

Nursery school

Snow Fairy, Curtain Call, Via Medici: just a few of the stakes winners who've graduated from Richard Brabazon's pre-training yard at Rangers Lodge.

Lissa Oliver enjoys a morning on The Curragh watching young horses learning the ropes

DESPITE A PEDIGREE that would suggest otherwise and a restricted licence that has seen Richard Brabazon leading his horses regularly into winner's enclosures, Brabazon insists he would never make a trainer.

"Mainly I am involved in breaking youngstock and it's only when the Noorani Paddock was added to Rangers Lodge, eight years ago, that I started pre-training," he explains. "I'd never make a trainer! I love to take my time with a horse and I wouldn't be getting on with them as you should.

"With pre-training, you're going at a much slower pace; there isn't the pressure. I love handling horses that way, giving them plenty of time and patience, and you can't do that without good owners. I'm terribly lucky having good owners. They're ready to give the time."

And therein lies his gift, Brabazon's empathy with the horse and a patience that has seen subsequent Group winners such as Snow Fairy, Curtain Call, Beauty O'Gwaun, Grouette, Akdarena, Roses For The Lady, Via Medici, Rain Delayed, Berg Bahn, Cosmo Meadow and Alla Speranza go on to ply their trade so successfully and consistently on the racecourse.

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"Snow Fairy was very buzzy," recalls Brabazon of perhaps his best-known graduate. "I wouldn't say she was difficult, she had a little-bit of an attitude, and that's what made her so good. Martin Davidson was the first man to ride her."

Davidson, who like most of the Rangers Lodge team has been with Brabazon virtually from the start, smiles fondly.

"She felt great, from the first time I sat on her. I knew she was a good one. She was so strong, she put me off a few times!" he recalls.

Currently it's another long-term team member Danny O'Donovan, who is currently repeatedly facing the floor from a freshly broken NH mare who knows her own mind

and seems intent on standing on her hindlegs.

To O'Donovan's credit, he stays in the plate, and his patience and understanding is plain. He jumps down and gives the mare a chance to relax and let off steam. A large blue sheet of plastic is stretched out over a section of the indoor ring and she repeatedly canters over it, before stopping to stand on it for a moment.

"It's an old trick I learned from an Australian cowboy," remarks Brabazon. "They seem to love it, walking across it, some even like to just stand on it. When you get a tricky filly it's usually down to pure fear and lacking confidence. Once they get to settle, they're great.

"We broke this filly's sister Blanchfield, and she went on to win two races. She was a tough, tough filly. This filly is the same, it's her spirit that will make her a battler on the racecourse. The breakthrough with her was the jumping. It distracts her."

"She thinks too much," explains O'Donovan, but the spirit causing them such difficulty if nurtured correctly could be her gift.

The filly is taken outside to a schooling ring and is loose schooled over a pole, a skill she clearly enjoys. The distraction has worked, her thoughts are only with her jumping and, transformed, she stands demurely

as O'Donovan remounts. This time they jump together, horse and rider in harmony. Watching them riding back through the yard a little later, you'd never know the mare had been intent on rearing when O'Donovan had first mounted her.

Although perfectly situated beside The Curragh training grounds, racecourse and M7 junction, Rangers Lodge is a secret little idyll, tucked so quietly away behind trees and hedgerows that you forget the outside world exists. It's the perfect setting for the pre-training of racehorses.

"My grandfather came to Rangers Lodge in 1927," reports Brabazon. "Dad, Aubrey, was a very good jockey and my grandfather, Cecil Brabazon, a very good trainer. He was the first trainer to fly a Flat horse to the races

— Beau Sabreur, he was the first Irish-trained runner in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe in 1949."

Part of Rangers Lodge had formerly been part of Ballymany Stud and the Noorani Paddock is a fitting reminder of its historic past. The field is encircled by a fibresand gallop, but the regular morning exercise fails to disturb its relaxed occupants, the 27-year-old mare Sweet Thunder and her even older donkey companion.

Sweet Thunder is an invaluable member of the Rangers Lodge team and helps to keep the youngsters in check when they're turned out.

