

THE FIGHT FOR CUSTODY

A Bitter Dispute Prevents The Transfer Of The Irish Draught Studbook
An Opinion Piece by Nicholas O'Hare

The Irish Draught world hungers for control of the Irish Draught Studbook and with it the right to make the rules, create standards, and terminate performance testing of breed stallions. However the bitter dispute which has fractured the sector prevents the transfer of the studbook into breeder's hands. Both warring breed factions have applied for custody, but while they remain at loggerheads and divided the studbook will never pass into breeder's control.

This stark reality does not seem to have reached those who control the opposing organisations. The studbook will only become the breeder's property if there is a healing of the wounds, if the two Societies join together and the festering sores of their hatred are consigned to the past.

The Irish Draught Horse Society scored a PR victory when the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture advised the Minister that the co-op should have control. The Irish Draught Horse Breeders Association which had previously not bothered to express an interest immediately played catch up and demanded that it should be the custodian.

The canny civil servants in the Department of Agriculture, however, were having none of it. As matters stand officialdom regards Horse Sport Ireland as a safe pair of hands for the studbook, which has been Department of Agriculture property since it was

left the Department of Agriculture on licence on only three occasions since then, to Bord na gCapall, the Irish Horse Board Co-op and Horse Sport Ireland. Breeders have never been able to exercise any rights over it whatever, and while the advice of the old Irish Draught Horse Society was listened to on occasion, the Department, through its licensees ruled the roost.

There is an odour of smug satisfaction about the attitude of the Department to the latest claims for control. The Department avows that it has considered both claims equitably but has opted to make no change. The reality is that the studbook will never come into breeder control while the Irish Draught world is so divided, but there are also good grounds for believing that the civil servant's real view is that such troublesome and volatile people, irrespective of their organisational allegiances, should never be put into a position of power.

The authorities have their own views as to how the Irish Draught breed should be managed. Performance testing of stallions is a key issue. Another point of friction is the campaign for rare bloodlines. This has not borne fruit and the Department has taken the line that the registration and approval controls must not be breached.

But these caveats could be overcome politically if things were not so dire in the breeding world. The two organisations are entrenched in their

any conciliatory moves. Personal antipathies stoke the flames. Old sores rankle and the result is that the industry is deprived of the one thing that it wants so badly.

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There is in reality no excuse for such a chasm. The dispute is childish and irrational. Breeders who have adhered to either side do not really know why they have done so. The co-op has stolen a march on the association with its successful assumption of the title of the society. It conveys a spirit of authenticity, of continuity. But it has brought with it problems, not the least of which is the debts of the old society. Neither has it got the numbers. The association is ahead in this regard, but it is questionable whether this is down to good organisation or true allegiance. There is no doubt that many breeders view the recourse to the courts and the subsequent routing of the old board of directors as vindictive and uncalled for, and a step too far. There is no doubt either that many breeders are against the concept of a co-op, although the idea is a sound one basically and works well in other sectors. The Irish Horse Board was established with a co-operative structure and still exists as such today even though it is subsumed into Horse Sport Ireland.

It is time for this wrangle to be resolved. It has reflected no credit on anyone and only serves to reinforce the belief that the Irish Draught world is fractious and unruly, that it cannot control its affairs and that the studbook should stay where it is. The division amongst breeders is not

Department of Agriculture refusing to make a change. There is a fundamental concern about breeders' attitudes to the way that the future must be shaped. The Irish Draught has a long and honourable history in the annals of Irish horse breeding, but it no longer reflects an image of progress. Irish Draught breeders are conservative and traditional. They have not kept pace with the demands of the modern horse industry and they are totally lost when it comes to defining a role for the breed in the production of the modern sport horse.

All these things are not lost on the Department of Agriculture and it is probably the case that even if the two sides were to form one unified organisation to which all breeders could show allegiance, the studbook would still remain where it is. But breeders have no chance at all of taking control if they continue in their present fractured state.

There is no fundamental issue which divides them. There is no breeding issue which underpins the division. It is purely and simply down to spite and venom. Both sides have so far resisted all efforts to produce reconciliation. There is no sign of peace on the horizon. In the mean time the Irish Draught world has become a byword for acrimony and division.

studbook means so much to breeders, wiser heads would emerge from the ranks of the protagonists. The fact that they have not surely must mean that there is a lack of basic acumen on both sides. There are some 1200 active Irish Draught breeders. Surely amongst them there must be some who could steer a way through this debacle and recreate a single representative breeding body which would reflect the interest of the entire sector.

Blaming the civil servants for withholding control of the studbook is certainly cursing the darkness. They will not budge and without their agreement nothing will change. Indeed nothing may change even if there is a resolution of the split. The Irish Draught world must demonstrate not only that it can get on with itself, but that it has the intelligence and understanding of what has befallen it in terms of its role in the horse breeding scheme of things to march into the future, with or without control of the studbook. A united Irish Draught organisation can only be good for the breeder. If the people who control affairs in the two organisations cannot agree to get together, they should agree to get out altogether, and let more civilised and wiser people take charge.

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