

Racing revolutionary's £20m hunch

Mark Souster meets man behind the new monorail that could change the way young racehorses are trained

Mark Souster, Racing Writer

October 22, 2016



Kurt shows off his new invention at the Kingswood Stud that the 69-year-old tycoon claims takes rider error out of training young racehorses (GRAHAM HUGHES FOR THE TIMES)

Rising from the earth on the edge of Lambourn is an edifice, which at first glance bears a passing resemblance to a rollercoaster. It snakes through a one-mile swathe of the 165-acre Kingwood Stud, the scars of its construction still evident on the land.

But far from being an object for amusement, it is a deadly serious attempt by a Turkish multimillionaire to revolutionise the way in which young horses are prepared for training. It is a £20 million hunch that its inventor and founder hopes will prove to be his legacy to racing. And it will be ready for use from next month.

Mehmet Kurt is the man behind the eponymous Kurtsystem — which is, in essence, a hi-tech overhead monorail from which horses are loosely and safely tethered individually to its cars.

Every aspect of their movement is monitored from a cabin that reads vital signs such as heart rate and respiratory behaviour. It allows horses to work at varying speeds, from trot to canter on an all-weather track. The monitoring can also identify any medical issues which need addressing at a young age.

Its uniqueness, Kurt says, is that it removes rider error from this vital stage of the training of young racehorses, which, as he knows to his cost, is a primary cause of injury. The system replicates the weight of work riders with weighted saddles and gradually introduces young horses to a training regime on the covered circuit. Putting work riders on a horse under two years old can, he believes, puts too much stress on them.

It aims to help yearlings to develop stronger joints, bones and muscles to avoid breakdowns when they begin training in earnest. Aimed primarily at the Flat, its progress is being watched by local trainers such as Charlie Hills and Andrew Balding, among others, but Nicky Henderson believes that it could have unexpected benefits in the rehabilitation of National Hunt horses. It has been endorsed by Monty Roberts, the renowned horse whisperer.

“The amazing thing is that when you’ve got ten horses using it together, by day two it’s like they’ve got a brain frequency amongst each other, they are working in synchronisation,” Kurt says. “I must emphasise, the cabin is not pushing or pulling them, they’re doing it completely naturally. My whole ambition is to make sure horses are strong and healthy before they start their racing life; to build a foundation for their future.”

He knows there will be those who doubt him and think it is a rich man’s folly. But his life has been about proving people wrong. “When the first aeroplane was built they said it was mad and would not work,” Kurt says. “I spent a lot of money on horses, sent them training and within months too many had succumbed to training injuries. I knew I needed to develop something unique and new.”

The 69-year-old tycoon’s system has been 20 years in the making, from its prototype development in his native Turkey through trial and error to the final version, which will go live at the end of next month. Along the way he has worked closely with the Royal Veterinary College. He was inspired by his experience as an owner and breeder in Turkey, where he twice won the Derby, with *The Best* in 1993 and *Bartrobal* six years later. Far too many of the yearlings and two-year-olds he was buying were breaking down prematurely and could not be trained on.

Kurt’s story is fascinating. Born in Ceyhan, in southern Turkey, he made his first fortune at 22 by importing specialist cotton machines to that rural corner of the country. He then moved to Istanbul, where he built textile and confectionary factories, employing 3,300 people.

In the 1980s, he switched to property and developing shopping malls, inspired by a visit to the United States. He bought a bank too, with the intention of opening up the mortgage market, and made a killing investing in run-down areas of Istanbul with the prescience that remains his hallmark. For good measure, he bought into a couple of television stations, both of which ended up costing him a fortune.

He then ran into political and ethnic opposition, prompted by jealousy, he says, not least from the mayor of the city at the time — one Recep Erdogan, now the Turkish president and a long-time antagonist. He found himself undermined at every turn because he says, he did not

“play the system”. He had a villa worth \$2 million (about £1.6 million) “confiscated” by the government and in 2011 another luxury abode worth £8 million was bulldozed to the ground in front of his disbelieving eyes. He and his wife are writing a book about their experiences, which he claims include an attempt on his life through poisoning.

Realising exile was his only option, Kurt left Turkey and moved to England, buying Kingwood Stud in 2012. He left behind the prototype of the Kurtsystem, the worldwide patent for which is now registered in England. Lambourn and its rich heritage provides the perfect showcase. “My motherland is the United Kingdom now,” he says. “It is where I can live and breathe and be a human being. Turkey stole 50 years of my life.”

As a child he was always interested in horses. His defining memory is of the two old nags on his family farm, under which he crawled as a boy. He learnt to ride at the age of four. A regular at British bloodstock sales, he bought 19 horses at Newmarket in the late 1980s and was up and running.

His brainchild focuses on the six-month period of a horse’s life between a year and 18 months. It can cater for up to 20 horses at a time. Once the proof of concept has been established he will open fully next spring ahead of the new Flat season. If all goes well he will look to export his invention under licence.

Kurt has five children. Two of his sons are moving to join him. The plan is also to build up his string, which stands at 33, 13 of which are yearlings. Several are in training at a variety of yards.

“I know it will be successful,” he says. “I am never interested in today. It is always about the future and this is it.”