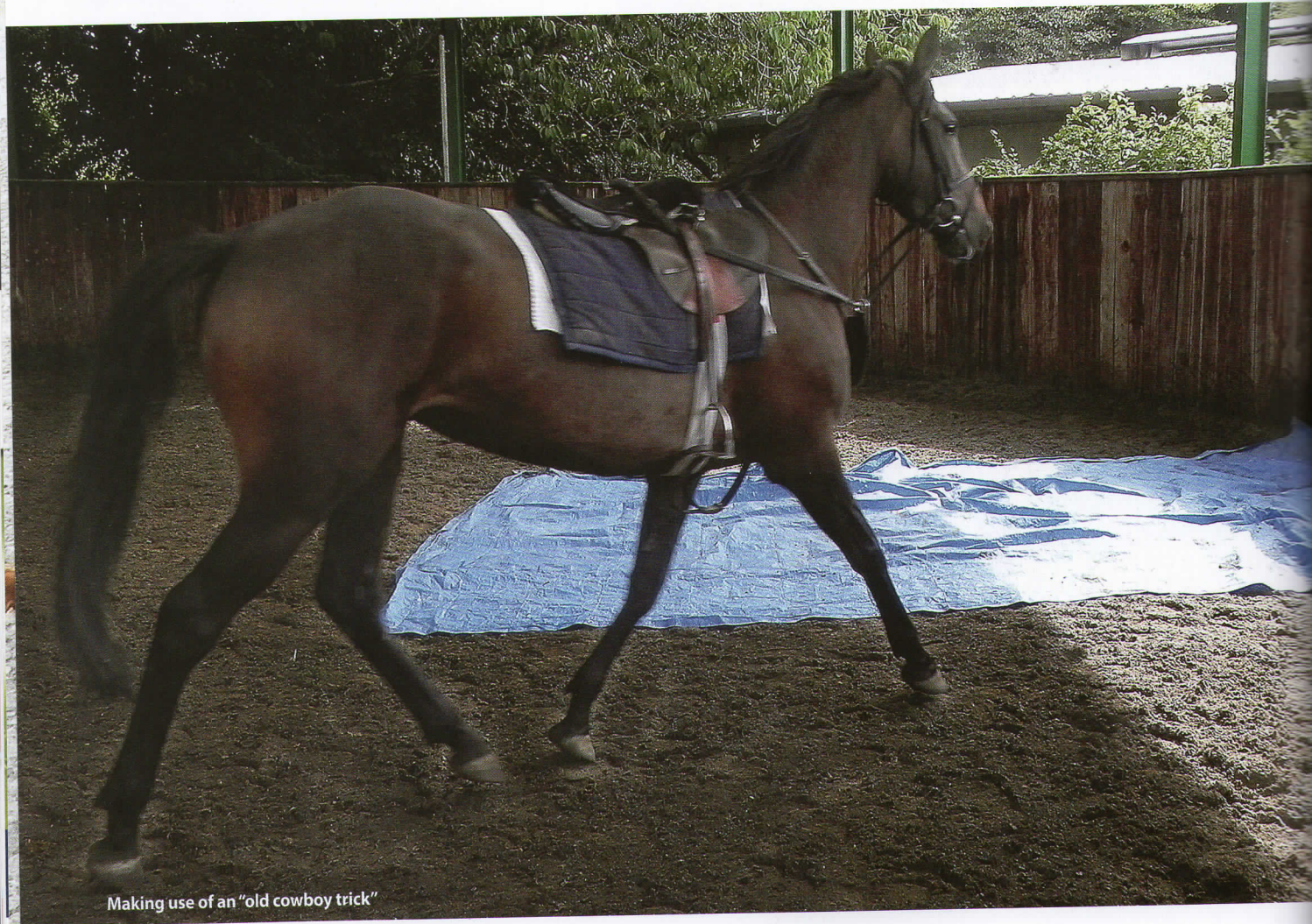
"I like to turn my horses out as much as possible and if they're the least bit boisterous she puts manners on them!" laughs Brabazon. "When she is no longer with us I'll definitely

go and find a retired mare to replace her."

Sweet Thunder will take some replacing: she was Brabazon's first and only winner as a jockey, he retired on a high at Fairyhouse in 1993.

"They get into a lovely routine here," he says. "We have a lovely loop, from the yard out across the road onto The Curragh, then back. They'll warm up on the round gallop here, then walk across to The Curragh, gallop, and walk back home. I don't vary their routine; it seems to work well and the horses enjoy it."

And Brabazon's horses literally step out from the yard and cross the road onto the training grounds. "How could a private establishment compete with the standard of maintenance you get here on The Curragh?"



Making use of an "old cowboy trick"

he asks. "The sand gallop at the Schooling Ground is great for slow winter work, while the All-Weather jumping strip is a super addition. Any time of the year on any day the training grounds are always spot on."

Through the early autumn the yard was fairly quiet, but now that the main yearling sales are over the lorries are coming in and Brabazon and his team are flat out.

"We call them 'our' horses!" he says of his past graduates. "The lads follow them keenly. We've a nice filly in France with Andre Fabre, So In Love, and she could be good, she has finished second twice in two Listed races and has some big entries."

THE FACILITIES in Rangers Lodge are excellent and the yearlings do not go out onto The Curragh grounds until after Christmas. "I tend to get the backward types, or otherwise they would be going straight to a trainer," Brabazon points out. "We get yearlings from Goffs and Newmarket, but the big studs tend to wait until they've sorted out their sales horses, then send us their own stock or something that's unsold. We get busier from October."

"When we're quiet I love the idea of getting everything ready before the horses arrive, but I never do it! One thing we did do was put rubber floors in everywhere and that's great. When we're busy I like it best when we can spend time with the horses, rather than spending too much time on the yard."

The team ethic is very important and in that respect Brabazon is blessed. "I'm very lucky with the core staff I have, we work very well together and that's a big thing. They know exactly what I'm asking for. When we get busy I take on a few extra people, but the core staff have been here for a good while."

