



TRAINING YEARLINGS

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT AROUND THE WORLD

Consider throwing a thirteen-year-old school child into a university environment straight from prep school. Sights, sounds and influences that the young mind would struggle to compute; physical rigours on the sports field that would either disappoint the mind or cause physical damage. I cannot think of any parent that would choose this for their young adolescent. Yet we often do this to the young horse, plucking them straight from the sleepy pastures of their nursery into an environment that is measured upon its

production of top-level runners. Perhaps we send them via the sales...an entrance examination of sorts.

When put like this it is clear that, as custodians of young bloodstock, we might consider a period of preparation during which the horse would be introduced to saddle and rider, taught the basic lessons that would allow it to fit into the programme of the trainer that its owner chooses, as well as a careful conditioning of the physical stresses that will be tested further upon its graduation to the greater strains that will be required to reach race fitness.

For the sake of this article pre-training will be considered to be the safe development of a young horse towards its first joining a trainer or returning from a break not enforced by injury, as opposed to rehabilitation. The American racing industry has the perfect phrase for this: Legging Up.

While there has been a constant growth in the number of commercial pre-training yards in Europe over the last 25 years to satisfy a growing demand for this service, this is something that has been a long-standing practice further afield, particularly in countries where there is stabling pressure at the racetrack or in metropolitan stables, not to mention numerous larger owners that have chosen to keep a greater part of the horse's young career in their control by employing a farm trainer or establishing their own pre-training division.

In the United States (and to a degree Australia), there is considerable pressure on stabling at or near to the racetrack and the priority will of course be given to runners that are earning. Stall allotments at a meeting in North America are on the management's expectation that stall will house a horse that is likely to run during that meeting which often leave trainers very limited space for either young horses or those coming back from an injury or break.

This historically has created a demand for either farms to undertake ridden work of young stock or specialised pre-training operations at training centres. A glance at Google Earth shows a number of training tracks at farms dotted around central Kentucky and anyone that has flown into Bluegrass Airfield will likely have noticed the famous Calumet training track immediately adjacent to Keeneland. These were borne out of a real need to have youngsters developed off the main track due to lack of space.

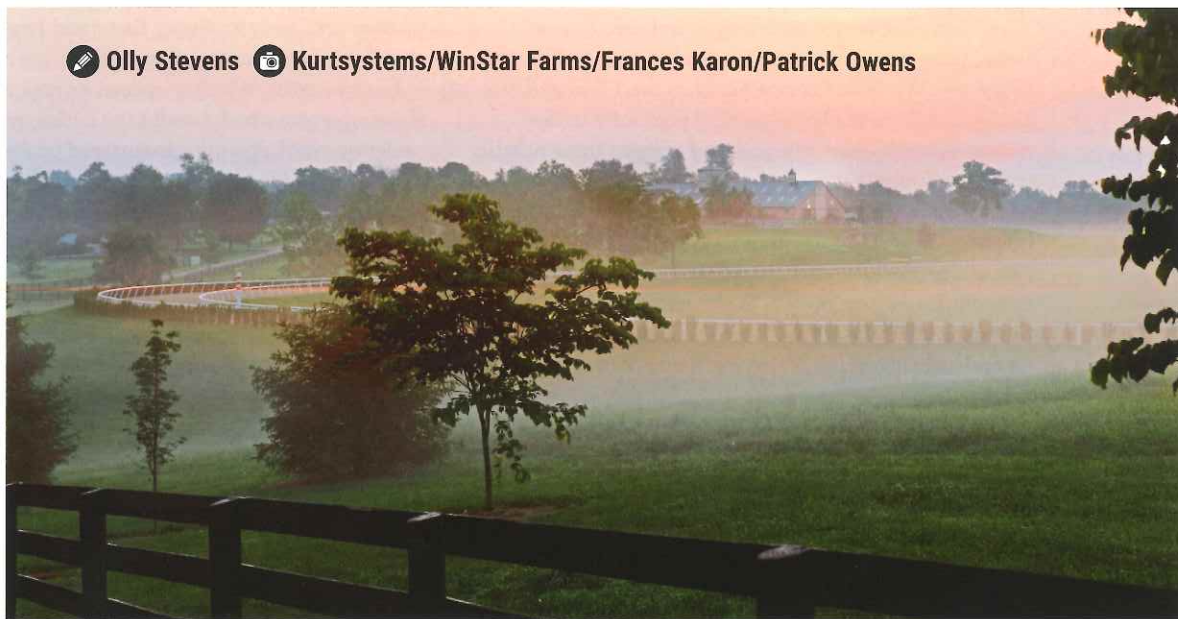
Horses that graduate to the racetrack in North America are not only facing their toughest physical challenges but also a high-octane environment where other horses will be breezing past them from the very first day, making their preparation of key importance.

Training centres such as Camden, where Shadwell have a barn, and Ocala, home of numerous highly regarded and well supported pre-training operations, have become centres of excellence where young horses can escape the harsh winters of Kentucky and New York and receive both education and physical conditioning with specialist businesses boasting superb facilities. The breeding hub of Kentucky is home to numerous operators that perform the task of legging horses up at training centres near to Lexington.

Geoff Mulcahy (coincidentally also breeder of Coventry Stakes hero Rajasinghe) has run his hugely successful stable at the Thoroughbred Training Centre taking advantage of a quieter environment, diverse facilities and no pressure from racetracks to run horses that are still developing. Yearlings start at his Bourbon County farm where a team of full time staff undertake the early work, backing the horses and riding them away until they are ready to be introduced to the training centre where a shared track exposes the young horses to some of what they might expect at a main track later in their career. The success of this detail-oriented and gradual approach has led to the stable attracting a very enviable client list, featuring as a key part of the programme of a who's who of North American racing.

