

Young breeders (l-r) David Browne, David Bourke, Arianna Mezzapelle and Vera O'Callaghan, joined the panel of Barry O'Connor, William Funnell, Tiernan Gill and Andrew Hughes on stage at the Teagasc/Horse Sport Ireland Young Breeders Seminar in Athlone



Turning breeding into business

■ Judith Faherty

INTERNATIONAL show jumper William Funnell and Co Kilkenny breeder Andrew Hughes knew about horses before they could talk, so it was a natural progression into the industry.

However, both have explored plenty of business options on their way to the top of their respective games. Funnell, a European gold medallist, is most well-known for his exploits in the arena, but his business, The Billy Stud, came about after meeting his now business partner Donal Barnwell.

"The partnership side of things is great because you can't do everything. Donal gets the foals on the ground, I'm producing them, as well as Pippa (his wife and international event rider) also doing the producing.

"I have eight or 10 riders at home that I am teaching. The lads that come to me work really hard, otherwise they won't last long, and when they leave me they can produce a horse well."

The Billy Stud's breeding operation has exploded in the 22 years since they began with an Irish mare. This year they will have 100 foals on the ground, 70 by embryo

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transfer. "Farmers need to diversify – breeding can be a business, you've just got to do it well," he said.

The panel assessed a three-year-old bred by The Billy Stud, with Funnell explaining that he uses a similar scoring sheet to assess his three-year-olds every year. "We are trying to minimise risks in terms of long term sale. Using the right bloodlines is so important," the show jumper said.

Hughes puts all the emphasis on bloodlines and likes to see as many 1.60m performers in a pedigree as possible, again to minimise the risks. He only invests in the very best and families in his herd include a three-part sister to Sapphire, a half-sister to Vigo and another to New Orleans, and is cut-throat about what he keeps.

After taking a summer job in Coolmore while still in school, Hughes got involved in the thoroughbred industry and spent 18 years as the

manager of Ballylinch Stud. After meeting a wealthy client, Hughes went out on his own and that is when he decided to get back in to sport horse breeding, as a back-up plan. Almost 15 years later, he is reaping the rewards.

"I went to the continent and I bought some very well bred filly foals. I now have about 20 mares to breed and about 16 or 17 foals every year. After 15 years the sport horse enterprise is paying for itself, but to start with I had to use my own capital," he explained.

"I would give mares three or four foals and then if it is not working they are gone. I only keep whatever is good enough."

Backing up the other panelist's views about breeders reaching out to riders, Hughes added that his working relationship with the likes of Greg Broderick and Ger O'Neill gives his home-breds the best chance of succeeding and makes the job more cost effective.

"My advice would be to join with three people and buy the best foal in the sale rather than taking chance and buying one in the bottom on your own. Your chances of finding one in the bottom are slim."

Taking the opportunities

■ Jennifer Micklem Diamond

THE third panel of the day discussed the variety of career options available in sport horse industry, looking at both direct and indirect career paths within the sector.

Chaired by Teagasc equine specialist Crea English, the panel was made up of Judith Faherty from *The Irish Field*, Horse Sport Ireland's coaching co-ordinator Catherine Flanagan and Rafael Sanctuary of River Lodge Equestrian.

Each of the speakers grew up with no horse background and spent time as working pupils in a variety of yards in Ireland and Europe, something they recommended to the audience of aspiring workers in the sector.

Faherty worked in Switzerland with Irish show jumper Niall Talbot and said the contacts she made during that year have stood to her in her career as a journalist.

"Where I am now, it is so valuable to have met so many show jumpers and people in the industry and to have done it full time.

"I would have never made those contacts had I not gone. I realised I was never going to be a rider so I went down another route, I went to UL and did Journalism and New Media and got into the

industry in another form," she explained.

OPPORTUNITIES

Finding the balance between earning a wage and gaining experience is a fine line in all walks of life and the equestrian sphere is no different. In the sport horse specialism, and earlier on in the thoroughbred discussion, the importance of gaining ground work experience and having a strong foundation of knowledge, as well as the fundamental basics, was emphasised.

Sanctuary encouraged youngsters to take the good opportunities when they come along as the experience will be of benefit in the long run.

"I started my first job and did not get paid, my second job I got £30 a week and do not regret a moment of it. Nowadays I see a lot of young people who don't take the opportunity because they want the money now. For me I wanted the opportunity because if I knew I could get the opportunity I could start my own thing," he said.

Faherty added that people in the industry must value their work: "Education-wise in the sport horse industry, there is no clear career path for a groom like in the thoroughbred side. We need skilled workers in this



Teagasc equine specialist Crea English (left) chaired the Career Options and Pathways in the Sport Horse Industry at the Teagasc/Horse Sport Ireland Young Breeders Seminar in Athlone. The panel consisted of (l-r) Judith Faherty of *The Irish Field*, Rafael Sanctuary of River Lodge Equestrian and Horse Sport Ireland's Catherine Flanagan

industry. It is not right to go into any yard and work for nothing any more. Work out a deal, get your livery for free and maybe your food and take the opportunity. We all did it, but value your hard work."

The speakers also agreed that being prepared to work hard is essential for anyone looking to succeed in this industry. Flanagan explained that her time spent working in a sales yard was the hard-

est work she's ever done, but attitude is so important.

"My mother used to say to me – 'get up, show up and dress up. Make yourself presentable and go and do it,'" she said.

PASSPORT TO TRAVEL

A key point taken from both the thoroughbred and sport horse discussions over the course of the day was that working in the equine industry can be a passport to travel

around the world. Each member of the sport horse panel all agreed with this idea. Faherty is just home from the Winter Equestrian Festival in Florida and through her position with *The Irish Field* she gets to travel to some of the best shows in the world.

"The amount of Irish people over there (Florida) is incredible, from riders to grooms, barn managers and the president of the whole show is Irish. There are so

many opportunities in travelling – my year away helped me with life experience as well as everything else and I'm lucky I get to go to some nice shows around the world," Faherty explained.

Sanctuary flew in for the seminar and the Co Wexford-based operation have just set up a new base in East Sussex. Managing close to 30 staff and two yards full of horses means the operation must be professional.

"Try to build a professional set-up," he encouraged the young audience. "You have got to be willing to meet new people and be approachable, it is important to be a people person. You don't walk past Brown Thomas and see everything on the floor, the same applied in every business, it has to look and be professional."

Flanagan co-ordinates the HSI coaching programme and encouraged youngsters to look into getting the extra qualification. Graduates of the programme have an internationally recognised qualification and can travel anywhere in the world to coach.

"The FEI use the Irish system, it is a really good programme. Coaching will always provide an opportunity to work and the age groups are getting younger and younger – it's something that you can always use," Flanagan said.