



June 2009

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Is horse breeding a viable farm enterprise?

The answer is - it can be, but it is not easy. Success involves having an acute awareness of what your potential customer needs. It requires careful selection of breeding stock and equally important is correct husbandry and training practices for sale day. With horse breeding there is of course an element of good fortune and luck needed to achieve financial success. The breeder's job is to stack the odds in their own favour. First decide what market you are breeding for. No business can succeed without a clear goal and strategy. The national breeding goal of the Irish sport horse is 'to produce sound, athletic sport horses with good basic paces, pleasant to ride with a good temperament, to be used as a pleasure or performance horse capable of competing in jumping, eventing, and dressage at national and international level'. Most breeders recognise the need to start with good breeding stock, but what does this mean?

Mares:

- must be sound of wind and limb, with good conformation and movement;
- must have a good temperament;
- must have a good pedigree (well related to other animals that demonstrate the performance attributes you seek to reproduce);
- must demonstrate an ability to perform in the sport you are breeding for (if your goal is to produce international jumpers, does the mare demonstrate excellent technique and scope over fences?). If the funds to test her in competition are unavailable, have you the skill to assess her yourself, or do you need advice? and;
- must be fertile – otherwise they simply cost money.

Management issues

The management skills a breeder needs depend on the age at which he/she intends to sell the horse.

If selling as a foal (weanling), the breeder must:

- be able to assess the mare;
- have the knowledge to use all available resource materials to evaluate her pedigree and performance information;
- be able to choose a complementary stallion;
- have appropriate land and facilities;
- ensure a high level of health and welfare with a good understanding of the requirements for nutrition, foot care, vaccination and worm control;
- maintain excellent pasture management procedures;
- handle foals in a calm and confident manner when leading, grooming, and loading for transport. This will result in a confident and obedient weanling on the day of sale; and,
- have the ability to assess the true value of a foal or seek unbiased professional advice.

If selling as a three year old, the breeder must:

- have all of the above;
- have the skill to manage young horses from weanling stage to three years;
- have extra facilities to allow controlled schooling on the lunge rein and over small fences;
- have the ability to assess the movement and jumping ability to assign a true value;

- take on the risks associated with the vetting for sale that are not necessary when selling foals; and,
- be realistic if they do not have the skills necessary to produce a three year old for sale. Be willing to have the horse produced professionally if it is of value to do so.

Current market situation in Ireland

The current economic crisis has affected and will continue to affect horse trade. Several factors impact on prices, including:

- current economic climate;
- dealers, though active, are not finding it easy to move horses forward;
- a large percentage of horses on offer are of poor to average quality;
- buyers are opting for low risk purchases (older horses with a bit more mileage on the clock and clean veterinary certificate);
- sponsorship has been declining; and,
- many riders are cutting down on both the number of horses they are competing and the number of events they take part in.

How to increase your chances of making a sale

- Start with good quality stock.
- Begin the training programme for sale day at least six-to-eight weeks in advance.
- Be mindful of the day of sale from the moment the foal is born. Put a programme in place covering correct feeding, dosing, farrier and general health care.

- Pay attention to the turnout of both horse and handler on day of sale.
- Gather all useful information on pedigree and performance and put thought into your catalogue entry.
- Be able to discuss your horse's pedigree in detail with potential clients.
- If your skills are not going to maximise the value of your horse, seek professional help with preparation.

Sales returns from Goresbridge

Despite the downturn, foals with good pedigree and conformation were still selling for high prices last year. The top selling colt made €20,000 and filly €11,500, both in Goresbridge.

Between 2002 and 2007 there was a marked increase in the number of foals sold for over €3,000, up from 15% in 2002 to 26% in 2007. This figure subsequently dropped in 2008 with only 11% of foals reaching over €3,000. In 2008 the majority sold for less than €1,000 (43%) which is back to 2002 levels.

The three-year-old sales were very similar. The majority in 2008 made between €1,000 and €3,000, again back to 2002 trends. Margins for many of these horses are in the red, underpinning the absolute necessity to be vigilant in choosing breeding stock with an emphasis on quality rather than quantity.

Sales preparation must be carried out well in advance, aiming to produce a horse that can perform at his best in a calm and confident manner.

2009 events

Equine workshops

Two workshops in a series of four are planned this month:
on June 11 at Goresbridge Horse Sales, Co. Kilkenny; and,
on June 18 at Clare Equestrian Centre, Ennis, Co. Clare.

National Equine Conference - November

A national equine conference is planned for November 12 at the Hodson Bay Hotel in Athlone. An impressive line-up of speakers will bring an international flavour to proceedings.

Speakers include:

- Ine Van Deurzen, a KWPN (Dutch sporthorse studbook) mare and stallion inspector;
- Christoph Henkel, Breeding Manager of Paul Schockemohle's stables;
- Inken Johannsen, marketing executive with the Holsteiner Studbook in Germany.

RDS Dublin Horse Show

Come and talk to us at the show from August 5-9. We look forward to speaking with you. Check out our website for details of upcoming events: <http://www.teagasc.ie/ruraldev/progs/equine>

Young Breeders Competitions



The Irish National Young Breeders' Competition will take place at Gurteen Agricultural College on June 23.

The countdown is on to the very exciting World Breeding Federation for Sport Horses (WBFSH) Young Breeders' World Championships to be held at Kildalton Agricultural College, Piltown, Co. Kilkenny from July 17-19. The event is jointly hosted by Horse Sport Ireland and Teagasc, with the support of the WBFSH. Training has been underway since January in preparation for the Irish National Young Breeders' Competition. This is planned for June 23 at Gurteen Agricultural College. Applications must be submitted by June 12 and are open to those born between January 1, 1984 and December 31, 1993. Contact the equine advisory team for details.



The World Championships are in Kildalton in July.

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