

Sunday Independent

Sunday, January 27th, 1974

SALUTE THE MEN WHO GAVE US STAR JUMPING TEAMS.....

Des MOORE's World

TO THOUSANDS of Irish people, it seems only yesterday that Ireland's name was written indelibly across the face of Europe in the superb fusion of man and horse. Still vivid in the memory are the massed onlookers, the thrum, of hooves on sun-dappled turf, the breathless pre-jump hush, and the wild pride in the veins as victory fell to a spruce figure in the green uniform of the Irish Army.

Unsophisticated, perhaps, yet unforgettable. It could never happen now in the changed circumstances of a post-war world. But it is well to remember, hand in hand with that regret, that the Irish Army's horsemen achieved the target they had been set and that we are still reaping the benefits.

NATIONAL EFFORT

Today the Irish Army Equitation School plays an altered role, not a subsidiary one, but as a partner in a nationwide conspiracy to restore the Irish horse to its place in the sun. Faced by an overwhelming superiority of money and numbers, only the pooled resources and expertise of the entire, country will accomplish this.

Almost a half-century has passed since Ireland, as an infant state, first turned an official eye on the promotion of the horse industry. Man behind the move was Minister for Agriculture Patrick Hogan, who accepted the views of; those well qualified to judge that interest in Irish horseflesh would be stimulated by Army participation in competitions abroad.

So, the Army Equitation School was born in 1926, and performance level was gradually built up to a point where Ireland had one of the best jumping teams in Europe.



Lt. Colonel Billy Ringrose, O/C of the Army Equitation School, runs an expert eye over Gleann Eineach.

VICTORIES RECALLED

First four to distinguish themselves were 'Jed' O'Dwyer, Dan Corry, Cyril Harty and Dan Finlay. And tomorrow night, at the annual Texaco Sportstars Banquet, the cradle days of Army jumping will be recalled with the presentation of the Hall of Fame Award to Dan Corry.

He and his contemporaries trained, as present-day members of the Equitation School do at Dublin's McKee Barracks. This is the Marlborough Barracks of British Army days, erected for cavalry units in 1888-92 on a site of 45 acres, which was acquired piecemeal for £15,000.



Lt. Colonel Dan Corry, veteran Irish Army Jumper, who is to receive the Hall of Fame Award at Texaco Sportstars' Banquet tomorrow.

CHOICE LOCATION

It was a logical enough choice of location for the Equitation School. Phoenix Park was at its back gate, and railway and sea transport for competing horses was close to hand.

Point and direction was given to the School's activities with the arrival of Colonel Paul Rodzianko as instructor in 1928. Rodzianko had served with the Russian Cavalry in Czarist days and had competed with the Russian Army team abroad in the years before the Revolution.

"He had studied in Italy under Caprili, who was the originator of the forward /seat," the School's Commanding Officer, Colonel Ringrose, told me. "Riders customarily sat back in their saddles after a jump in case of falling upon landing. Caprili taught them to sit forward over the point of balance, and this transformed the whole art. Of jumping."

Before' long, the Army Jumping Team was making a name for itself at home. And as men like Lewis, Aherne, Heffernan, Nealon and Stack came to the fore, it won

competition after competition in Europe and the United States—to come to a triumphant peak in 1936.

With the outbreak of World War II in 1939 the magic chain was broken. The Equitation School was disbanded, and its members dispersed around various units. When normality returned in 1945 the School was re-constituted. But in Ireland, as elsewhere, nothing was to be quite the same again.

MIXED BLESSING

Vision and increased prize money popularised the sport, and the ambition to figure in the Olympic Games generated more and more competition.

"It was getting harder and harder to acquire good horses," Colonel Ringrose said. "The Italians, British, Swiss, French, Spanish and Americans all had Irish horses on their teams, this was fine, this was what was wanted, but with good horses fetching high prices it was difficult for us to buy them."

Nevertheless, the Army still represented the country, by and large, until the sixties. And this was the era that saw; a new star arise in the equestrian firmament, Captain Billy Ringrose went into partnership with a Kilkenny-bred gelding and captured a galaxy of awards.