Owners who operate on a large scale have also chosen to build up a pre-training division to match their breeding and sales activities. Taking control of this allows the owner and team of advisors to make more informed management decisions regarding the horse, choice of trainer or whether to even continue with a horse's career, in many cases saving money. Shadwell operate a sector of their Thetford stud for this as well as a well established pre-training operation in Dubai and barn in Camden, NC. Godolphin have multiple pre-training sites as part of their global operation which have built upon their historic Kildangan base to help give the young stock the best possible start.

 Olly Stevens  Kurtsystems/WinStar Farms/Frances Karon/Patrick Owens



view “Everything here is about detail, spotting when horses are sleeping just a bit more than usual, letting them grow, letting them relax. I might expand a bit, but I do not want it to ever be at the cost of ensuring that every horse has the right workload to balance their physical and mental development.”

A novel approach that has more in common with more conventional approaches than initially meets the eye is Mehmet Kurt’s Kingwood Stud. While the cutting edge and beautifully-engineered Kurtsystem is dazzling, it could easily divide opinion and is beyond the reach of many commercial pre-trainers. The idea was born from Mr Kurt’s desire to “reduce the injuries and breakdowns suffered by racehorses in the early stages of their careers,” something that every horseman is seeking to achieve in gradually and considerably developing the young horse.

In this case it is carried out by taking young horses, very young horses of weaning age, and slowly introducing them to the Kurtsystem. This takes some time especially as farm manager and Classic-winning Italian trainer Daniele Camufo explains: “The horses are not forced into this so it takes us some time for them to learn. They learn to travel along together as a herd. Initially perhaps not every day, and only just to be introduced to it, but this is increased as they become accustomed to it.”

Critics of this system might not have been fortunate enough to have seen it first hand, and also not had the opportunity to ask questions. Yearlings are all broken in and ridden just as they would normally be, but by this stage they have already been cantering (without the

weight or interference of a rider) since April, learning to balance themselves “Look! They don’t lean on this like a treadmill, they have to carry themselves. All of the gates are open now on these yearlings. They are free” says Camufo, as a group of smartly-bred yearlings (including a very eye-catching Pivotal colt) canter before us while we sit in air-conditioned comfort tracking them.

The horses carry rollers and weight cloths of varying sizes on the Kurtsystem 2000 but are also ridden and turned out to supplement this mechanised exercise. The training programme is a part of a bigger picture that is designed to give each horse the best possible chance of a long and successful racing career. The early start to the training programme gives ample opportunity to assess each horse’s potential as well as controlled exercise that can collect data on key physical metrics such as aerobic capacity and efficiency, and stride length and heart rate data will soon be added.

Conditioning, safety and specialising are all key elements of pre-training and Mr Kurt has had success with his earlier versions of this system in his native Turkey. This led to the huge undertaking in Lambourn, in which he has such confidence that has supported his structure with some blue-blooded young horses that are





developed on the Kurtssystem before heading to Jamie Osborne down the hill to race in the Kingwood Silks.

Dennis O'Brien manages Shadwell's Thetford-based pre-training and rehabilitation establishment and the global powerhouse keeps things simple. "We take in all of the sales yearlings and work with them, in house, until they are mature and sound enough to take training." At the early stages of each horse's career they do not alter significant details of the management of each horse and, all going well, they soon graduate to their intended trainers. "Most of our trainers have large numbers of horses so we are aiming to send horses to them that can fit in nicely with that."

“
WE TAKE IN ALL OF
THE SALES YEARLINGS
AND WORK WITH THEM,
IN HOUSE, UNTIL THEY
ARE MATURE AND
SOUND ENOUGH TO
TAKE TRAINING.

Arriving at the Snareshill Estate is a contrast to the busy cut and thrust of nearby Newmarket. Avenues of mature deciduous trees, with hedged paddocks and a calm but deliberate working atmosphere in the yard, all combine to leave, to the human observer at least, with the impression that this would be an idyllic place for a horse to grow up. The relatively flat topography lends itself well for building the sort of gallops that will not over-face the young athlete and within the yard is an enviable roster of facilities.

In principle, a conventional pre-training operation can have slightly lower operational costs than a racing yard as there aren't any runners to think of, a lower administrative burden and a less immediate need for extensive facilities which can in turn offer each horse's owner a potential saving. This is not to say that pre-trainers have lesser facilities, as is proven by Ed and Tanya Peate's Penny Farm outside Newmarket.

Built in 2006 to meet the demands of a growing business, and well supported by leading trainers, owners and breeders, Ed and Tanya were able to buy and develop Penny Farm on arable land just outside Newmarket. Penny Farm boasts a gallop that, while kind to young horses, would more than suffice to train runners, and allows them to work horses upsides as they develop and get closer to progressing into the yards of their trainers. There are giveaways, however, that Penny Farm has been designed with a very specific purpose; most obviously the number of lunge rings so crucial to breaking in such a number of yearlings each autumn and winter.

In the here and now, pre-training already offers apparent financial and performance incentives for the trainer and owner alike, but with new methods and technologies being employed by pre-trainers, it's not hard to see this increasingly important sector of the industry developing further and becoming adopted by the wider training fraternity. **T**