

The 1993 Melbourne Cup winner
is still the cream of the

Crop

Vintage Crop serves a different purpose to the virile stallions who rake in the euros with scores of coverings at the Irish National Stud. As the most popular living exhibit, the gelding gets people through the gates of a business that must pay its way.

WORDS AND PHOTOS JESSICA OWERS

At the end of a long, narrow avenue they call Oak Walk, an old chestnut gelding lives in the last paddock on the right. It's a grand yard, nearly an acre square, fringed by oak and beech and bitten by yellow buttercups. The old gelding is 22 now and probably worth very little, but he is the Irish National Stud's most popular living exhibit. He is Vintage Crop.

It is 16 years since his Melbourne Cup victory, a famous one because he was the first European-trained horse to win. And when he did, his trainer Dermot Weld recited Banjo Paterson's *The Man From Snowy River*. "Since I read that poem," the ever smiling, self-effacing Kildare man said, "Australia has always been in my heart." In 1993 Vintage Crop had managed to slip through the media spin that courts the foreign raiders, but his win was a cruising one, three lengths clear of outsiders Te Akau Nick >



LAZY DAYS: Boarders graze contentedly at the Irish National Stud.

and Mercator. The Irish triumvirate of Weld, jockey Mick Kinane and magnate owner Michael Smurfit had changed the world of horse racing in three minutes and 23 seconds. They had opened the Flemington gates to international competition.

Vintage Crop looks tired these days, and a little dark around the eyes, but his infirmity is the fruit of growing old on the magnificent Irish National Stud in Tully, Co. Kildare. He has lived here since his retirement from racing in 1995, graced to the stud by Smurfit, and over the years he has kept company with Irish hurdling champion Danoli and, lately, champion chaser Florida Pearl. In the neighbouring paddocks on Oak Walk the National Stud stallions graze in isolation, but the polite geldings at the end of the avenue know little of them. Life in retirement is good, quiet and constant, just as it should be.

The Irish National Stud has existed in its current form since 1946, a few years after the Irish Government assumed control of the property from the British. It exists to promote Irish bloodstock, to develop it, and to do so around tourism, a unique initiative that allows anyone the opportunity to walk through the foaling yards, stallion paddocks and breeding barns. But this isn't a boutique business with neat fences and ornamental thoroughbreds. It is a multi-million

euro empire standing Invincible Spirit (B h 1997, Green Desert (USA)-Rafha (GB), by Kris (GB)), Elusive City (B h 2000, Elusive Quality (USA)-Star Of Paris (USA), by Dayjur (USA)) and Rakti (B h 1999, Polish Precedent (USA)-Ragera (IRE), by Rainbow Quest (USA)). It has been graduating students since 1971, was home to Arc winner and illustrious Group-producing mare Urban Sea for the last eight years of her life (she died after foaling in March this year), and last year it played host to 135,500 visitors.

As a commercial entity, the National Stud is no different to its competitors, standing nine flat stallions that begin at €6000 a cover and climb to €60,000. Not all of them reside on the property, like Touch Of The Blues who lodges at Haras du Logis Saint-Germain in France, but the big guns do, and that includes Verglas (Gr h 1994, Highest Honor (FR)-Rahaam (USA), by Secreto (USA)), Amadeus Wolf (B h 2003, Mozart (IRE)-Rachelle (IRE), by Mark Of Esteem (IRE)) and Jeremy (B h 2003, Danehill Dancer (IRE)-Glint In Her Eye (USA), by Arazi (USA)). The stud has 148 horses on site this season and 72 foals, one of which includes the orphaned Urban Sea colt by Invincible Spirit who, as a half-brother to Epsom Derby winner and super stallion Galileo and this season's undefeated three-year-old

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Sea The Stars (five Group 1 wins), has set tongues flapping since his arrival in March. But he, like many of the racehorses produced here, is a boarder whose owner pays good money for livery, in turn fueling an enterprise audited by the Minister for Finance and answerable to the Minister for Agriculture.

John Clarke is the chief executive of the Irish National Stud and has been on the team for 26 years. He has had plenty of time to adjust to the unique nature of his stud and can peel its layers like an onion. When it comes down to the horses, though, this man's job is the same as any stud master's. “We look at horses owned by independent firms when it comes to stallions coming here,” he says, “because any big stud racing a potentially brilliant stallion is not going to sell him. So we go racing, we go to the sales, and we just have to bide our time and be ready to move on a horse, and normally we instigate the purchase.”

When a horse is acquired by the National Stud for duties, a ballpark figure of 45 to 50 shares is released. The state will retain 50 per cent of the equity, dependent of course on the horse, but the stud insists that shareholders be breeders rather than investors out to make a quick buck. “What we want are breeders who are going to use their nominations,” Clarke says, “because if they own a one-fiftieth share in a stallion they will have two nominations a year. If you have 50 breeders who all send two mares, then you've got 100 mares already booked to your horse.”

