

# European Trainer

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## DERMOT WELD

The master craftsman

**RACING RETURNS  
TO LIBYA**

**FOAL SURGERIES**  
Are they worth it?

**HOW NUTRITION IS THE KEY TO  
MANAGING HORSE BEHAVIOUR**





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ISITING the home of Dermot Weld is rather like visiting a museum. It's bright, airy and welcoming – and packed with photographs, awards,

and trophies from every known corner of the world. Weld is a traveller and he is very much a conqueror, in the nicest possible way. You have only to look at the two Melbourne Cups and a Hong Kong Vase displayed close to the impressive Key to the City of Melbourne to know that he came, he saw, he conquered, and he is very much loved and respected wherever that happens to be.

"I have been very fortunate travelling horses, I was one of the early pioneers of international runners," Weld explains, sitting comfortably in the office, his chair overlooked by the beautifully portrayed head of that fine filly Committed. The history of his great record as a trainer, since taking over the stable from his father Charlie in 1972, is all around him. "I have been fortunate to train 21 European Classic winners, apart from Grade One winners on the east coast, midwest and west coast of the United States.

"I started travelling horses in the early '90s and a lot has changed. Now it's commonplace to run horses in Australia and Dubai and Asia and America, it's pretty standard. The advantage I had in the '90s has long gone! People are more aware nowadays, with modern technology and communications so much better. Don't forget, the mobile phone was only just appearing in the '90s. Technology has advanced incredibly and flight paths have become easier."

There is no doubt that his horses owe their fine international record to Weld's wanderlust of his youth. "My own travelling experience has helped," he says. "After qualifying as a vet from University College Dublin I travelled the

As one of the most respected European trainers worldwide, Dermot Weld's record has been a catalogue of firsts. The first European trainer to win a race in Hong Kong, the first to win the Melbourne Cup, the first to win with a two-year-old on dirt at Grade 1 level, the first non-American to win a leg of the US Triple Crown. His record with his National Hunt horses is just as remarkable.

WORDS: LISSA OLIVER PHOTOS: CAROLINE NORRIS, HORSEPHOTOS.COM

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world on a student ticket and I was involved in American, Australian, and South African racing." Weld was also a leading amateur jockey and this put him in a unique position. He not only worked his way around the world's racetracks, he rode on them, too. For a trainer of

international runners, there could be no finer grounding.

"I've ridden the winner of one of the only major National Hunt races in South Africa, the Freights Services Champion Hurdle run at Pietermaritzburg," Weld reveals. "I also won the Bright Hour Amateur Hurdle, run on the same programme as the Colonial Cup in South Carolina.

"I've been fortunate enough to work with some very good people, such as Tommy Smith in Australia. In America I worked as a vet at Belmont Park and Saratoga. And I've combined that working experience with riding on the racetrack. It gives you a concept of the tracks and an insight into how they race. It all gave me a good grounding and good insight and concept of racing in these countries, not only working as a vet, but also riding – and riding winners."

Such experiences widened Weld's view of the racing world and what it might take to come back and win at these tracks. "The Australians never believed a non-Southern Hemisphere horse could ever come over and win the Melbourne Cup. And so the challenge was always there! Vintage Crop would have won the Melbourne Cup the year before he did, but getting there was not possible, the whole quarantine arrangements were not set up."

Elsewhere, as quarantine and travel fell into place, Weld was ready to take advantage and strike. "We were the first to go to Hong Kong; we went the first year of the International races in 1991.

There were only the two International races then and we sent a horse over for each of them. Additional Risk won the Hong Kong Bowl, which is now the Hong Kong Mile, and our other horse ran second in what's now the Hong Kong Vase, both

