

equine

Equine and dairying complement each other in Galway

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Michelle Kavanagh Gilligan and her husband John farm 141ha near Eyrecourt, Ballinasloe, Co Galway. John began jointly managing the farm with his father, Martin, about 10 years ago and over time they expanded from 80 to 260 dairy cows. John is now managing the farm himself and is targeting a 340-cow herd for spring 2018. In parallel with the dairy expansion, Michelle has developed "Avalon Sport Horses and Ponies".

There is a symbiotic relationship between the two businesses with Michelle and her student rider, Shane, both assisting the dairy enterprise. In turn, the heavy lifting machinery elements of the equine enterprise are met by John. The businesses complement each other in other ways too. The mixed grazing system of cows and horses works particularly well

for the horses in terms of parasite control and keeping the pastures clean and well grazed.

"Both Martin and John have always supported the equine enterprise," says Michelle who has a degree in business and equine and over the last decade or so has gained extensive industry experience in both the thoroughbred and sport horse sectors.

"I was always most passionate about sport horses and ponies but found the experience of thoroughbred sales preparation and stud work fascinating and it really brought home to me the absolute importance of turnout, husbandry, and attention to detail."

Michelle also worked for a professional event horse production and dealing yard which gave her insights into training programmes, marketing, pricing and selling.

The equine enterprise is multifaceted. It includes a small band of broodmares, homebred youngstock, purchased youngstock which are being broken and produced for sale, and a very select number of livery



clients. Occasionally, horses/ponies are taken in from clients for breaking, sales production or to be produced for studbook inspections or competitions.

The equine enterprise is financially self-sufficient, debt-free and is not drawing on the profits of the dairy enterprise. Having facilities which permit professional production is important to Michelle and she therefore has no hesitation in re-investing in the business with additional plans to upgrade fencing, add a mechanical horse walker, cross country schooling fences and further housing facilities to the enterprise in the near future.

Business acumen

Over the years Michelle says she has always dabbled in buying and selling ponies and horses alongside her other jobs, building her clientele over the years. A testament to her business acumen is that the development of an eight-horse American Barn and an outdoor arena with superb high-spec all-weather surface were possible a year ago through re-investing profits purely from her equine enterprise, i.e. the sale of horses and ponies.

Michelle specialises in performance ponies and produces also a few horses for the both the amateur and

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professional eventing market. Her long-term goal is to breed Connemara Cross Warmblood ponies. "We'll aim to breed good-looking sound ponies with a nice jump and add value through the production of ponies that are very well-schooled and exceptionally safe ponies for the 10-year-old to ride; easy ponies that are well-mannered."

Michelle acknowledges that horses take longer to produce and feels that there is a very accessible niche market for ponies that are produced in a professional way. "I feel that too many ponies come to the market without sufficient production and also that there aren't enough breeders focusing on producing performance ponies."

Michelle believes in absolute honesty in her dealings with her clients. She works hard to ensure that the client and pony/horse are well matched and is never in a rush to sell. Given that in many cases the end user is a child, safety is paramount. She will even encourage a customer to take a bit more time to ensure that hers is the right animal for them and always insists on vetting prior to sale, sometimes at her own cost where a client is happy to proceed without.

Michelle is adamant that no young

pony will leave her yard until it has been out at a few shows or training events and is comfortable with travelling, crowds and the show environment. "Time spent doing the extra bit with them reaps further dividends in the long run," she says. "It ensures clients get what they pay for and I can stand over the pony or horse."

Social media

Social media, particularly Facebook, is proving to be an excellent sales tool for the business and Michelle says she is constantly collating photos and videos to promote her stock through this interface. She has steadily grown her followers to almost 2,000 and has widened her customer base to as far afield as Sweden through this medium.

"I believe it is absolutely crucial in today's marketplace to be present and active on social media and particularly to be able to forward videos of horses/ponies to prospective customers," says Michelle. "The majority of potential buyers aren't keen to come for a face to face view until they have made a preliminary inspection on video first."

Through the network of existing "friends", who may "like" or "share"

a post, the news feed can travel quite a distance she has found. "I have sold five animals in recent months through this medium and I encourage buyers to keep in touch after the sale by posting photos and videos of the animal in its new home with a satisfied customer on board."

KT discussion group

In 2016, Michelle joined a Knowledge Transfer (KT) discussion group in Galway, which I facilitate. There are 17 other members from across counties Galway, Clare and bordering parts of Tipperary. "I have already gained some great ideas for developing facilities from visiting other farms through the group," says Michelle. "I've plans already in place to put some of those ideas into action."

"Not being a Galway native, I find it's a great way to meet other like-minded people from the surrounding area. The group provides a forum to not only create new business contacts, but also to learn from other production systems. Everyone has something of interest to contribute. Having an open mind and being ready to share what you have learned yourself benefits all in the long run," she concludes.