

A KINGDOM FOR A HORSE

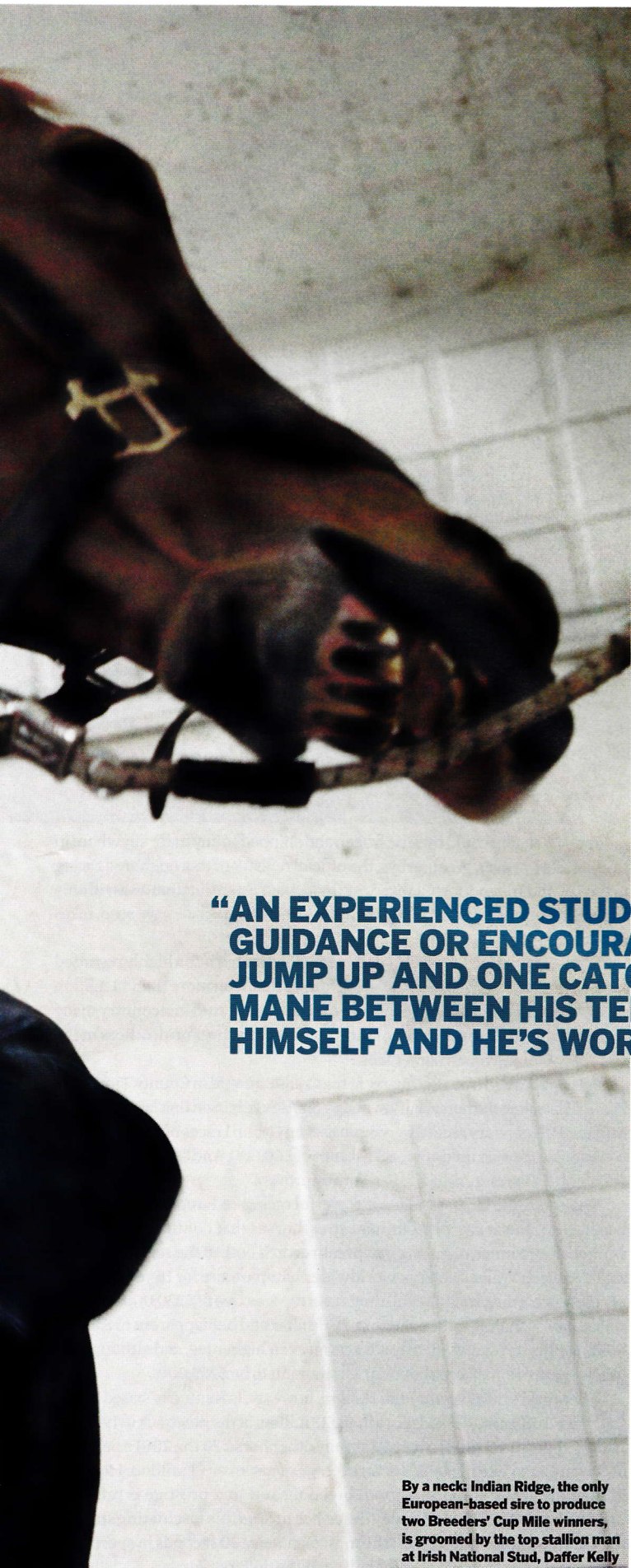
A successful stallion's earnings on the racetrack are nothing compared to what he can make as a stud after retirement. The top horses command fees of over £200,000 for a single "cover", and some will service up to 250 mares in one year. But the world of the super stud is as strange and secretive as it is lucrative

◆ **AS HE IS GUIDED FROM HIS STABLE BOX, BARATHEA'S BRIDLE MAKES A CURIOUS CHIMING SOUND – A SOFT CLANGETY-CLING THAT SOUNDS LIKE THE FIVE-MINUTE RING IN AN ACTOR'S DRESSING ROOM.** The muscles of his neck, chest and body bound on his strong, straight legs, sending honeyed and golden hues rippling across his light bay coat. At the entrance to the bare barn, he pauses for a moment, gracefully, expectantly, like a model at the top of a catwalk. Though 13 years old, he still has all the characteristic outlook and athleticism of a classic flat-racing miler.

Barathea is a very special horse. He earned almost £1 million at the track, culminating in a win at the 1994 Breeders' Cup Mile in the US, part of a championship that forms the world's richest day of horseracing. Now he pays his way by doing what comes naturally to him at Rathbarry, a leading stud farm in County Cork, Ireland.