1990 Belmont Stakes winner Go and Go is still the only non-American-trained horse to win a leg of the US Triple Crown







Weld on the gallops with his son Kris

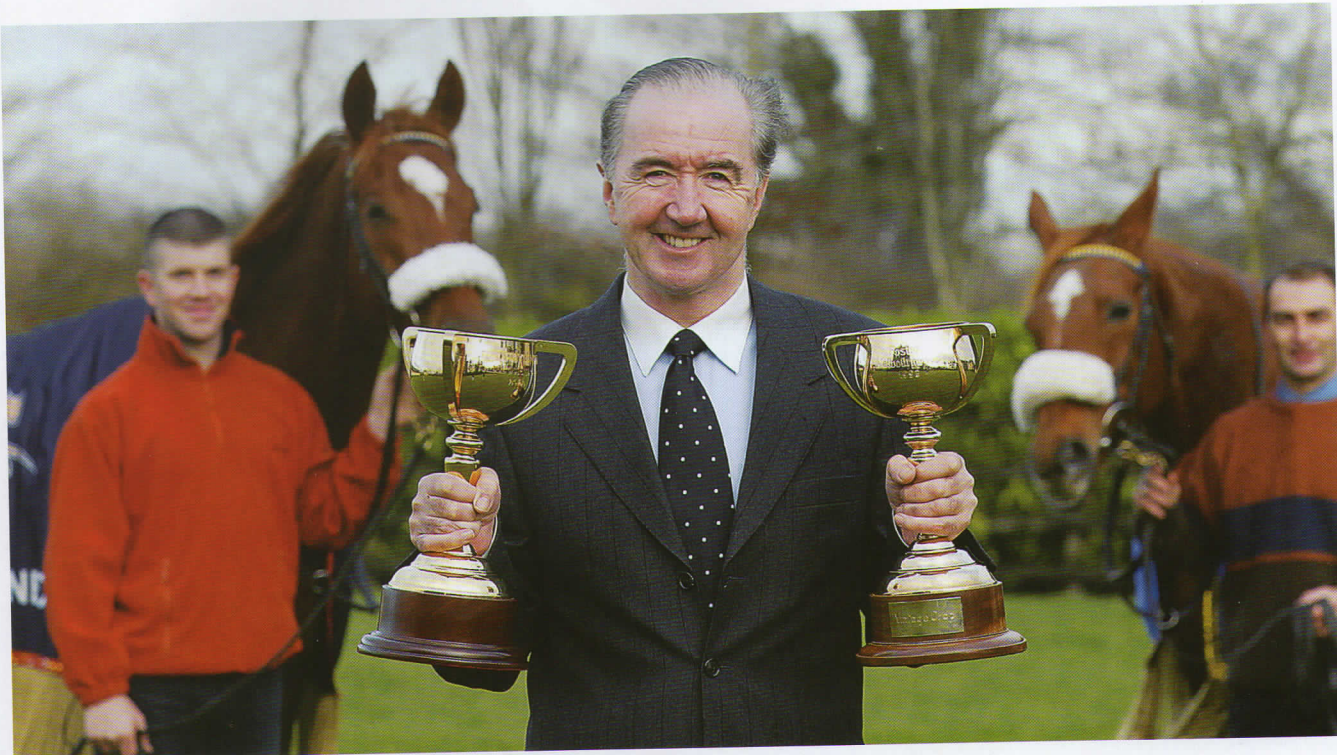
ridden by Mick Kinane. That was the start of the travelling.”

Weld was the first European trainer to win a race in Hong Kong, the first to win in Australia, the first to win with a two-year-old on the dirt at Grade One level, and he still remains the only non-American to train a winner of one of the legs of the US Triple Crown. “I follow world racing very, very closely,” he says. “When you have a particular race in mind, preparation begins many months in advance and it all depends on how the horse runs in its build up. I prefer to race them straight off the plane – go in, strike and get out.”

Part of Weld’s skill in raiding big foreign purses lies in knowing exactly what type of horse is required. “When it came to bringing Go and Go out for the Belmont Stakes, I brought him out originally as a two-year-old. The concept was that non-American horses would find it difficult to win at Grade One level on the dirt. This was ahead of the Polytrack surface here in Europe. People forget that it was so different in those days than now. So much has changed, we don’t realise how dramatic the change has been in the past 20 years.

“To me, winning the Belmont Stakes was a bigger feat than winning the Melbourne Cup. Go and Go was a horse I always thought could come back and win a leg of the Triple Crown. He had come out and won his maiden at Galway, a race we’ve now won 20 times! The Laurel Futurity was a Grade One on turf, so my thought was to run him there and then go for the Breeders’ Cup in Florida. But it rained overnight and the Futurity was switched to the dirt track. He was very adaptable, it was a





Weld with his two Melbourne Cup winners - Media Puzzle (left) and Vintage Crop

sloppy track and he handled it well. I would have liked to train Go and Go for the Kentucky Derby, but in those days getting to Louisville was too difficult and the quarantine arrangements were not there, it was just not possible. Hence, the Belmont Stakes.

"Dress to Thrill was another I should mention. All year I had planned to bring her for the Matriarch Stakes, it was a race I had always wanted to win, but it turned out to be a particularly high-class field that year. She won. She was a good filly."

Not all of his best horses have been globetrotters, and Weld fondly recalls his more 'local' winners. "Winning the Two Thousand Guineas in 2003 with Refuse to Bend was a definite highlight. Also Grey Swallow, bred and part-owned by my mother and champion two-year-old, winning the Irish Derby at three and the Tattersalls Gold Cup at four. In 2006 Nighttime won the Irish One Thousand Guineas, also bred and owned by my mother.

"Vinnie Roe is the only horse to win a Classic four years running, the Irish St Leger. His achievement is one of my great pleasures. We've had 17 Royal Ascot winners, and Brief Truce's win in the St James's Palace Stakes and Rite Of Passage's Gold Cup stand out. I had always wanted to win the Gold Cup.

"Initially I made my name as a trainer with fillies. Blue Wind won the Epsom and Irish Oaks and was champion three-year-old filly of Europe. Committed with her back-to-back wins in the Prix de l'Abbaye at Longchamp was champion female sprinter of Europe two years running."

Once again, Weld reminds us that his success abroad is down to attention to detail.

"Science has moved forward and so has the scientific approach in training horses. I was always very aware of the dehydration factor when travelling horses. Others were aware, but it was not accepted to be as big an issue as I thought it. It's common knowledge nowadays. To re-hydrate a horse quickly is the key and is vital.

