Susan Finnerty joined Irish breeders and producers on a Teagasc equine overseas tour to the home of the Holsteiner horse

When ORSE breeding for some is a religion and a selection of devout followers gathered in Dublin Airport at an ungodly hour last Friday morning for the latest Teagasc equine overseas tour. Expertly organised by Wendy Conlon, whose inside knowledge of the Holsteiner breeders and fluent German proved invaluable, and Crea English, it was a whirlwind tour to the home of the Holsteiner horse.

Timed to coincide with the breed’s annual colt inspections and elite riding horse auction, the first two days were spent by the 24-strong Irish group at the Holstenhalle, an exhibition and concert venue in Neumünster. This year’s colt candidates had already had a preliminary school in the transformed arena on Wednesday, before limb and movement at walk and trot assessment outdoors the following day.

By Friday, when the Irish Brigade arrived, it was a full house for the loose jumping element when spectators from home and overseas watched to see if they could spot the next new supersire or competition prospect. Blessed with the best seats in the house, decoding announcements in German, it took us several minutes to match up each colt’s number to a superbly informative catalogue, worth every cent of its £13 price tag. However it was clear from several exuberant jumping displays, rewarded by a vocal audience, that there were some outstanding prospects for the inspectors to choose from.

This year’s panel included Dr. Thomas Nissen, Jens Hauschildt, Michael Gonell, Wulf-Hinrich Hamann and Christian Thoroe who oversaw a process, which ran like clockwork. The colts had already been assessed in August and October which was a benefit for them and so Friday’s loose jumping element was a final confirmation for the inspectors and another opportunity for prospective buyers to view this year’s batch.

On Saturday morning, colts were first shown individually by sprint-speed handlers and again, the German ‘clapo- meter’ flagged favourites, before being brought into the arena in small groups to stand in front of the inspector’s table for the decision. We soon recognised the ‘gekört’ or “nicht gekört” verdicts or when one was awarded a premium, with the highest-marked colts scheduled to return later for the championship.

Early that morning, while walking around the stables, I’d spotted a photo around the stables, I’d spotted a photo of the Holsteiner Verband’s breeding director Dr. Thomas Nissen who generously gave his time during one of the busiest weekends of their year to share his frank views and costs of the selection process, plus the challenges facing this German studbook.

Those thoughts were often echoed over the next three days of fascinating visits to farms around the Holstein region to breeders interwoven with household names such as Cor de la Bryere, Capitol and Sacramento Song. The heavy clay soil shaped the type of horse once produced in the Holstein region and these local breeders’ experiences over the decades both echoes and contrasts with their Irish counterparts. For example, filly foals are valued by Holsteiner breeders, as they are the next generation of carefully-cared mare lines and a fashionable stallion is not regarded as a ‘quick fix’ solution in one generation.

More common problems include the shortage of suitable riders for the breaking and production of young horses, thoroughbred-sired geldings are viewed as a by-product for the eventing market, while the Holsteiner and Irish breeders have also witnessed the rise of the Benelux breeding countries.

Next week: Walking in the shadow of giants

This has been my third Teagasc equine tour, which may seem odd for someone who has no involvement in show jumping, but I have always been intrigued as to why continental breeding is way more advanced in this sport. What better way to go and visit and to experience their scientific method to breeding elite horses?

Repeat customer Jimmy Quinn