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**BEST OF
THE BLOG**

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Trainer Effectiveness – Assessing Success *and* Sustainability. The Need for Stronger Business Skills

“Racing does not lack the skills of being a horseman. Trainers are highly competent in that area. The big issue is the cluster of skills to do with being a successful businessperson. The major gaps are in trainers’ business acumen, and that’s where training and coaching should focus.”

There have been some very interesting developments on the National Hunt training scene in Ireland over the last couple of weeks: one sad and one perplexing.

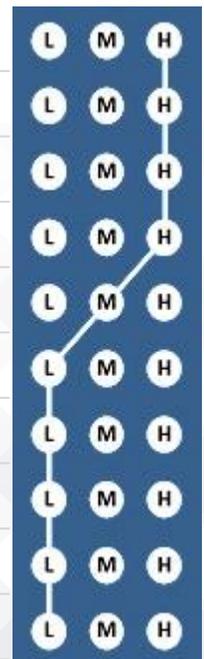
A mid-tier Irish trainer, Colm Murphy, who had sent out a number of excellent winners not least Brave Inca to win the Champion Hurdle, has decided to call it a day, primarily because of a contraction in his owner pool and not being able to succeed commercially. This is the sad case study, because it shows just how difficult it can be for trainers with excellent horseman skills to build a sustainable and successful operation.

The other case study is the announcement by Gigginstown that they are taking 60 horses away from Willie Mullins. Bearing in mind that we're talking here about the current champion trainer and champion owner, this is a big story. Apparently Mullins had made a decision to increase training fees for the first time in quite a number of years, and Gigginstown refused to accept the increase. Doubtless there are a number of layers to that particular negotiation, and it may well not be quite as simple as it appears on the surface. The lucky trainers to receive these horses include Gordon Elliott, Noel Meade, Mouse Morris, Henry de Bromhead and the rapidly emerging NH (and for that matter, Flat) trainer Joseph O'Brien.

I'm sure I'll revisit the Mullins story once it has settled down a bit, but the two case studies together prompted some thinking about the appropriate mix of skills needed for trainers to succeed, both on the racecourse and as a sustainable business. Our sport definitely does not lack the skills of being a horseman and, indeed, the vast majority of licensed trainers are highly competent, dedicated and immersed in that aspect of their business. The big issue is in the whole cluster of skills to do with being a successful business person, in terms of both possessing them in the first place and applying them in a diligent, ongoing manner. Alas, many trainers are only strong in the skills of being a horseman and either do not appreciate, or do not know how to address, the gaps in their business acumen. I've made an attempt to bring that to life in the diagram below with its ten factors: five to do with horsemanship and five with being a business professional.

Typical Profile of Mid-Tier Trainers: Business skills fail to complement training skills

1. Training racehorses to win high profile races
2. Keeping racehorses healthy, mentally and physically
3. Attracting and retaining high-quality stable staff
4. Investing in and improving the training facilities
5. Timely sourcing of new horses with real potential
6. Investing in and improving owner facilities and staff accommodation
7. Ensuring that the business has strong cash flow and is profitable
8. Attracting and retaining sufficient number of owners
9. Having a marketing and communications plan to do this
10. Adopting a business model that drives and sustains ongoing success



When many young trainers start off I doubt whether they fully appreciate what being a high performing, highly competent trainer really involves. Training is provided as part of obtaining a licence, but despite its best intentions it is regarded as more of a chore and a means to an end than something that goes right to the heart of being successful and sustainable as a business.

Alas, when the gaps in competence become self-evident it is very easy for the whole operation – such as that of Colm Murphy – to be incapable of revival. Equally, really successful businesses such as that of Willie Mullins need to ensure that they don't take owners for granted and that they develop the right type of long-term partnership and collaborative endeavour to guarantee success at the highest level.

Conventional businesses learnt a long time ago that their senior managers need ongoing training, development and coaching to groom them for broader responsibilities. It is highly likely that racehorse trainers also need appropriate interventions to raise their competence and skill base so that they can genuinely succeed. This really matters because without successful trainers you cannot have successful owners. The two need each other as both Mullins and Gigginstown may realise over the next couple of years.