"The stress of travelling is something we don't fully build in. Some horses appear to travel extremely well, but in fact mentally have not coped. Keep stress levels down, keep

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constant – the same people, same diet, keep it simple. For Australia, I sent the food over in advance of the horse so that it would be there when we arrived."

There is certainly no stress at home. His horses are given time to develop slowly within the best of environments. Ventilation is seen as a very important aspect and great care has been taken to ensure it is adequate within the American-style barns, even down to the pitch of the roof.

"I find some horses are better suited to the

open boxes, while others prefer the companionship of being in the barns. It's a combination of keeping them happy and keeping their environment as healthy as possible," explains Weld. "When the yearlings first arrive I like them to have a little break. There's a big difference between horses arriving from the sales and horses arriving straight from farms. Those coming from the farms I go straight ahead and break. Those from the sales I like to give a month off. When it comes to food, horses are very adaptable, I don't worry about a change in diet, I like to build them up slowly.

"I bring my horses along slowly, breaking the traditional old-fashioned way, and I take my time. They canter on grass doing figures of eight, which is probably old-fashioned but I still like my young horses to train on the grass. I have them cantering in figure eights as it helps to make a horse's mouth more adaptable and helps them to learn to lead on the near fore and then the off fore and teaches them balance."

It isn't only the horses who are brought along slowly and gently with the minimum of fuss. "Over the past 25 years I have only ever had two jockeys, I think that's worth a mention!" Weld chuckles. "Mick Kinane for 15 years and Pat Smullen for ten," which suggests he is a very easy man to work with. He is certainly well liked wherever he goes and among the racing trophies are a few personal additions that mean much to him.

"I am very fortunate to be honoured in Australia and it was a wonderful honour to be given the Key to the City of Melbourne by the Lord Mayor. I have been voted Irish Sports Person of the Year twice, and in 2003 I was





Emulous won the Group One Matron Stakes (Pat Smullen) at Leopardstown in 2011



Vinnie Row (left) wins the Irish St Leger for a historic fourth year in succession

Person of the Year in Ireland." Yet there is one medal Weld treasures above all else. "I am immensely proud to have received the Charter Day Medal in 2001 from University College Dublin, in honour of the work I do for the University. I was only the fourth person to receive the honour, following on from Dr Ken Whitaker, Professor Dervla Donnelly, and former Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald. It is the highest honour the University bestows.

"I was directly responsible for moving the veterinary college in Shelbourne Road to the new site on the campus at Bellfield," Weld reveals. "I was coordinator of that development and I was responsible for the communications, funding and government funding and development. I am very proud of what is probably the finest veterinary school in Europe."

Weld is naturally always looking to the future. "I'm very positive about the future of racing," he insists. "There is a goodwill feeling

within the industry and its leaders. Racing has great ability to adapt to change and as it becomes more international the industry is learning to work more with communications and its use of modern technology.

"Racing in Ireland is very different to other countries; it is an industry recognised by our Government as an employer that involves every county and from a tourist point of view, the Galway Festival, for example, brings many millions of euros to Galway City.

"I would like to see extension of the one percent betting tax introduced to offshore, online, and phone betting. This is urgently needed. Hopefully it is about to happen in the coming year. With tax imposed on offshore betting and that money coming back to racing, in a few years racing can become independent of any government support."

Appropriately for a trainer so noted for his international exploits, Weld's 3,000th winner was attained in Dubai by King Jock in

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February of 2005. Last April the aptly named Notable Graduate gave him his 3,500th winner at Tipperary. The 4,000th winner might well come in South Africa, the last country still remaining on Weld's Wish List. There is, of course, the possibility that his next major winner will be led in at Cheltenham or Aintree. Unlike most leading Flat trainers, Weld is just as successful when he turns his attention to National Hunt.

"I have always enjoyed training a few National Hunt horses," he says, "as I was leading NH Amateur in Ireland three times and I've ridden the winner of the South African Champion hurdle, the 'Amateurs' Derby' at Epsom, and other notable races. My parents both rode point-to-point winners and my father trained some very good NH horses, including the 1959 Galway Plate winner Highfield Lad.

"I've won every NH race worth winning in Ireland, including the Galway Plate, Galway Hurdle, Irish Champion Hurdle, Lexus Chase and Irish Grand National." In Britain, Rare Holiday also won a Triumph Hurdle, while Grease Paint finished second to Hallo Dandy in the 1984 Grand National.

"We have always had a small but select team of jumpers and we have a very high strike rate. I'm very proud of the way my horses jump and they are taught to jump properly. Over the years top jockeys have enjoyed riding my horses and they are able to ride them well, with confidence, knowing they know how to jump off their hocks. I enjoy teaching young horses to jump and I am very proud of Unaccompanied and how she jumps."

Unaccompanied is a measure of her trainer's great versatility, as well as her own, winning a maiden hurdle, following straight up with a win in a Grade One hurdle and a close second in the Triumph Hurdle at Cheltenham, before returning to the Flat only two weeks later to win the 10-furlong Listed Alleged Stakes, claiming the scalp of no less a horse than St Nicholas Abbey. It is a unique record typical of his horses and typical of the Master of Rosewell House. ■