The barn in which he performs up to three or four times a day is 10 metres square, with protective straw and wood chippings on the floor that have been built up around the sides to form a central hollow. Barathea instinctively heads towards it, becoming more alert and agitated as the sexual hormones start to kick in. There's a kind of staccato swagger to him now, a jerking awkwardness that, I rapidly realise, is due to the fact that his rod (as a horse's penis is known) is way out and swinging near the ground. Sniffing the hormone-rich urine left behind by a recently covered mare only serves, very graphically, to further harden his resolve.

Sport of kings: eight-year-old former world champion miler Desert Prince is one of Irish National Stud's brightest breeding prospects



“AN EXPERIENCED STUD NEEDS LITTLE GUIDANCE OR ENCOURAGEMENT. ONE JUMP UP AND ONE CATCH OF THE MARE'S MANE BETWEEN HIS TEETH TO STEADY HIMSELF AND HE'S WORKING AWAY”

By a neck: Indian Ridge, the only European-based sire to produce two Breeders' Cup Mile winners, is groomed by the top stallion man at Irish National Stud, Daffer Kelly

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arathea likes to be in the barn first to mark out his terrain before a mare is brought to him, suppliant-like, to service him. (It's a little, I imagine, like Hugh Hefner and his harem at the Playboy Mansion.) Today's mare is a young horse named Scottish Spice; modern veterinary techniques can pinpoint ovulation to within a couple of hours, and 4pm this afternoon has been designated as her time to be “covered”, as equine sex is so euphemistically termed, by Rathbarry's leading stallion.

Swabs will have been taken to make sure that she is carrying no infections, her vulva washed with hot water, her tail tied so it can be easily swung out of the way, and finally – just in case you thought the whole process wasn't quite mechanical enough – she is injected in the neck with a luteinizing hormone that further stimulates her ovulation.

As Scottish Spice's groom, Declan, straps padded boots to her hind legs (to protect Barathea – and his handlers – in case at any time she rejects his advances) and a third handler, Hugh, twists a twitch, a loop of rope at the end of a long stick, tight over the mare's upper lip (the effect is distracting and makes her easier to control), I spot Barathea in a corner of the barn walking in increasingly smaller circles. His ears are pinned back and he is all restless movement, his head ducking, his legs twitching and his tail whipping up into the air.

“Easy Billy, wooaah,” says his stallion master with quiet authority. But “Billy”, Simon's nickname for all his stallions, is anything but easy; in fact, he is absolutely dying to get at her.

The three handlers put on helmets and Barathea is brought on towards his mare. At the last second Declan lifts her tail and

for the briefest moment I catch sight of what horse breeders so delicately refer to as “the wink”, the pulsating of the mare's vulva that unmistakably signifies that, whether Scottish Spice is a willing participant or not, the state of arousal is now officially mutual.

An experienced stud like Barathea, now in his ninth year on the job, needs little guidance or encouragement. One jump up – and it's a mighty thing to witness a beast as impressive as this rear up and land down on a mare's back – and one catch of Scottish Spice's mane in his teeth to steady himself, and he is working away. For his handlers, the next few moments are then a carefully choreographed dance, in which Hugh steadies the mare while Declan and Simon lean skilfully into Barathea on each side to keep him on the mark.

The deed is over in no more than 30 seconds; really, it's more patch than cover. There's no whinnying or roaring, and the mare seems as docile as a clothes horse, but once I see Simon's Latex-gloved hand move quickly to the base of Barathea's rod to feel for the “cast” (ejaculation) and a benign smile – of pride, I'm certain – flash across his face, I know that this particular theatrical five-handler has reached its climax. It has been a solidly professional performance, if a little lacking in emotion.

Scottish Spice is led away back to her stable. As a broodmare, she now faces the cheery prospect of another 11 months of pregnancy if the cover proves



What's love got to do with it?: some stallions won't come out of the stable for less than £50,000

a success; her 30 seconds of fame and fun are well and truly over for another year. Barathea, on the other hand, will be hard at work again tomorrow. "By God, he loves his job," says Simon, as he and Barathea breeze past me on their way back to the stallion yard. I probably imagined it, but I could have sworn there was a swagger in both their steps.

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S MUCH AS THE PROCESS OF THOROUGHBRED BREEDING IS ABOUT THE AWESOME PHYSICALITY OF THE ANIMALS and the scientific skills of the men who organise and oversee the equine sex act, it is also about hugely impressive sums of money. The fee charged by Rathbarry for Barathea's sexual services, for example, is £17,000.

