

anne-marie o'brien

A family business

Wife of a champion trainer, mother of a champion jockey and the breeder of Group 1-winning horses, **Lissa Oliver** meets Anne-Marie O'Brien

BALLYDOYLE is steeped in history with a rich heritage of champion racehorses having passed through its gates, but the pedigrees of the human incumbents are equally impressive.

Many will know Anne-Marie O'Brien as the wife of champion trainer Aidan and mother of champion jockey Joseph, but what is often overlooked is that she is also the breeder of many of the horses who have helped to secure those coveted titles.

Breeders are used to being overshadowed by owners, trainers and jockeys and are often excluded from the post-race celebrations, but Anne-Marie has always been very much involved with the horses she has bred and to describe her bloodstock business as a family affair is something of an understatement.

Few families can be so fully involved at every level of a horse's career, Anne-Marie successfully donning the multiple hats of breeder, owner, wife and mother as she steps forward to greet her winners.

It sounds like a balancing act that could prove the downfall of many,



Racing is life for Anne-Marie O'Brien seen here with husband Aidan.

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but the Crowleys and O'Briens have horses in their blood and have always been fully immersed in all things equine. There are never any days off from the stable and none needed.

"I was always involved with horses," reveals Anne-Marie's father, Joe Crowley. "I kept Irish Draft horses for working on the farm, and broodmares.

"My first successful mare was probably Late Spring, who bred a horse called Spindrifter who went on to win 13 races as a two-year-old for Sir Mark Prescott. It's a record that I think stood for quite a number of years."

Having been actively involved in the farm from a young age it was only natural that

Crowley should include his daughters in the daily activities and anyone who has enjoyed a day at the races over the past 19 years will be aware that his influence has clearly rubbed off.

"All six of the girls enjoyed riding out and looking after the breeding stock when they were at home," Crowley says. "It's great to see the next generation becoming involved now again. It's very much a family operation and we all work together and discuss everything." A view echoed by Anne-Marie who adds: "Everyone gives their opinion with regard to matings and sales."

Looking back on her time at home she remembers: "All my family were very involved with the stud farm when we were growing up, from foaling the mares to riding out the



racehorses and everything in between. "It certainly gave us all a great understanding of how the whole industry works, from the ground up."

For Anne-Marie, her personal involvement really took off when she was given a vital choice, which revealed her true passion.

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It was, of course, the right decision and she has since produced the likes of Lady Lupus, winner of the Listed Lanwades & Staffordstown Stud Stakes; Ishvana, winner of this year's Group 3 Jersey Stakes and second in the Group 1 Irish 1,000 Guineas; Empowering, the Group 3 winner of the Leopardstown 1,000 Guineas Trial and the Listed Sweet Mimosa Stakes; the dual Group 2 juvenile winner King Torus, as well

as the Group 1 winners, the Dewhurst Stakes winner Beethoven, multiple winner Rock Of Gibraltar, as well as the latest exciting star Kingsbarns, winner of the Group 1 Racing Post Trophy. Many have raced in O'Brien's own colours.

"We breed primarily to race," O'Brien says. "We do all our matings based on trying to produce the kind of racehorse that we would like to train." Even when yearlings are sold, they occasionally find their way back to Ballydoyle, which is a source of immense satisfaction to their breeder. "Obviously we hope that we could train everything we breed," she admits, "but it's not always possible!"

Working alongside Aidan at Ballydoyle means that almost every week there's a big race win to enjoy, but Anne-Marie still gets a thrill not only from the stable's victories, but also from her own; Ishvana providing her with her first success at Royal Ascot as an owner this summer.

"Royal Ascot was wonderful as we know just how hard it is to win there. Ishvana was coming off a very good run when she was second in the Irish 1,000 Guineas, so it was really great when she confirmed that form."

It may have been Anne-Marie's first Royal Ascot win as an owner, but she had already visited the winners' enclosure there as a breeder, during the incredible Group 1 run of Rock Of Gibraltar. When asked for her most thrilling moment as a breeder she is in full agreement with her father when they both say: "Probably when Rock Of Gibraltar won the 2,000 Guineas and then went on to win seven Group 1s in a row."

His record of wins, broken only by Frankel

this year, began at Longchamp in the Grand Critérium in October 2001 and ended at the Parisian track in the Prix du Moulin in 2002. Only a three-parts of a length defeat by Domedriver in the Breeders' Cup Mile prevented his winning run extending to eight.

