

equine

From paddock to podium

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Eamonn Murphy from Thomastown, Co Kilkenny, is a small horse breeder enjoying his retirement who saw a product of his breeding programme travel from paddock to podium in 2017. His breeding strategy to produce a horse of international fame came to fruition when a mare he bred, and jointly owned, Columbcille Gipsy, won the gold medal in the six-year-old class at The WBFSH Championships in Lanaken, Belgium, ridden by Gerard O'Neill.

Eamonn's enterprise of two brood mares and followers is a family affair with daughter Cynthia keeping the show on the road. Cynthia grew up jumping ponies and young horses, and studied Equine Science University of Limerick. She completed the National Stud course and was broodmare manager in Darley for four years. She then worked at Emirates Park as foaling manager. More recently, Cynthia moved home to care for her late mom, Ann, and focus on the family breeding enterprise.

Partnership

Eamonn and Cynthia have a long-term partnership with rider Gerard O'Neill. "Ger used to come to us in Columbcille to ride his ponies a few nights a week and from there we have developed a partnership where we invest in horses together," says Eamonn. The aim is to bring his homebred horses to a level where the return on investment is much greater than could be achieved if working in isolation.

Ger's international status in the saddle brings clients into his yard. Eamonn affirms that Ger has had a positive influence on his breeding programme also, as he is fully involved in the critique of mares and their progeny. Ger will come and look at Eamonn's young horses, give them a jump and together they make a decision whether to produce them up the grades or sell them.

Columbcille Gipsy

The story of Columbcille Gipsy began when Ger and Eamonn went to Holland to look at horses. They came

upon an 18-year-old Holstein mare – Gipsy III – which caught their eye.

Her pedigree showed promise. She was by the thoroughbred Grundyman out of a mare by Flamingo. Her progeny included one approved stallion by Casall that had competed to 1.40m, and a mare who is dam to another 1.40m horse. She was purchased for €1,600, considered worth the "dabble" given they liked her type and display of athleticism despite her age.

Eamonn and Ger decided to focus on embryo transfer as the means of reproduction. Two embryos were taken the first year, the second of which turned out to be the champion Columbcille Gipsy by Toulon a successful 1m60 performer himself.

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Even though Gipsy III is now 26 and not breeding, it was always the intention to sell Columbcille Gipsy as her other daughter and Columbcille Gipsy's full sister is now aged three years. "We hope to take embryos off this filly in 2018 and then let her compete up the grades. She has the potential to be a good broodmare, all going well," Cynthia commented.

Columbcille Gipsy was lightly jumped as a four- and five-year-old. "We tend not to rush the horses – Gipsy was out a few times in 2016 at the end of her five-year-old year, and then campaigned in 2017 with Lanaken in mind," Cynthia said.

As a six-year-old she won four competitions, all prestigious events: the Pettitt's novice five- and six-year-old championships at Bannow and Rathangan show, the Horse Sport Ireland six-year-old class, the Breeders' Classic and, finally, the gold medal at Lanaken. In all, she won around €30,000 in prize money over six months.



Embryo transfer

Given Gipsy III's age of 18 years, she was inspected by a veterinarian and her reproductive tract proved healthy and fertile.

Embryo transfer is an expensive option given that a single flush and transfer can cost in the region of €1,500 and multiple flushes may be required to achieve pregnancy. It involves removing a fertilised embryo from the donor mare and transferring it to a surrogate, thus allowing the donor mare to produce more than one foal per annum.

It is preferable to work with mares between four and 16 years of age that have previously carried a foal themselves. Intensive veterinary work is involved as the recipient mare must ovulate one day before – to three days after – the donor mare, while the donor mare is flushed at 6.5 to eight



Cynthia Murphy (left) and Crea English with Gipsy III.



Crea English, Eamonn Murphy and Cynthia Murphy.

CLEAR GOALS

Eamonn always had clear and ambitious goals for his breeding enterprise. Working in partnership with a competent rider who brings additional expertise and market insights allows the Murphy family to produce and market horses further along the value chain than would be possible on their own.

Having a female sibling to Columbcille Gipsy to continue the line is of utmost importance to the Murphys. Columbcille Gipsy's success to date and, hopefully, continued sporting career with her new rider adds value to the mare line. Despite the funds invested to get her to Lanaken, the financial dividend achieved from her sale reaped profit that can now be re-invested into the future development of the line. Cynthia, Ger and myself make a great team!" concludes Eamonn.

days after ovulation.

Eamonn and Cynthia have used embryo transfer a number of times and find it works well for them. "There are pros and cons as with most things. I see the value of embryo transfer but I also believe that surrogate mothers have an influence on the foals they carry. I have followed the scientific research and my own experience suggests foals pick up traits from their mothers, nurture certainly plays a role in the development of the foal," Cynthia said.

World Championships – Lanaken

The FEI WBFSH World Breeding Jumping Championships for Young Horses is held annually at Zangersheide, Lanaken, Belgium, where horses from around the world showcase their talents and compete for medals over three days. This prestig-

ious competition of 837 combinations representing 44 countries, the Belgian Championships and an elite foal sale with 61 foals for auction brings together breeders, competitors and buyers from across the globe, providing a great stage for trade and entertainment for 80,000 spectators.

Columbcille Gipsy jumped two challenging rounds over two days against 262 other competitors in her class at 1m 30 level that earned her place in the final. After a rest day, the final course proved much more technical and higher at 1m.35. The initial 262 competitors were whittled down to just 40 and she was 15th to jump. She jumped clear and won on a time of 38.38 seconds, the fastest by over two seconds.

Eamonn could not attend but was ably represented by Cynthia: "To be in the centre of such a good win and

achieving your dream of breeding 'the good one' is phenomenal. There is no one else you would want on a horse's back for those big pressure days than Ger O'Neill. We are very grateful to him."

Gipsy's extraordinary record ensured her subsequent sale to Paul Schockemöhle the world renowned rider, coach and "high-end" horse dealer giving her a place in Schockemöhle's exclusive Performance Sales International (PSI) auction. In December 2017, 53 individually picked horses, 26 dressage and 27 showjumping horses were auctioned in Germany. A total of 47 horses sold generating €14,635,000m. The top-price dressage horse was sold for €850,000 and jointly top-priced show jumping horse was Columbcille Gipsy who sold for €700,000.