In some ways, the figure reflects the industry's exclusive and highly specialised nature. If Barathea was any other breed of horse – a draught or quarter horse, say – he could fulfil his half of the reproductive bargain simply by jumping onto and depositing into a padded, pretend but "mare-like" breeding

mount. His semen could then be frozen and shipped to any mare anywhere in the world. However, Weatherbys, the official registry of thoroughbred racing in the UK and Ireland, forbids breeding by artificial insemination and will only register racehorses conceived by "natural cover". That, as we have seen, takes a considerably greater effort.

Still, Barathea is cheap compared to some. Although he's a highly regarded stallion near the top of his game, siring horses that won more than £1 million at European racetracks last year, and he is standing at stud in a country many consider the leading producer of thoroughbreds in the world, others in the market command much higher fees.

Just up the road from Rathbarry at the Coolmore stud in County Tipperary, Rock of Gibraltar, the horse half-owned by Sir Alex Ferguson that last year broke Mill Reef's legendary record by winning seven Group 1 races on the trot, won't contemplate a cover unless he sees a return of £60,000. And "the Rock" is in his very first season at stud and is therefore unproven.

Coolmore, the largest and most powerful racing and stud operation in the world, also stands two pre-eminent sires, horses that continue to produce winner after winner, offspring that break records both at the sales and on the track. Sadler's Wells, a veteran worldwide champion sire for 16 years and the top money-earning stallion of all time, has a reported fee of £220,000. Younger stablemate Danehill, father of Rock of Gibraltar and heir apparent to Sadler's Wells stallion crown, evidently attracts an even higher fee, and although the precise figure remains confidential, it is thought to be £255,000.

The world's number one stud stallion, however, is Kentucky-based Storm Cat, whose offspring earned more than £13 million at the racetrack in 1999 and 2000 – almost £4.5 million more than any other horse. At the 2001 sales, each of Storm Cat's yearlings sold for an average of just over £1 million. He is one of the holy grails of thoroughbred breeding and that prestige is reflected in a fee that author Kevin Conley describes in *Stud*, his fascinating study of the US bloodstock industry, as "the most expensive 30 seconds in sport". For 2003, Storm Cat stands at stud for half a million dollars.

While all these contracts have a standard “no foal, no fee” clause in case of accidents, disease or infertility (famously, record-breaking champion Cigar retired to stud in 1997 only for none of the mares he covered in his first and only season to become pregnant), Storm Cat’s £320,000 fee is payable each and every time he delivers. Last season his total was thought to be around 50.

Others, such as Barathea, Indian Ridge and Rock of Gibraltar, will cover a lot more, perhaps 120, during the five-month stud season that starts in mid-February. It means that Ferguson’s horse could yield an income as high as £7.2 million this year, half of which will accrue to him. It’s a figure that puts both the £1.27 million the Rock won on the track and Ferguson’s salary at Manchester United in the shade. This income is also likely to grow as and when the stallion’s progeny go on to prove themselves on the track, and could continue for the next 20 years or more. It’s not a bad return for Ferguson’s initial investment of just £120,000.

What’s more, some horses will generate even more revenue in the autumn by travelling as “shuttle stallions” to Australia and New Zealand. During this time they will often cover close to the number of mares they do in the northern hemisphere. A few particularly virile and libidinous stallions, such as Strong Gale, have been known to service as many as 300 mares in a year.

It all creates a mega-rich industry. In Ireland alone, the 349 thoroughbred stallions at stud were conservatively estimated last year to have turned over almost £70 million. Most of that turnover will have been produced by Coolmore, although how much exactly is difficult to estimate since the stud is run as a private enterprise, with no accounts or figures ever released to the public. Casual visitors to the farm are greeted with high fences and permanently manned security checkpoints.

What is known, though, is that it is part-owned by super-secretive Irishman John Magnier, a multi-millionaire in his mid-fifties who, as well as owning some of the world’s leading racehorses and stallions, has extensive business interests around the globe. In addition to extending his stud operation to farms in Australia and the US, Magnier owns properties in Ireland and Switzerland (where he is a tax exile), co-owns the opulent Sandy Lane Hotel in Barbados and runs companies in various tax-sheltering isles. Together with long-standing friend and partner JP McManus (the duo are often referred to as “The Boys”) and millionaire financier Dermot Desmond, Magnier recently increased his share in Manchester United (hence the connection with Ferguson), making his and his friends’ interest by far the largest and sparking rumours of a takeover.

