

European

ISSUE 30 – SUMMER 2010 £5.95
www.trainermagazine.com

Trainer

THE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE FOR THE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE THOROUGHBRED

Joanna Morgan – in profile

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JOANNA MORGAN

I defy anyone to visit the Portlester yard of Joanna Morgan, in Ballivor, County Meath, and return home still under the belief that stabling is the best policy for racehorses. Five minutes in the company of Morgan is enough to convince you otherwise, never mind the obvious proof in the well being of her horses.

By **Lissa Oliver**

THE fact that I managed to pay my visit on a bitterly cold and miserably wet day (not difficult in Ireland) did nothing to alter that opinion

and Raise Your Heart, recently returned from the far different climes of Dubai and living out day and night since, showed a definite reluctance to be caught, until he realised it was merely for a photo shoot.

“Stables are a hindrance”, Morgan says fervently. “Horses need to be in their natural environment; they’re a herding animal. They should be out grazing with their pals around them.” All of her horses are doing just that and none of the negatives raised by other trainers in the pros and cons debate on this topic are applicable. “You wouldn’t lock an athlete up in his room for 23 hours a day and expect him to be able to put in an effort for an hour in the morning!” she rightly argues. “I’m totally against it. It just dates back to years of the old regime.”

Last year Morgan built 17 new boxes – “a nightmare”, as she described the intrusion of builders. Having only chatted with her for a short while, I already get the impression she would do everything herself, if she were able. All the new boxes are now

filled and her string has risen from the usual 30 of previous years to 50. Her high profile and prolific winners have allowed the recession to pass her by, unaffected. She is also being sent a far better class of horse than in previous years, so her steady rise is likely to continue.

I didn’t discuss fees, but the obvious benefit of training from the field, as Morgan does, is the lack of need for supplements and medication aimed at counter-acting the many problems of stabling. Gastric ulcers, set-fast, and respiratory disease are strangers to the Portlester team. “If he was stabled”, Morgan tells me as we stand in the field with Raise Your Heart, “he would be costing me €28 a day on ulcer medication.” Neither are there any supplements in the feed room. “They graze naturally for 18 hours a day and they walk for something like 18 miles a day in the course of grazing”, Morgan points out. “They’re already getting all the nutrients they need from grass alone.” While they are usually supplemented with a hard feed – a 14% racing mix – even that is unnecessary when they start to fill out on May grass.

There is one negative and one alone: stone bruises. “I’d keep them out all year round if I could”, Morgan insists, “but when

the ground is very wet they get stone bruises, so I have to fetch them in.” The Irish weather is very much against her and, with only 40 acres, she must preserve her grazing during the winter months by limiting turn out, which is otherwise normally 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“Originally when the aristocracy owned racehorses they wanted to visit their horse in a clean stable and see a clean horse”, Morgan explains, “and nothing has changed since. Much of racing is archaic, that’s the trouble. I treat my horses as animals, not as hothouse flowers. It’s maybe more work, very tiresome, taking food out to them, fetching them in and out when necessary, and it’s more messy. But most of the prevalent problems – ulcers, tying-up, respiratory – none of those happen. They have to be healthier and fitter. It’s living as nature intended them to.”

Morgan puts them out in groups of six, of separate sexes. Her stables are open, every horse able to see its neighbours and interact, even when in. “The barn is open plan. Fresh air is very important”, says Morgan as she shows her new boxes, not the usual American barn design. “They can all see each other and have contact with their neighbours; they’ve already become

friends and got their own buddies before they're turned out. There's the odd bit of kicking, but nothing serious and we don't put hind shoes on them. They soon establish a pecking order and settle down."

Neither does Morgan experience any feeding difficulties. The worst doers usually thrive once they are turned out day and night and Morgan likes to feed four times a day, feeding haylage ad lib, "I'd use meadow hay in preference, but you just can't get it here", and taking round the last feed and hay herself at ten in the evening. "They've a very long intestine and a very small stomach," Morgan points out, "the food intake is always slowly filtering through. There's no problem fetching them

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out of the field and straight onto the gallops. Even when they're full up on rich May grass they blow far less when they work than a stabled horse."

