang and was very inflamed inside. That sale went through okay.

Screening

"If you are producing horses and have a nice horse, you should be screening that horse from an imaging point of view and see what you have. Look at their eyes, put a stethoscope on their heart. You could have good X-rays but a noisy heart murmur."

Swail spoke about bone chips at length, advising producers to get rid of them as early as possible.

"X-rays are the commonest imaging we employ for part of the risk-assessment and you'll hear a lot about bone chips. There can be a genetic component to it, the horse is growing quickly on middling land. This is why you hear people talking about copper supplementation.

"These little chips are mistakes that happen when they are growing. You can take them out and add value to the horse. We get excited about chips because if left there, over time, they damage the joint and led to arthritis," said Swail.

Questions from the floor included Hoof Wall Separation Syndrome in the Connemara Pony and how Swail views splints. "It's the development of a bony bump on the cannon, it settles and is part of the furniture. Outside of the show ring, splints are not offensive," Swail commented.

Top show jumping horse owner, breeder and producer, Richard Bourns asked what Swail's view was if chips were removed, and there is scars left behind. Swail replied: "Often a little bed is left behind of where the chips were taken out.

"You have an internal conversation with yourself on this – what does it matter – it's not there now. It does not bother me at all."

X-rays

Asked about differing opinions on X-rays, Swail did not agree that opinions varied widely, saying there is generally a degree of agreement.

"X-rays should always be interpreted. A client once said to me, 'remember I'm riding the horse, not the X-rays'.

"If I need to, I'll send X-rays to two radiologists in the States because they are looking at them all the time and if there's something I have not seen before, they will have seen it. You'd defer to their experience because that's their job. However, if you were sending X-rays to radiologists all the time, I don't think you'd see the purchasers for dust."



Next week: challenges and opportunities for show jumping breeders and producers