Brabazon likes to keep everything as simple as possible when it comes to stable routine and exercise.

"The horses are fed four times a day, with a 7am first feed, then I go round at 10pm with the last feed. I deliberately don't have a varied routine," he says, adding: "Trying to explain a mix to different people can get very confusing and it just doesn't work unless you always have the same person mixing the feed, so I only feed nuts. Scientists have researched and developed them to find a balance that's right, so why make up a mix? I just have the three bags: a low protein feed, pony nuts for those that are standing in and racing cubes."

As the spirited half-sister to Blanchfield

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The Curragh is right on Brabazon's doorstep



“... the way yearlings are prepared by the good studs is unbelievable – you blink and they’re riding

has shown, Brabazon may like to keep things simple, but young horses can often make life difficult, even though there have been huge advances in our handling practices.

"I'll probably have to eat my words this year," Brabazon laughs, "but the way yearlings are prepared by the good studs is unbelievable – you blink and they're riding. You get the odd NH store horses who has been left out in a field and it reminds you just what it used to be like."

Not that all of Brabazon's students are perfect. "Even the well schooled ones can become difficult," he says, "get them into a

“You can’t meet someone in the horse business whom you cannot learn from. I could have the worst lad in the world working down in the yard and he could still teach me something

new place and they get unnerved. It takes them about a week to ten days to settle in and then you can see that they were very well schooled before they came, they were just nervous.”

With so much of his patience tested on youngsters between autumn and spring, it’s no real surprise that Brabazon finds relaxation in what could be seen as a busman’s holiday, as a restricted trainer.

“It’s nice to have a few to train, you get used to having them about the place, they become like pets, and you forget just how difficult it all really is!” he laughs.
“We won the

Ladies’ Derby at The Curragh last year and the Tipperary Crystal Amateur Derby this summer with Placere.”

Placere hurt a foot in training and Brabazon has been keeping her fit by taking her swimming twice a week. “Taking them to the swimming pool is a great experience for them,” he says. “There’s nothing more frustrating than a young horse who won’t load, but when you bring them for a drive and into the pool, they’re not frightened too much after that!

“We give them a couple of jogs up and down straight after swimming, because they can often get a bit of water in them and they need to clear it. They often belch as they jog, which clears the water

and stops them getting colicky.”

Brabazon is also a great fan of allowing horses to have a hack canter after their piece of work on The Curragh, rather than simply the traditional slow walk back – tests carried out by trainer Mark Johnston show that a lot of lactic acid is cleared from the horse’s system by a steady canter or trot after the main exercise.

“It is also most important,” he says, “if you’re not too sure which way a horse is going, to make sure you talk to the lads. It is a wonderful help, simply watching horses isn’t enough. Hearing what the riders have to say is important.”

Brabazon is a good listener and a willing student. “You can’t meet someone in the horse business whom you can’t learn from. I could have the worst lad in the world working down in the yard and he could still teach me something.”

Perhaps it is the reason why Brabazon is also such an excellent tutor, with empathy for his students, be they equine or human and Rangers Lodge is a popular destination for students from equine colleges, even as far afield as Japan.

Brabazon’s first connection with Japan was when he was given a horse from a Japanese owner and met trainer Takashi Kodama, who took six stables at Rangers Lodge.

“That’s how we came to have Pop Rock here,” he explains of the son of Helissio who

Rangers Lodge has been in the Brabazon family since 1927



travelled from Japan to Ireland in 2010 to run in the Irish St Leger. "It's always very varied here, which is ideal for students. We're not too busy in the summer so it's a good time to show them what's going on. We had Japanese students for the past couple of years and they're all very interested and full of enthusiasm and I love that connection; I've even taken some Japanese lessons!"

It seems that Brabazon's role at Rangers Lodge is all about looking forward and nurturing the stars of the future, but it is not difficult to forget there's also a lot of wonderful history to look back on. Brabazon's father Aubrey will be forever revered for his victories on Hatton's Grace and Cottage Rake and Brabazon has a tireless passion for history and recalling those stories.

"When Dad was training he was one of the first to consider examining horses' teeth. The vet "Doc" Rawnsley, used to come to the yard and I remember he had an ingenious method – he'd smear molasses onto a rasp and the horses would move their mouth back

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and forth over the rasp to get the molasses!" Not every skill was easily passed on, however: "Dad was a very good jockey, but he was too soft and too nice, he didn't criticise me."

While Sweet Thunder holds the distinction of being Brabazon's only winner, it's advice of a different nature that has led to her record.

"I remember riding in a 5f sprint at Leopardstown and Christy Roche came alongside me and warned me about the terrible climb! Of course, there is no climb, but if you look and you're told there is, it's a bit of an optical illusion.

'By the time I'd realised my mistake Christy had gone on by 10! He'd put me on a wrong footer and I finished second. The trouble was, there was always about three months between each ride I got, so I was a beginner every single time!"

Brabazon has experienced every aspect of the education side of racing and one has only to look at the results of his graduates on to acknowledge what a great educator he is. ■

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