The natural movement involved in grazing also has its fitness benefits. "I do

very little work with them," Morgan explains. "I never ask them hard questions at home. I won't work them upsides, I hate that. That's why they retain their enthusiasm. When you see horses being worked upsides each other twice a week



they lose their competitive edge, they lose their confidence. I like to see them happy and enjoying themselves.”

This is probably why the best known of Morgan's winners have been prolific, with Dbest notching up 13 wins, Portant Fellar winning 15 times, Orpailleur and Jawad each winning eight, and globetrotting Group winner One Won One even trying his hand at hurdles as an 11-year-old, never losing his zest for racing. Perhaps the same could be said of Morgan, who was still enjoying life as a jockey up until 1997 and partnered One Won One as a two-year-old.

“I started off in point-to-points in Wales”, she says, “and came to Ireland to

ride for Seamus McGrath as a holiday job. Giving licences to lady jockeys was a new innovation then and I signed on with him as an apprentice for the next six to eight years.” In 1976 she became the first woman to ride in an Irish Classic, partnering Riot Helmet in the Irish Derby, and during her career rode over 200 winners, riding a winner on every continent. She took out her first licence to train in 1985, while still riding.

“I rode in Australia for three months and I broke my leg”, Morgan recalls, “so I spent time going around with the vets, helping out and learning all the time. I also spent three months in America. Every country is different, all have their own methods. I

wouldn't just ride out for a trainer in the morning and go home, I'd go back in the afternoon and observe.”

In any recession the weak disappear and the fact that Morgan has never been busier says it all. But still, there must surely be a negative? No matter how I push, or how hard Morgan thinks about it, we can't come up with one. Her horses suffer none of the problems associated with stabling, they're fit, healthy, and show an enthusiasm for racing combined with soundness, keeping them going from season to season. It's only when we discuss the infrastructure of Irish racing itself that negatives start to appear. As in her approach to training, she keeps things simple and logical.



Imperial Belle with Amy Parsons walks back to the yard after work



Morgan keeps her horses outside in their natural environment as much as possible

"I'm very glad to see we're back under the banner of Agriculture, rather than Sport and Tourism. We're definitely agricultural and represent a huge value to the economy." Indeed, the Irish bloodstock industry represents €1.1 billion gross value to the economy, with exports in excess of €180 million annually. "The biggest problem with Irish racing is probably half the people who run it!" Morgan insists. "It should be run as a business. It's archaic and is still being run the same way it was centuries ago. It's a business and there should be businesspeople running it. There's no control; we're losing too much to bookmakers and the internet."

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Morgan cites Australia as the perfect system. "They have a Tote monopoly and have on-course bookmakers, which encourages the punter to go racing. It's

bloody expensive to have a pitch at the course, they need to lay. A punter can put big money on and still get good odds; they encourage the punter to go racing. The French also have the Pari-Mutuel; it keeps the money in racing, and look at how wealthy France and Australia are."

Neither is Morgan happy with the management of racecourses in general. "There is no organisation and [is] a total lack of common sense. Racecourses should be run by hoteliers. They're trained specifically to provide a top class service to the public. The country tracks are far from perfect but they're desperately underfunded and with limited resources they're doing their best. But for a premier track the Curragh has no excuse."

Morgan was particularly annoyed by the condition of the track on the opening day of the season and the fact that up to 30 horses were allowed to work on it after racing, as well as staging an apprentice practise race on it a few days later. "That just could not happen at Longchamp or Newmarket and there's no excuse for it." She also lists serious safety issues to be found in many of the racecourse stables around the country.

"The Calendar is another problem. In the first month of the new Flat season there was no racing on a total of 10 days. Either the season has started or it hasn't! The all-weather should have a meeting twice a week. When the season opens we should go for it, with racing every day. There's no opportunity for a progressive handicapper to notch up a decent series of wins."

During this heated discussion much of what Morgan has said has been interspersed with "for God's sake don't print that, I'll be lynched!" but it's her obvious passion and dedication to the sport she so loves that engenders such forthright remarks.

Coupled with her undeniable expertise, that is what makes Joanna Morgan a successful trainer even in the hardest of times and it is little wonder that we can see that same enthusiasm and passion exemplified by her horses. She is, if you'll excuse the pun, truly outstanding in her own field. ■



Morgan with A Hit Is A Hit (left) and Raise Your Heart