Billy Ringrose, whose father also was an Army officer, was born in Limerick, but brought up in Dublin where he attended Synge Street Christian Brothers Schools. He entered the Military College on the Curragh in 1949, and two years later was commissioned. After a year's routine soldiering, he was attracted to the Equitation School, and his steady progress as a horseman got under way.

His long-unsuspected flair in this field came to full fruition when he was paired with Loch An Easpaig, an impressively large mount of great heart.

Between them, young Captain Ringrose and the courageous Loch an Easpaig chalked up victories that inside a year placed them in the top bracket of show-jumping combinations of the world.

LARGE STAFF

That was in 1961. Promotion followed in 1964 when the 34-year-old Captain became a Commandant, and seven years later he was advanced to Lieut.-Colonel and O/C of the Army Equitation School. He had married in 1956, Joan, daughter of Professor O'Malley of Galway.

Training is in charge of German-born Eric Bubbel, who worked with the U.S. Army in Europe as Riding Instructor, and subsequently with the U.S. Equestrian team in the States before entering into the employment of Sir John Galvin there.

Present top riders with the Equitation School are Captain Ned Champion and Captain Larry Kiely in the show jumping category, and Captain Ronnie McMahon in the three-day-event category. But I talked to one of the School's most recent recruits, Second Lieutenant Frank Yorke, who was commissioned in April of last year.

Frank Yorke comes of an Edgeworthstown family, and first became interested in horses when he was 14. He attended a riding school in Mullingar at the house now owned by Brian Donleavy of "Ginger Man" fame, and later went to Iris Kellet's school while attending Blackrock College.

Two years after completing his formal schooling, Frank entered the Military College as a Cadet, and the horse came back into his life again in earnest.



Riders of the Army Equitation School about to exercise their mounts at McKee Barracks (from left)... Cadet Paul Lindsay, Cadet Pdraig Cunniffe, Second Lieutenant Frank Yorke, Second Lieutenant Con Power, and Captain Ronnie McMahon.

START FROM BOTTOM

For every Cadet must take horsemanship as part of his course, and it follows that every Irish officer has some knowledge of riding. Those Cadets particularly interested in equitation are interviewed by the O/C of the School, who watches them riding, chats to them about horses, and chooses those he considers best suited to the work.

"At the beginning you do an ordinary groom's course that lasts six weeks," Frank told me. "That teaches you everything; you should know about caring' for horses.

"Ordinarily, however, we report here at 9 a.m. and work on the ground with the horse for about a half-hour to get him to relax, so that you know every move that you want and

can get him to do. A bit of jumping comes next, probably, and you ride about four horses each day for approximately 75 minutes. You learn a lot that way, because each horse has his own little tricks and peculiarities."

The various exercises, done under the supervision of the trainer, occupy until 4.30 p.m., and that as far as the Equitation School is concerned is the end of the working day.

Always provided it isn't his stint for regimental duties such as Orderly Officer at which he must also take his turn. Being unmarried, like all the School officers except the O/C he lives in the Barracks.

Life is varied for him by an odd visit to the Curragh for, Three-Day-Event training, a sport which calls for intensive exercise varying from dressage to cross-country riding.

His main ambition? That of all school members, to jump abroad, and maybe someday if one knuckles down to it and follows closely the trainer's instructions, to take part in the Olympics.

BEATING THE BEST

"We are a producing and selling nation," Colonel Billy Ringrose stressed in summing up Ireland's present position in an international context. "Compare our effort with, say, Germany, where every good horse will eventually make its way on to the German team, whereas our resources are split up over a variety of foreign teams that have purchased Irish horses. "That's the way it is, and we don't want to change it. But we do aim to have our own team suitably and adequately mounted so that it can hold its own wherever it goes. We have won a lot against the very best of company, now we're aiming at doing that a bit more consistently.



The Equitation School was founded in 1926 to promote Ireland and the Irish horse. Since then, Equitation School riders have been the backbone of Irish show-jumping and event teams. Army riders have represented Ireland at Olympic, World and European Championship level in Show-jumping and Three-Day Eventing.



Billy Ringrose at the RDS Arena on the day Ireland won the Aga Khan Cup in August 1963.

Col. William (Billy) Ringrose

Born: June 13th, 1930 - Died: April 29th, 2020