

F&I Willie Mullins Tour 2017

On the 27th June the F&I Association were lucky enough to be invited on a tour of Willie Mullins' training yard in Co Carlow. This opportunity was not to be missed and the maximum number of 30 people attended, made up of F&I members and some Irish enthusiasts. Firstly I must apologise for the length of this report, as you may gather I am a huge racing enthusiast but I will try not to ramble on too much.

The day started with rain and while we gathered in the Lord Bagenal Hotel many commented on the typical Irish weather and if we had all packed enough waterproofs before setting off in convoy to Willies. I was getting butterflies as we drove into the yard (As I said huge fan!) but for those of you who will know of Willie Mullins but perhaps not closely follow National Hunt racing I will explain the justification for butterflies.

Willie was born in Goresbridge into racing royalty, his father Paddy Mullins trained the wonder mare Dawn Run to win the Champion Hurdle and the Gold Cup. Willie started out as an amateur jockey, recording wins over the Grand National fences and at Cheltenham, he was also six times amateur champion jockey in Ireland. This however was only the start as he took out a training licence in 1988 and has been Irish champion trainer every year since the 2008/2009 season. His dominance in Ireland spread overseas when winning the 2004 Aintree Grand National with Hedgehunter and being one of the most successful Cheltenham Festival trainers on record. 2015 was an outstanding year with him training no fewer than 32 Grade 1 winners and emulating Nicky Henderson's record of 7 winners at a single Cheltenham festival when he trained 8, currently Willie's Festival tally stands at 54 winners and is sure to rise with the wealth of talented horses he has in his care.

As we made our way across the yard a work rider was casually sitting in the boot of his car with his phone in the harness of his hat, it was then on closer inspection you realised that it was not just a work rider it was 12 time Irish champion jockey, dual Aintree Grand National and Cheltenham gold cup winning jockey Ruby Walsh, undeterred by the mass of women wandering up the yard he smiled and carried on with his phone conversation.

We were met by a very friendly member of the team Jo Shairst who made us all feel very welcome, she then led us across the road to the gallops to watch second lot. On first impression the yard seemed very quiet, this was a contrast when we turned the corner to the gallops where it was a hive of activity. The weather had been kind and the sun came out, it was a beautiful setting with the backdrop of the mountains. Between 25-30 horses of all types and ages were working in a number of directions. As Jo explained it was organised chaos but it was very evident that all the horses were relaxed and happily going about their work, even a loose horse leisurely cantering around the track did not throw anyone into disorder. He was promptly caught, remounted and rejoined the string with little distraction to the other horses. It was then we were guided to the middle of the inner of gallop. Here we met the genius of Closutton, Willie Mullins. He explained how each work rider would ride up to 4 horses a day and he liked to keep the same rider on each horse to allow a partnership to develop. The horses appearing to work in a number of directions at all paces were part of the 20-25minute warm up which Willie encouraged each work rider to do individually using their feel and judgement to prepare their horse. It was clear all horses were treated as individuals, some horses were ridden in bungees or French reins to encourage a correct and efficient way of working which Sam Watson was on hand to explain. His part in team Mullins is to help educate the work riders on how to ensure all the horses are working correctly in order to condition muscle, one of his philosophies was the three S's suppleness, symmetry and strength. The tailor made service even



allowed one bay gelding to work alone in a headcollar as he was unable to be worked in a bridle, I thought the lad was very brave. Interestingly most lads chose to ride work in leather full tree race exercise saddles rather than the more modern half tree Gibson saddles commonly seen in many English yards, all riders were well turned out and mannerly and it was clear they held Willie in very high regard.

The warm up took place on the inner sections of the gallops on a sand surface using a figure of eight shape, this area was spacious enough to allow the horses the room to be warmed up separately and to allow Willie to observe them clearly from the ground. Following the warm up Willie consulted with each rider to get feedback on how the horses were feeling before giving them instructions of what work would follow for each of them.

The fast work commenced on the outer woodchip gallop which meandered around a few turns then finished up with a straight two furlongs. As the paired up horses led by Ruby started to move up a gear and gallop past us at a rate of knots Willie focused on every single one, I imagine picking up on their action, wind, attitude and ease in which they were taking their work. Willie is renowned in the racing world at being very sharp to pick up when one of his horses is off colour and not firing, something we unfortunately saw this season with three of his Cheltenham stable stars, Faugheen, Annie Power and Douvan (this did not however stop him being champion trainer in Ireland).

