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. The American over-reach is the ‘key North American market, last week’s Teagasc’s National Equine Conference at the Castlelotty 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 Vrooij 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 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 as 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 many 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 Vrooij said: “I worked for a long time as a rider and a selector of young horses. That 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 not necessarily have to be have performers themselves but their quality must be evident.

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 international 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 over-selecting?”

Bourns replied: “I have no doubt our five and six-year-olds are being put under too much pressure. I was in Belgium and Sweden this year and our young horses are jumping 10cm higher than horses on the continent. 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. 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

As Dr Cawley pointed out that Ireland does not have many international competitions, and only one at five-star level, Bourns was asked from the floor if a horse needs to leave Ireland for Europe or we will not have top-class show horses.

He said that the fillies from top families are supporting our beef while making the selection for your young horses is the most difficult.

“You have to look everywhere for those good mares.” Bourns agreed saying: “We don’t have that many international competitions and people are looking outside of Ireland for these mares. That’s the reality. You have to look everywhere for those good mares.”

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 early production all come into play, the panel told a packed room at the Teagasc National Equine Conference in Limerick last Thursday.

Asked how he values a horse at a certain level, Richard Bourns of Bourns Sport Horses said: “How long have we been selling horses? About 25 years. It’s a different market. Back in 1995, 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.

“Breed and butter is the amateur horse and if we get a crack out of those, it is a great way to earn a very good living. Buying 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 one where we are working towards the horses 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.”

Genetic 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 Vrooij 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 stallions could be a way forward for Irish breeders as it was not too expensive.

Van Vrooij said: “The current market is exceptionally strong and growing all the time. We see many 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.”

Ralph van Vrooij said: “I worked for a long time as a rider and a selector of young horses. That 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.”

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Beef vs Horse

Asked for his view on the sustainability of the horse business, Bourns said: “We have a foot in every 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.”