Through a controversial law passed by the Irish government in 1969, all fees earned by stallions at stud in Ireland are also exempt from tax. While this has given a substantial boost to the Irish blood-stock industry over the past 30 years or so, and has made it a global force now even stronger than that of the UK, it has also undeniably resulted in a few owners becoming substantially wealthy. It has also consolidated power away from small breeders and into such billionaire owners as Magnier, Sheikh Mohammed and the Aga Khan.

While there are many different types of deal struck for the ownership of a stallion, the essential model is the syndicate. Recognising that the blood-stock business is risky and expensive, stud farms traditionally divide ownership into shares, typically 40 or 42, which they then sell to breeders and speculators. Investors can buy one or more shares, each one of which entitles them to a share of the profits and a lifetime breeding right – each year they can either breed one or two mares to the stallion, or sell that cover to the highest bidder.

The incentives of the Irish tax system have, however, encouraged cash-rich studs such as Coolmore to maximise their profits by owning their horses outright – or by offering small numbers of shares to select friends and associates. The half-ownership of Rock of Gibraltar was offered to Ferguson by Magnier’s wife, Sue, in whose name the horse was registered. It was an investment



Smoking gun, empty barrels: while Rock of Gibraltar, top, now makes up to £60,000 a cover, Cigar, this picture, a record-breaking champion, famously failed to impregnate a single broodmare

designed to bring glory to both parties and to cement Magnier’s financial interest in Manchester United. “John [Magnier] knew that I’d had one or two successes with the horses and he said, ‘We’ll try and get you a Group 1 winner’,” explained Ferguson last year. “I said, ‘How’s that?’ and he said, ‘Well, we’ll offer you the chance to buy one of our horses.’ Now I look back, though, I realise I’ve been very lucky.” And they say Ferguson is a hard man to please.

FOR ALL THE INTERNATIONAL FINANCE, TAX INCENTIVES AND SOPHISTICATED SYNDICATIONS, HOWEVER, at the heart of the global stud industry lies a love of the horse and an appreciation of the overwhelming beauty of the thorough-

“EARLY RETIREMENT, PLENTIFUL SEX WITH THE WORLD’S WEALTHIEST AND MOST ATTRACTIVE PARTNERS, AND PILES AND PILES OF MONEY – THE STUD’S LIFE IS A LIFE OF WHICH MOST OF US ONLY DARE TO DREAM”

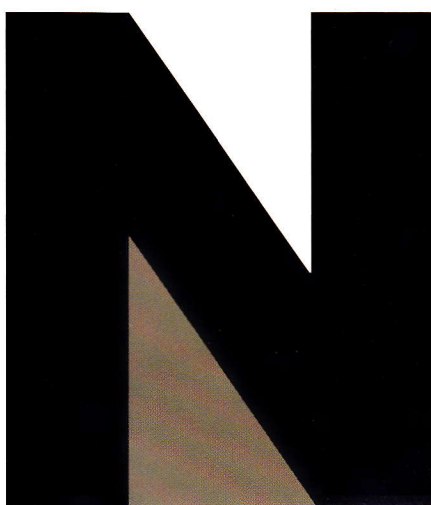
bred. At one point during a visit to the Irish National Stud (INS), I am introduced to one of the farm’s brightest prospects, Desert Prince, and it’s hard not to be impressed. The towering, eight-year-old former world champion miler is a strong, lithe and muscular-looking horse. He is also a rich and complex chestnut colour, a mix of mahogany, hazel, auburn and coffee shades that flicker and flash in the sun. Yet there is something more than physical allure. There seems a real depth to his outlook, a posture and confidence that imparts real presence.

It’s perhaps because of this that stallions at stud are not only treated with total respect, but they are also catered and cared for like royalty. Their diet and weight are carefully monitored and a stallion’s daily routine of feeding,

exercising, grazing, grooming and covering is adhered to with an almost clerical devotion. At the INS the stallion boxes have skylights, a feature introduced by one of the original owners of the farm in the belief that “the moon and the stars had an important influence on horses”. At some farms in the US, music is piped into the stables.

The stallion is certainly in a very happy position indeed. As the blurb for Kevin Conley’s book states: “Early retirement, plentiful sex with the world’s wealthiest and most attractive partners, and piles and piles of money – the stud’s life is a life of which most of us only dare to dream.”

I put such a description to INS Chief Executive John Clarke. “Yes, attractive isn’t it?” he says. “If there is such a thing as reincarnation I’d definitely like to come back as a stallion.”