As good a miler as he was, it's every breeders' hope to produce a Derby winner and the dream is currently alive in the shape of Kingsbarns, the impressive unbeaten winner of the Group 1 Racing Post Trophy.

"That was a wonderful moment," Annemarie reflects. "My Dad had bought his dam Beltisaal at Goffs for us a few years ago and he was watching on TV when he won the Racing Post Trophy, so we were all really excited to have produced such an exciting prospect for next year."

BELTISAAL HAD been a bargain purchase for the shrewd Crowley, the main attraction being that he "liked her pedigree."

She was sent to Galileo, because as Crowley so succinctly puts: "In my opinion Galileo is the best stallion that has ever existed." The union produced the current Derby favourite, which came as little surprise to his breeders.

"Kingsbarns always looked a very special colt," Crowley recalls. "The Racing Post Trophy was a very special race for us, particularly because Joseph rode him."

With a Derby favourite to keep the winter dreams fuelled, the obvious question is does Anne-Marie have any yearlings she is particularly looking forward to seeing race next season?



Left: Joseph O'Brien guides Kingsbarns to Group 1 Racing Post Trophy glory at Doncaster, and, below, a proud family moment for the horse's breeder in the winner's enclosure



"We have a really lovely bunch of Fastnet Rock yearlings coming into training shortly and we are very excited about them as they look fast, strong and seem to have great minds," she reveals. "I am really looking forward to a Fastnet Rock filly out of Lady Icarus, she is probably the best-looking filly we have ever bred and I think her half-brother Furner's Green, by Dylan Thomas, would definitely have won a Group 1."

Sadly, the son of Dylan Thomas was fatally injured in the Poule d'Essai des Poulains.

When it comes to mating plans, Anne-Marie is naturally drawn to those who were trained at Ballydoyle and with whom she has first hand experience.

"Apart from the obvious ones we are looking forward to having Henry then navigator back in this part of the world. We loved the Henry's that we had in Ballydoyle this year, they showed us a lot of natural pace throughout the year and we are looking forward to seeing them run as three-year-olds, hopefully on better ground than we had this year.

"We are also looking forward to using the first-season stallions. Power and Excelebration were both very good racehorses and have all the attributes necessary to produce early maturing stock, while So You Think is a fantastic-looking horse and a wonderful athlete, winning ten Group 1s."

On a more personal side, while marrying the breeding enterprise with ownership and Ballydoyle looks to be a benefit, trying to also fit in managing a family and all the outside interests that children have should surely put a strain on Anne-Marie, though if it does, it never shows. The four children have always accompanied their parents to race meetings and have enjoyed early successes of their own at top Pony Club level.

Joseph is now champion jockey, Ana has already had her first professional ride in public, Sarah has ridden as an amateur and Donnacha is waiting in the wings; all ready to carve out names for themselves within the racing industry.

As their mother says: "As racing is such an all-consuming way of life it was

Having Joseph on board the stable's runners certainly adds some pressure to the big days, but also takes away other pressures too

probably inevitable that the children have also become totally immersed in the industry. Obviously I am always worried when they are riding, but I'm also delighted and feel very lucky that they have such an interest in what we do.

"Having Joseph on board the stable's runners certainly adds some pressure to the big days, but also takes away other pressures too.

"From the time he started to ride

Joseph was always a very good rider and horseman. I never thought that he would have a career as a Flat jockey, as I always thought that he would be too heavy, but it's great that he has stayed light enough to ride on the Flat."

Ballydoyle is under constant media attention, but Anne-Marie appears unaffected by the added pressure. "I think the media are an important part of the industry and we try to be as accommodating as possible," she accepts.

The racing calendar rarely provides an opportunity to escape and relax, but the family do occasionally get a chance to unwind.

"We have been lucky enough to have been able to spend the last two weeks in the incredible Sandy Lane hotel in Barbados, where we have enjoyed beautiful weather, amazing food and total relaxation."

It seems a well-deserved treat for a family that includes the first father-son combination to win the trainer's and jockey's titles in Ireland since 1916.

With so many bows to her racing string and the achievements that have come with them, what are Anne-Marie's hopes for the future? Probably the same as any breeder.

"Just to try and produce as many stakes performers as possible," she smiles. ■

**Daughter and father team:
Anne-Marie with father Joe Crowley**

