

Ireland's own fame academy driven by passion and pride



James Willoughby on the inspiration behind the Racing Academy and Centre of Education based on the Curragh

THE list of former graduates is impressive, the facilities are amazing and the history of the project is inspiring. But to understand what the Racing Academy and Centre of Education (RACE) on the Curragh really means, you only have to listen.

You can hear it most clearly in the voice of Stan Cosgrove, one of its founding fathers. You can hear it from PJ Wyer, its enterprising facilities manager. And you can hear it from any of its staff or volunteers.

It is not just pride, but one part belief, one part commitment and one part satisfaction. What they have done here is not just for racing in Ireland, but it is broader social reparation, by the people for the people.

Back in 1970, Cosgrove decided to take a stand. Appalled at the squalid conditions in which stable staff and apprentices were forced to exist, he teamed up with Michael Osbourne, Joe McGrath and others to do something about it.

"Lads then had to sleep three or four to a bed," Cosgrove says. "And they had to put the bed legs in their boots, or they would be stolen by the morning."

A battleplan was formulated at a public meeting in the Keadeen Hotel in 1970, when Sir Gordon Richards and Scobie Breasley were among the gathering. With funding strictly on a charitable basis, however, the agreed strategy would take time to put into practice.

Cosgrove, however, is not a man easily deterred from a cause. Aided by the centre's first director Derek O'Sullivan, he fought to get the project recognition over the following years. By 1978, government support provided a shot in the arm, and what had started from an old lodge on the grounds of the Irish National Stud began to resemble something much more significant.

Students then started to pass through the centre in increasing numbers. Each generation was armed with not just the skills to make a success of their lives, but



Stan Cosgrove (right), receiving a contribution to racing award last month, is one of the founding fathers of RACE

the social education to go with it. Moreover, students were told they could always call, write or phone whenever trouble darkened their door after graduation. They did, and still do.

RACE is now a national academy of excellence for the Irish racing industry. It has classrooms, lecture theatres, gymnasias and a cavernous indoor riding school.

Its string of ex-racehorses are housed in facilities that some trainers would die for, and every one of the inmates, including the famous pacemaker Ice Dancer, looks in tip-top condition.

When you hear Wyer describe the time, resources and enterprise required to add each new arm of the academy, the passion invested in the place is palpable. Cosgrove is adamant that Wyer has saved the budget millions with enterprising deals, initiatives and foresight.

"This wood looked a bit expensive to me when I was first offered it," Wyer says while prodding the floor of the sports hall. "So I went down the road and bought in much cheaper from another branch of the same store – it's amazing what happens when you shop around!"

The trainee jockey programme at RACE has now achieved worldwide recognition, even to the extent that a similar project in Kentucky run by Chris McCaron has adopted it as a model. Graduates include Johnny Murtagh, Conor O'Dwyer, Willie Supple, Eddie Ahern and many apprentice champions, including Chris Hayes and Stephen Donohoe. A third of the jockeys in last year's Derby at Epsom were RACE graduates.

RACE also runs courses catering for just about every branch of the industry, from stable staff to secretaries to transporters to stud

rooms. In 2002, a school was opened to maintain the skills and traditions of farriery, one of many rural professions threatened by the lure of Ireland's fast-breeding high-tech industries.

On the last point, it cannot be overstated how important it is for racing to protect its skills base. It was stressed to me that eight out of ten RACE graduates are still employed in the industry ten years later. As the Celtic Tiger has roared, the Irish racing industry has found it difficult to compete with the financial remuneration available elsewhere, and it has been forced to look abroad for an increasing percentage of its employees.

While this approach serves Irish racing's practical needs, it also threatens to slow the sport's national heartbeat. The restructuring of agricultural subsidies makes it likely that rural industry will continue to diminish for some years to come, weakening the physical and psychological link between children and animals that is responsible for nurturing many of Ireland's great racing heroes.

What a tour of RACE would suggest to me as a fresh-faced industry fledgling is that a career in the sport can be as dynamic as you want to make it.

While there is nothing like a natural gift for working with horses, talent will only get you halfway up the mountain in a faster time. To reach the summit, you must address the technical element of what you are doing, and you must take care of yourself in what can be a treacherous world while doing it.

The message from RACE on a life ahead in racing is a twist on the old bromide about riding: it is always good to get back up, but much better not to fall off in the first place.