

BREEDING SPORT HORSES

What is a sport horse?

The foundation Irish sport horse breeds are the Irish draught horse and the thoroughbred, with influence also from the Connemara Pony. In recent generations, there has been an infusion of continental warmblood breeds, and there is now a

considerable amount of crossbreeding with these breeds in the Irish sport horse studbook. Traditional Irish Sport Horses (registered as ISH(TIH)), which do not have any foreign ancestors recorded in their back pedigree, continue to be bred.

The market

There is a market for sport horses both nationally and internationally. The market for professional rider competition horses and high-end amateur competition horses is vibrant and likely to remain so, but it can be challenging to sell in the middle market, unless horses are sound of wind and limb, with good temperament (and ridability), physically attractive, and well produced. Showjumping and eventing are the two Olympic disciplines, which are bred for in Ireland. The top end of the marketplace for professional competition horses is lucrative but limited. At the lower end of the market, horses are destined for leisure use (i.e., 90cm-1m jumping), for which there is a larger volume requirement, but also a lower market return. The middle market is a combination of horses destined for amateur competition and high-end leisure purposes (1.20m-1.40m jumping). The same analogy is true for

ponies, with those competing in international championship competitions commanding the highest returns to a finite number of users, and those for wider leisure consumption at the lower end of market value.

Other markets include those for showing horses and ponies (ridden and in-hand), hunting, trekking, endurance sport, and various other recreational activities. High-quality production is key for these markets to maximise opportunity for financial dividends.

Capital costs

Broodmare purchase price: highly variable and dependant on the many factors discussed under 'Critical factors to consider'.

Facilities and equipment: housing (stable or loose housing for overwintering); safe-fenced paddocks for turnout; if producing three year olds or above, additional facilities for controlled exercise, i.e., lunge ring/arena/mechanical horse walker are desirable; and, means of transport.

How are horses sold?

There are two main options when selling a horse: sell privately (direct from the farm gate in person or using online/video promotional means); or, sell publicly through a sales auction, mart or fair.



Purchase prices of broodmares are highly variable.

Production costs

Key variable input costs are: stud fees; veterinary fees (dependent on the fertility of the mare, method of breeding chosen (artificial insemination – fresh, chilled or frozen semen – or other assisted reproductive methods) and general health of the mare and offspring); and, necessity or otherwise to employ professional persons for foaling the mare or training offspring. Other input costs are also involved.

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Critical factors to consider when purchasing a broodmare

Investment in a quality broodmare is of critical importance as a foundation for the success of a breeding programme.

Breeding goal

- What is your breeding goal? Which market do you aim to breed for?;
- in relation to the desired breeding goal, is the mare's pedigree and damline strong, i.e., related (ideally first, second and third generation) to many horses demonstrating the performance attributes to be reproduced?; and,
- are her conformation and athleticism traits appropriate to the chosen breeding goal?

Health

You should take into account:

- veterinary soundness (reproductive, wind, and limb soundness) – no inheritable unsoundnesses;
- fertility history – if there is evidence of barren years without progeny on the ground find out why, as poor fertility negatively impacts costs of

production; and,

- that fertility declines with age.

Temperament and training

- Temperament is an inheritable trait and impacts trainability; and,
- is finance available to assess the mare under saddle, perhaps in competition (<7 years of age)?

Registration status

- Is she registered with pedigree recorded?;
- it is important to be familiar with the classification system for whichever studbook the horses/ponies you are breeding from belong to; and,
- it is desirable to breed from 'approved' breeding stock in the knowledge that they meet studbook requirements for soundness, conformation and athleticism.

Linear profile

- Provides information on strengths and weaknesses of conformation and athleticism traits; and,
- is a useful tool when seeking a stallion to physically complement, where a linear profile is available for him also.



Breeder skill requirement

Selling as weanlings

- Ability to assess conformation and athleticism traits of the mare and choose an appropriate complementary sire;
- knowledge to evaluate pedigree and performance information of mares and stallions;

- high level of husbandry skill and ability to manage mares and foals in-hand; and,
- ability to assess the value of offspring, or seek unbiased professional advice.

Genetic indice/breeding value (show jumping)

- Breeding values measure the difference between genetic ability of an individual and the average of the population;
- breeding values are expressed as an index, with values between 80 and 120 considered average for the breed;
- horses with breeding values over 120 are considered of high-genetic merit and breed improvers – horses with breeding values over 130 are considered superior breed improvers; and,
- breeding values (reliability): 90% or greater – great reliability; over 50% – satisfactory reliability; and, 30-50% – poor reliability.

Production options

- Breed a foal and produce to sell as a weanling at six to nine months;
- breed a foal and produce to sell at three years unbroken; and,
- breed a foal and produce to sell under saddle at four years of age or older.

There is scope to enter partnerships with producers to breed and sell horses at older than three years of age. Trust is important. Agree in advance all elements of the arrangement, including exit clauses for both parties.

Selling as a three year old and older:

- The same as for producing weanlings; and,
- the skills to lunge and loose jump (three year olds), and to ride under saddle (four years and older), or employ a trainer.

Three year old and older horses generally undergo pre-purchase veterinary soundness examinations prior to sale, while foals do not.

Further information

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The following resources are also helpful

- 🌐 <https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/rural-development/equine/>
- 🌐 <https://www.horsesportireland.ie/>