NOT ALL COVERS

ARE QUITE AS QUICK AND EFFICIENT AS THE ONE I WITNESS AT RATHBARRY. For one thing, the mare may not be quite as much of a sexual walkover as Scottish Spice. If she is a maiden mare, for example, she may be very unhappy at the prospect of losing her virginity to such an uncaring lothario as Baratheia and kick up quite a fuss. And, not to be too graphic about it, her vagina may also be somewhat tight.

Mares are therefore warmed up, often over a number of days, by a small, vasectomised pony stallion called a “teaser” – the thoroughbred’s equivalent of a porno fluffer. Presented to the mare as she approaches ovulation, the teaser will attempt to straddle and thrust at the mare for long enough for her to get used to the idea and for stallion staff to measure the degree of her “receptivity”. Once she is passive and willing, the main attraction will then be brought on.

Even then, there’s no guarantee the mare will behave herself. If she’s a maiden, she may tense up, thus making the valiant stallion’s job that much harder. Occasionally, a “breeding roll”, a padded rolling pin that measures about 15cm or so in diameter, is placed between the horses to cushion the blows of a particularly well-endowed stallion, or to reduce the possibility of tearing the mare’s cervix. Mares may also stamp, kick and jump away, often leading her suitor and his men in a merry dance around the covering barn; sometimes tranquillisers are used to quieten mares down.

The boys don’t always perform on demand, either. Just as in the human world, some will fail to ejaculate and others will deliver way too soon (in the latter instance, a black band can be placed near the end of the horse’s rod that will cut off the blood flow if it reaches a certain size).

Towards the end of a long season, when a horse is facing his 100th cover or more, even Baratheia has been known to show less enthusiasm for the job. Sometimes stallions simply decide to override their natural instincts and come on all prissy: one horse in Ireland, for example, refused to mate with greys, while another wouldn’t take to mares who were suckling foals. Others simply like to take their time and, however expert the teasing tricks of their stallion masters,



Happy families: Desert Prince, above, sired the foal below





there is precious little mere men can do when a half-ton stallion decides he is not ready.

"We had a horse called Imp Society that used to take up to an hour and a half," says Rathbarry's Simon Beirne. "We'd try to jizz him up, like, by talking to him and driving him on, but whatever we did he would just stand there. Then he would have to smell the mare and be with her and get to know her, but again and again he wouldn't jump up. It became more like a mating operation than a natural cover."

Difficult covers can also lead to accidents, even deaths. Handlers have been hurt and, even though mares are kitted out with padded boots, those that are reluctant, or inflamed, can still lash out with their sturdy hind legs and inflict injuries and even fatal blows. A stallion called Sallust died at the INS in 1987 when a mare he was covering kicked back, smashing his shoulder. And a young Rathbarry stud named Charnwood Forest had to be destroyed in 2001 after he reared up in the covering barn and landed badly on a hind leg, breaking it. "It was the most freakish thing you ever did see," says Rathbarry's owner Liam Cashman. "I felt desperate for a long time afterwards because he was so kind and gentle and you'd get attached to him, like. I'd be kind of soft and sentimental that way because you'd be with him every day and he would become a part of you."

"HERE'S A REAL NICE TYPE COMING INTO THE RING NOW, A VERY WELL-MADE FOAL, AN EXCEPTIONAL COLT WITH A PEDIGREE AS WELL. Who'll put me away at 30,000, at 25, 20, 15, 10, five, four, three? Three thousand. Who'll put me away at 3,000? Thank you, sir. Down below." We're at the horse sales at Goffs in County Kildare and the arena is busy with bidders, breeders, owners, chancers and gamblers. This is one of most famous horse sales arenas in the world, especially for steeplechasers: more Grand National, Gold Cup and Champion Hurdle winners have passed through Goffs than any other auction house; the mighty Arkle was bought here as a three-year-old by the Duchess of Westminster; Aintree champions

include West Tip, L'Escargot, Bindaree and Red Rum, the latter bought as a yearling in 1966 for the bargain price of 406 guineas. This is also where Sheikh Mohammed bought a yearling in 1984 for a more princely 3.1 million guineas.

There's a very mixed bag of National Hunt horses for sale today, foals and yearlings never ridden and yet to be broken, as well as horses in training, broodmares and older horses. The progeny of almost all the leading sires and young stallions in Ireland are represented, including one from Rathbarry called Presenting. Unusually, a National Hunt stallion is even up for sale: a son of Sadler's Wells called Mohajir.

