

Breeding future stars

Alan Hurley equine specialist
Teagasc Rural Economy Development Programme

Jimmy Ryan hails from Kilnamack, Clonmel, Co Tipperary, and is a modest-scale but very successful horse breeder. Recently retired as principal at St Mary's National School, Jimmy has always had an interest in horses and started breeding over 30 years ago.

"I got my first mare from the late Ted Keane in Cloneen, a brilliant horseman. My foundation mares were by Clover Hill which were crossed with either Cruising or Cavalier Royale and kept the resulting fillies which gave me an excellent genetic base," says Jimmy.

A modest man, Jimmy Ryan has bred horses of the highest quality including Electric Cruise who competed at the London Olympics in 2012. He bred the mother, grandmother and great-grandmother of Electric Cruise.

The offspring from his Kilnamack broodmares have qualified for the RDS Dublin Horse Show on numerous occasions. When asked which mare has done the most for him as a breeder? Jimmy smiles and, without hesitation, says: "Kilnamac Sally (pictured), the mare that bred Electric Cruise and several other high-class winners. She is rising 23 this year and her progeny now forms a large part of my foundation stock today."

At its most fundamental level genetics involves the passing of genes (both favourable and unfavourable) from parents to offspring, and unlike

Jimmy Ryan.



management (i.e., nutrition, exercise, and health) genetic selection is permanent and cumulative. Therefore, genetic selection and optimum management when used together generate the best opportunity for improvement and enduring benefits over time.

This means that if a breeder introduces good genetics for traits such as soundness, performance and athleticism they can be improved every generation. This is fundamental to Jimmy's breeding. He says that he tries to "breed horses that are of higher genetic merit than the previous generation".

Nonetheless, if genetic selection mistakes are made then it can take several generations to undo those mistakes.

Fundamental to any breeding programme is a clearly defined breeding goal. A breeding goal should focus on quality over quantity using only proven mares and stallions with good genetics for soundness, temperament and performance traits so the resulting foals are meeting an industry demand.

Jimmy states that his goal is to "to produce a horse of international fame who will potentially jump 1.50m or go to 3* eventing". From talking with Jimmy, it is clear he has a passion and a focus on breeding the correct type of individual that meets a market requirement.

So what advice would you give to a young breeder? I asked. "Start with the very best mare you can afford and then objectively look at her faults and failings.

Then select a stallion that will complement her; the mare and the stallion's progeny should also be consistent performers.

"You need to be realistic of what the mare is capable of producing.

"I go to Lanaken every three years and enjoy watching the jumping but in particular I study the catalogue and look to see if there are any stallions that are a little bit



more prominent in producing show jumpers. I also attend the RDS young horse qualifiers every year and mark any notable stallions with several offspring as well as paying close attention to the dam lines.

"There are several young stallions that are proven to jump which I would love to use but they are not proven as sires and when you are in the market of selling foals you need to have a

proven pedigree," Jimmy says.

When picking a stallion Jimmy looks for four criteria: "Pedigree, conformation, stallion performance record, and the success of his progeny. Most of the stallions on the continent will tick all those criteria; similarly, those four criteria also apply when selecting your breeding mare," says Jimmy.

When it comes to selling foals, he

says: "It is essential you sell into a yard where you know the foal will be produced to reach its true potential." And what of Jimmy's breeding plans? "To continue to breed horses of international standard using the top-ranked sires listed on the World Breeding Federation for Sport Horses. Now that I'm retired, I will consider keeping a few foals until they are three and see if they have a jump."



LEFT: Jimmy Ryan with Kilnamac Sally one of his most successful broodmares.

ABOVE: Electric Cruise ridden by Joseph Murphy.

Key messages

- You must define a clear breeding goal.
- A successful breeding programme needs to be based primarily on genetic selection in addition to phenotypic selection.
- Focus on breeding from mares that meet strict criteria such as soundness, pedigree, performance, athleticism, and temperament.
- Don't expect the stallion to compensate for too many faults on the part of the mare.
- Learn from your mistakes and, more importantly, learn from the mistakes of others.

Waterford sport horse breeders

In 2013, Jimmy joined the Waterford Sport Horse Breeders' discussion group. There are over 30 members across east Cork, south Tipperary and Waterford.

"It's invaluable because if I have a problem there is someone else who has also encountered the same issue. I can bounce ideas off other members to solve issues quickly and effectively and it also gives you a different perspective on things," says Jimmy.

"The group is very passionate and we all have a strong desire to learn from each other's production systems and improve our business. Everyone has something of interest to contribute. This year as a group we took professional footage of all foals. The footage was subsequently uploaded on to Facebook and Irish Horse Gateway." This proved to be a successful sales tool as he has already sold two foals using these platforms.