The stallions, as critical as they are to the National Stud's existence, are but one penny in the jar when it comes to balancing the books, even if they are the biggest penny. Keep-fees for boarding horses comprise the second level of income for the stud, followed by yearling-sale returns (including commissions), tourism, shop returns (€30,000-€50,000 annually) and cattle. A profitable venture then, this national concept? “Usually, but not always,” says Clarke, “which is what we're finding this year.” But they wouldn't be alone there.

Where they are alone is the proviso to keep up appearances. There is no room on this land for broken fences or peeling paint, chip packets or tardy workmanship. At a parliamentary discussion in 1969 on amendments to the National Stud Bill, the then ▶



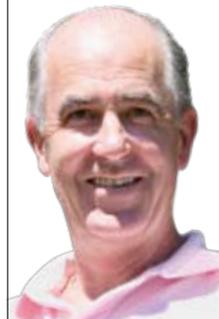
VERGLAS: the grey stallion is at home at the Irish National Stud after standing in France and Western Australia. From two seasons in WA (2003, 2004) he has 143 live foals, including Spirited One (G3 Champion Fillies Stakes) and Sheenasaidgrey (Listed Perth Stakes).

HIS SAY

Who owns the stallions?

John Clarke, Irish National Stud chief executive, says the state usually goes halves in the ownership of a sire with a group of investors, preferably breeders.

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opposition leader Liam Cosgrave wisely stated; “No matter how alert or energetic the board or their advisers may be in acquiring suitable bloodstock, it does not always follow that the success which they expect for the progeny will be achieved.” So while every other stud can slink away from mistakes with burnt fingers and a shorter pocket, the Irish National Stud can make it all the way to parliament.

The Australian breeding industry has no such concerns. Operating around wholly commercial interests, there is no major stud that uses tourism to bolster its income or further the cause of bloodstock. Clarke says that he is rarely approached these days by nations looking to emulate the Irish National Stud, and he knows why. “It would be extremely difficult to set up a national stud anywhere now,” he states. “There is more competition and there would be more opposition. But I’ve had numerous meetings in my 26 years with people from Australia who were investigating the possibilities of setting up an Australian National

Stud. It started with the Australian ambassador to Ireland some 20-plus years ago, Sir Peter Lawlor. There was even a group that came from Tasmania last summer. So while it has been investigated, it is very difficult to see it actually working.”

The notion is feasible, though unlikely. The Irish National Stud is located in prime thoroughbred country an hour from the national capital so, were Australia to replicate its northern hemisphere cousin, is the Hunter Valley an obvious location? “I could see it working in Seymour, for example, which is only an hour outside Melbourne,” Clarke says. “It would be very hard to see how it could work in the Hunter Valley because the competition would be so enormous there. To actually turn around and set up a national stud and have it open for business, with facilities for tourism, you really have to be near a centre, and the Hunter Valley might be too far away.”

Localities aside, there is an issue that few are willing to mention.

Michael Ford, Keeper of the Australian Stud Book, isn’t one of them. “Imagine a government spending \$20 million on a stallion,” he states, and plants the idea firmly where it belongs, because as lovely as the idea of a national stud is, the Australian public are not as enamored with horse racing as the Irish. Someone, somewhere, would moan that stallion money could be well spent on a hospital. “The top stallions attract the high fees,” says Ford, “so if the idea is to have stallions that are second rung (which would happen when a government won’t pay big money), there’d better be a market for them. In Australia, the commercially successful studs have, really, 80 per cent of the market so I don’t know that a national stud is feasible here. Whoever is thinking about doing it would have to do some hard research.” John Clarke reiterates that like any commercial business, the Irish National Stud is out to profit its shareholders – in its case the Department of Finance – so without the good stallions there are no fees and without the fees, no stud.

There is one gesture, however, that the Irish National Stud continues to make that elevates it beyond that of the everyday stud. It has, since its early days, existed to benefit small breeders, the backbone of the trade. In days when the conglomerate studs make it almost impossible for the small man to compete, such an institution has to be worth its weight in gold.

Far from the irascible stallions and wild dollar figures all the while, Vintage Crop grows older on Oak Walk. He migrates from the barn in winter to the paddock in summer, hardly noticing the clamoring public that recognise his name on the fence above all others. Over the years he has made guest appearances on race days, even venturing back to Melbourne in 2000 for the Cup parade, but his travels are getting fewer now. He’s a little long in the tooth. At Navan racecourse in nearby Co. Meath, the listed Vintage Crop Stakes (one mile and five furlongs) honours one of Ireland’s most celebrated stayers and, just across the field, The Curragh has mounted a life-size statue of him. The real thing, though, at the Irish National Stud is infinitely more impressive. And isn’t it interesting that the property’s least valuable thoroughbred draws the most number of visitors? The old boy probably would say he has earned it. **U**