It's a sale that has attracted a large and knowledgeable crowd, from doughty old farmer types in tweed jackets to businessmen in blazers who nonchalantly smoke fat cigars under the "No Smoking" signs. While there are plenty of seats in the large, circular auditorium, most of the serious bidders prefer to stand in the wings, often huddled together in small groups, discussing the lots in quiet voices. This, after all, is a serious business of hot prospects and cool heads. This is the end product: where the money invested in the breeding shed starts, with luck, to see a return. The INS stallion Indian Ridge may cost £50,000 a cover, but his yearlings averaged more than £140,000 at the sales last year.

"Twenty thousand on my left, who'll give me 22? Quick, quick, quick if you

want him. Twenty-two – thank you sir – 23, 24, 25, 25,000. Who'll give me 27,500? Don't regret it later. Remember this: it's only euro..."

As the horse is led around, its lot number swaying on stickers placed on its hips, the auctioneer high on the rostrum keeps up his supercharged gabble, a barrage of encouraging words often rolled together into one long musical chant, like the singing of a Welsh place name. Each auctioneer has own style. The younger ones tending to be the more theatrical, walking up and down the platform, ducking and dancing to coax out the bids. The older auctioneers, meanwhile, take it easy, letting their experience and the artistry of their rhetoric serve to inch up the bidding. As they work, a large LCD beneath them flashes up the new bid in euro, sterling, US dollars, yen and old Irish punts.

Certainly there can be real drama if, like now, the bidding is down to a final two, both of whom really want the horse. This is when the pavilion can suddenly hush, the auctioneer milking the moment, raising his hammer as if he is about to close the sale. "It's against you, sir – now is no time to stop. Thirty-five thousand. Who's going to like him the most? Thirty-five thousand. Thirty-five thousand. Last time around the ring he goes. At 35,000 I'm bid. To you, sir – don't fall at the last fence on me. Quite sure. Are you all finished and done? At 35,000. This time, last time. Hammer up and down [pause]. Last call, at 35,000 I'm bid, all done. Hammer up [long pause]. Lot sold. Well bought, sir."

"A STALLION MAY BE AT THE HEIGHT OF FASHION, COMMANDING HIGH FEES AT STUD, BUT TWO SEASONS OF NO-HOPERS LATER, FEES COME CRASHING DOWN. LUCK REMAINS A CRUCIAL FACTOR"

While this is a reasonable price for a foal (though in December the INS sold a filly foal at Tattersalls in Newmarket for a world-record price of 1.8 million guineas – £1.9million), this is a small-scale event compared to the big autumn sales of yearlings at Goffs, Tattersalls and at Keeneland in Kentucky. It's at these that you'll see the big hitters of the bloodstock world: the English bookies, Irish vets, French trainers, Kentucky breeders, international bloodstock agents acting for Hong Kong businessmen and Japanese venture capitalists, and men such as Sheikh Mohammed and John Magnier who have been known to pay six or seven million dollars for a young horse. As Kevin Conley writes, "For horse lovers, yearlings are pretty irresistible – they're optimism on four legs."

It's an optimism that starts in the breeding shed, a gamble that is an intrinsic part of the nature of the horse-racing business. Breeders can study sales catalogues, pedigree charts, studbooks, check the race records of a horse's sire, dam and granddam (father, mother and grandmother), as well as the success of their progeny, if they have any. There are all manner of analyses of provenances, family histories and bloodlines to ascertain the likely efficacy of the cross between a stallion and a mare.

Buyers can then go to the stud farms and the sales and observe the result of that match, lift up a horse's hooves, look at the legs, stand him still, make him walk up and down, all the time watching to see how gracefully he moves and how straight he walks, look at his "conformation" (his overall proportions and deportment), judge if he looks happy and correct, get some idea of his temperament, his demeanour.

But in the end, just as in the covering barn, nature will take its course. A stallion may be at the height of fashion, commanding high fees at stud, but two seasons of no-hoppers and horses that fail to win races later, fees come crashing down and its career may effectively be over. While breeders try to eliminate risk wherever possible, luck remains a crucial factor.

"There can be hundreds of horses at a sale, but you and everyone else knows that within those hundreds there are only a certain number of winners, a much smaller number of Group 1 winners, and at best two or three champions," says the INS's John Clarke. "The challenge that everyone involved in the thoroughbred industry faces is how to breed, produce and find those champions. That challenge and that hope is what keep us all going. There's no doubt about it – we are in the business of selling dreams." 🐾