

Skills key to career success

Young people aspiring to work in the equine industry had plenty to think about at Wednesday's Young Breeders Seminar

■ Judith Faherty

F ever young breeders need to be inspired, then Wednesday's Teagasc/Horse Sport Ireland seminar was the place for them to be when four of Ireland and Britain's most renowned breeders and producers of horses took to the stage to discuss their journey in the industry, as well breeding, trade and assessing young horses.

Sales agent and coach Barry O'Connor was joined by British show jumper and owner of The Billy Stud, William Funnell; young horse producer Tiernan Gill, and breeder Andrew Hughes. Ironically, and a theme that was seen in each of the four panels, both O'Connor and Gill came from families who had no interest in horses.

Speaking about his own career path, O'Connor urged the young audience to think carefully about your ability before entering the sport horse industry. "There are jobs but you have got to be good at it. This isn't easy!

"It is the best fun, but it is tough and you have got to

have the skills, the ability, and a business plans. It is a dangerous think to get in to if you don't have the skills," O'Connor said.

He urged the young people to keep up-skilling, talk to people, take advice on board and be professional in the growing industry. And echoing a point made in the earlier career pathway session, O'Connor explained there are many career options – if one doesn't suit, look at another avenue.

"If you are in a horse business, you are an entrepreneur because it changes all the time. Everyone starts around a horse but you can do other things. There are more avenues in it than any other industry I know," he said.

"You have to have a skill. Ask yourself 'How do I start with zero money? Can I go on work experience? Can I work a few hours in return for a lesson?' I made a sacrifice when I went to Switzerland, I went to work with the Mandlis, I don't know how much I got paid but I was close to the sport and that was an invaluable experience."



O'Connor raised the point that breeders have to go and look for opportunities for their horses: "No one is going to knock on your door or send you a message on Facebook, you have to go out and get it. There are young people in the country dying to take your horses, give them a 30% share and let them pay the costs of producing them, you must go out and get it."

PARTNERSHIPS

Similar to O'Connor, Ballina producer Tiernan Gill grew up in a town before moving

to the country and buying a Shetland pony "because we couldn't afford a lawnmower". That Shetland was the beginning of Gill's obsession with horses and he has made a lucrative business out of it, among other interests.

Gill buys up to six foals every year, jumps them himself to a certain level (five or six-year-old year) and then sells them on. He has partnerships with top riders and producers like Cameron Hanley, Paul Hendrix and O'Connor.

A question on marketing

and selling foals from the audience sparked Gill to back up O'Connor's point, saying: "Don't be afraid to ring people. I do more mileage than a taxi looking for nice foals! Once you have the right article don't be afraid to ring people."

Gill travels to Europe to buy foals and has a very strict criteria. He will never buy without seeing the foal in the flesh. "I study every catalogue, will spend hours looking at maybe 100 foals. I'll dwindle that down to 40, then I'll go and look at them

in the flesh and get 40 down to five – I'm very strict on myself.

"The Irish ones I show here and the foreign ones, to be honest, probably turn out the better jumpers."

Gill didn't get to where he is without making a few mistakes and he encouraged youngsters to keep the head up. "There are people sitting here saying how do I do it? We all made mistakes, you pick yourself up and go again. You don't make money from day one, they haven't all been rosy."

"Don't fear making mistakes"

■ Isabel Hurley

COMBINING hard graft, drive and planning while not letting the fear of failure hold back business dreams were among the main messages from equestrian entrepreneurs speaking at the Teagasc/Horse Sport Ireland Young Breeders seminar in Athlone this week.

UCD academic and founder of the successful Equilume Light Mask Dr Barbara Murphy joined entrepreneurial schoolgirls Kate (17) and Annie (16) Madden, founders of Fenu Health, a range of equine supplements, for the General Industry Career Options panel, chaired by Teagasc equine specialist Wendy Conlon.

Like many of the panelists throughout the day, none originally came from an equine background. Dr Murphy described

how her own interest in the equine industry was triggered as a transition year student. She went on to successfully complete an Equine Science degree in the University of Limerick; spent time working in Ragusa Stud and Coolmore before completing a six-year PhD in the University of Kentucky in veterinary science and was then asked to develop the equine programme in UCD where she heads up the Animal Science degree.

"From there, Equilume started," said Dr Murphy who formed the idea for the light mask while working on thoroughbred stud farms, often looking after barren mares under lights in stables for 70 days to kickstart early ovulation in line with the January 1st foaling date set by the industry.

"Mares in stables are not walking around. I wanted to give them the light and let

them stay outside. Sunlight has a high percentage of blue light and it was a eureka moment when we discovered there was enough blue light coming into one eye to fool their body and that led to the development of the Equilume light, the product is now in 30 countries," explained Dr Murphy.

Making the transition from academia to business was not easy. "I'm still doing a full-time job at UCD. It is very hard to move from being an academic to a business person but every step is important. Every mistake was valuable. I was so naive. People said I was mad putting lights on horses.

"I believe science is the way forward and having a scientific basis to some of the problems we have in the industry. I would encourage people to learn as much as they can, then you can question why some things



Teagasc's Wendy Conlon (left) with Dr Barbara Murphy of Equilume and UCD with sisters Annie and Kate Madden of Fenu Health at the Teagasc/HSI Young Breeders Seminar in Athlone

are done as they are. Always ask questions, don't be afraid of asking questions," she advised.

Dr Murphy urged as many people as possible to travel overseas and immerse themselves in a good working experience in the industry. "Go and travel. This (equine industry) is a passport to work anywhere. A degree is not the be all and end all but if you are interested, email us if you enjoy the sciences."

FENU HEALTH

The Madden sisters described how their initial

to sell. We have eight products. Fenu Save and Fenu Care are our two main products, for the prevention and care of ulcers. We have done preliminary trials on our products and are now doing some independent research. It will be €100,000 of research and more than likely, it could be a lot more. We have plans to extend to five more people. We have a person in Germany and Dubai/Qatar for us."

The daughters of a teacher and physiotherapist, their grandfather breeds National Hunt horses.

"We got great support off the bigger companies. Go to the top people," Kate said, with Annie adding: "We missed three calls from Dr Pearse Lyons of Alltech, who unfortunately died recently. But the very first time we actually talked to him, Dr Lyons cut our production costs by 90%. He helped us as much as he could. Look for the best and when you get talking to people who are willing to help you, ask them for their mobile number."