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Connemara pony gallops out of the mists to world fame

Ray Ryan visits Clifden's Connemara pony show to discover a breed that is thrivingTHE origins of the celebrated Connemara Pony breed go back some 2,500 years to the days of the Celtic warriors.

They are thought to have brought their own dun coloured ponies onto the island of Ireland and used them to draw chariots and carts along the beaches and river valleys of their new home.

Legend also has it that when the Spanish Armada sank off the west coast, the horses on board swam to shore and bred with the native ponies running wild in the mountains.

That's part of the heritage of the celebrated Connemara, the only native breed of Irish pony, which has played a crucial role in the life of people in the west.

Often, a farmer could only afford one good pony. She would pull a plough or a cart from dawn to dusk at whatever task was needed under extremely hard conditions. She carried heavy loads, moved rocks to reclaim the land, seaweed to fertilise the barren ground and turf from the bogs. And on Sundays, she was harnessed to cart the family to weekly Mass. Intelligence, stamina, hardiness and disposition were needed for such gruelling duties, traits that have also made the Connemara a much sought-after breed among sport horse breeders.

For, like the Irish Draught, the Connemara mares, when crossed with thoroughbreds, have frequently produced excellent showjumpers, who have won honours in competitive arenas all over the world. One of them was little Dundrum, who took on and beat the best of

Europe with Tommy Wade from Cashel, Co. Tipperary, on board. Another was Stroller, who brought the English rider Marion Coates to the women's world championship and an Olympic individual silver medal.

Prized traits of agility, soundness and remarkable jumping ability, developed over the centuries in the rugged terrain of the west, are qualities central to the breed's renown in sport horse competitions. But while the Connemara pony still possesses the energetic characteristic of early warlike ancestors, it also has a gentleness, which makes it suitable even for young children. The versatility of the breed, along with its good temperament, makes it an ideal riding pony for all ages. It is capable of carrying an adult across country, is widely used for Pony Club activities and is hugely successful in show jumping, dressage and eventing classes.

But the key for the continued success of the Connemara, as with other breeds, is, of course, quality, a fact reflected at the annual show in Clifden last Thursday and the sale at the local mart on Friday.

The show marked the 78th year since the foundation of the Connemara Pony Society to preserve, develop and maintain the unique characteristics of the breed. It was also the 54th show to be held in Clifden, where the Pony Society opened a new Heritage Centre last year to tell the story of the breed through photographs, documents and exhibits.

Minister of State Eamon Ó Cuív said the show has become a prestigious event and the value of staging it should not be over-estimated. It provides an ideal opportunity for all involved in Connemara ponies to meet, appreciate and possibly buy some of the finest specimens of the breed.

He said the society, now headed by John Luskin, president, with Henry O'Toole as show committee chairman, was set up in 1923 to encourage the breeding of Connemara ponies and their maintenance as a distinctive breed.

"I am glad that the work of the Society will be stimulated by financial incentives for breed improvement under the National Development Plan", he said.

Minister Ó Cuív said the popularity of the breed, which has a long and proud history in Ireland, has spread throughout the world to 17 other countries.

England, America, Australia, New Zealand, France, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Germany, Italy, South Africa, Switzerland, Holland, Austria and Canada have their own societies. Many of them have also set up their own websites on the internet, which also has thousands of pages dedicated to the unique breed that has survived the centuries into the hi-tech modern world.

Henry O'Toole said the crowd at the show was one of the biggest for some time. Over 500 ponies were entered in the various classes, an increase of over 70 on recent years.

Buyers from overseas were present to view the stock ahead of the traditional sale. There was a clear demand for good quality ponies, an indication that the Connemara pony is still in strong demand both at home and abroad.

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