Watching the horses fly past us gave me a real sense of nostalgia thinking about the greats that have galloped here previously, Florida Pearl, Hedgehunter, Hurricane Fly, Annie Power to name a few. It was noticeable that the woodchip gallop was deeper than expected and not a surface we would usually work our horses on. Willie's regime was every

horse was to work over the 2-2 1/2 miles a day regardless of the distance they are racing over, the fast work (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) is still done over a similar distance just at an increased speed. He believes in soundness being a huge factor to continued success and therefore if he can work his horses harder on a deeper surface and in doing so keep the distance covered lower you are preserving the horse's limbs. Sam made a similar comment too; he wanted to condition the muscles not wear out the limbs of his horses. You could argue the deeper surface could be a risk and how can you train different types of horses



over such similar distances but his results are proof that this regime works as Willie is the only person to produce a horse (Quvega) to win 6 races at consecutive Cheltenham festivals and train the 1st, 2nd and 3rd in the Champion hurdle with Faugheen, Arctic Fire and Hurricane Fly along with multiple champion trainer titles and one of the highest winners to runner percentages.

Something I was expecting from one of the most successful Cheltenham Festival trainers of all time was a hill, Colsutton was amazingly flat no hint of rising ground anywhere. I asked him about this and his response was very simple " It is an art to learn to work with what you've got." This was very true, he doesn't have a hill so he doesn't use one, the roads are dangerous so he doesn't hack. This is a very good example of how a wide range of facilities does not make your horses perform better. I was starting to see Willie's way of managing his setup, keep things simple.

The lot was finished off by each rider delivering feedback to Willie as they walked past him, the brief discussions ranged from "She found that easy" to "He is a good mover" and even "He was disappointing today". These concise but accurate assessments are logged in his brain for future reference. Following a walk off the horses were given a pick of grass with the sun on their backs, the work riders dismounted and loosened their tack and chatted quietly amongst themselves while we had some valuable time to talk to Willie - between the many phone calls that come with being a trainer in high demand. He talked in depth about the Irish Point to Point system and shared future plans for Yorkhill, Limini and Carter Mckay and a few amusing stories of working with French

bloodstock agents. He talked about the decision to cover Annie Power with leading flat stallion Camelot and again demonstrated how he likes to keep things simple, he said "It's not something I wasted much time thinking over, you've just got to get on and do it." Whereas perhaps some of us would intensely compare the conformation of both the dam and potential stallions, look back through the bloodlines and research tirelessly I can't imagine Willie would worry much about what colour, size or stature the offspring might have, a catchphrase of his I quite liked was "Once the starter's flag is down conformation doesn't matter". I would agree with him as the one time I was lucky enough to see Annie Power in the pre parade ring at Aintree I was pretty underwhelmed, she looked very ordinary, before going out and thrashing her opponents by 18 lengths without coming off the bridle, conformation didn't matter that day.

Next we headed for our tour of the stable yard with Jo whose affection for the horses was clear to see. It was very peaceful, not one horse called, kicked the door or box walked, even the horses at peak fitness didn't scowl or put their ears back when 30 strangers intruded their space. These were truly content happy horses, all with plenty of good quality Irish or Canadian hay on offer, the latter having a higher protein content. Feeding was as you would expect from the Mullins' yard, simple but effective, a Red Mills 14% mix for all.



Wicklow Brave Irish St Leger and Punchestown Champion hurdle winner

There was no sense of 'cramming in' like you see in some yards, most of the barns only held around 10 horses which allowed for wide corridors, spacious boxes with good ventilation and a lovely addition of 'nose holes' at the back of each stable to allow horses nose to nose contact with their neighbour. We learnt there were 18 barns and 9 horse walkers to accommodate 160 in

peak season with each lad/lass only looking after 4 horses therefore allowing time for each horse to receive the required attention. The use of 'hot stickers' on the stable doors (for horses requiring less rugging) was a nice example of the attention to detail. Jo told us how Willie and Gillian do final night checks every evening making sure all is well, it was clear every horse received the same treatment winner or not.

The tour continued through a number of colour coded barns and we bumped into a few well related future stars, Djackadam's full brother, Big Buck's half brother and Arlie Beach's two year old. We were lucky to be able to meet recent Ascot Stakes winner Thomas Hobson, he had also run a good second in another race at the Ascot festival less than a week before our visit and looked none the worse for his recent trip to England, he was happily covered in mud from a roll in the field that morning. Another familiar face was peeping out over a stable door, Ballycasey a beautiful grey gelding by Presenting who has previously been a runner in the Grand National, he was a horse Sam commented on later in the day that had huge jumping ability and he'd happily take him round an event tomorrow.

The final part of the tour was a look at the tack room and the colours room, the lists and instructions for stable staff provided information of what to do on the morning of racing, when at the races and when returning home, every piece of racing equipment was in there, ear plugs, visors, Australian cheekers etc . The workbook was very interesting, logging every piece of work each horse has done and on what day, dating back to the early days. Throughout out the whole morning we were made to feel very welcome with access all areas, I am sure everyone shared my feeling of not wanting the tour to come to an end. We were kindly seen off by Ruby, Willie, Jo and Sam with just enough time for a selfie or two!



Thomas Hobson, Ascot winner.

Amy Bannister-Bell BHSI

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