

INTERVIEW PETER DOYLE

IT'S IN THE BLOOD

Julian Muscat talks to the bloodstock agent who has become a key figure in Richard Hannon's success



THE Doyle family tend to make their first shot count. Father Jack won the inaugural pony-jumping competition at the Royal Dublin Society Horse Show in 1912. His first Grand National runner, Revelry, went off favourite in 1947 – and fell at the first. And when a bout of tuberculosis forced him to quit training, the first horse he bought as a bloodstock agent was Another Flash, subsequently winner of the 1960 Champion Hurdle.

Jack's son, Peter, has posted a few of his own since he started trading in 1976. One of the first stores he bought and sold was Silver Buck, who went on to win the 1982 Cheltenham Gold Cup. The first yearling he bought in tandem with Liam Browne was Dara Monarch, a Classic winner who cost 5,000gns – the minimum bid – at Tattersalls in 1980. And the first horse he bought with Richard Hannon, at Deauville in 1988, won a brace of Listed races.

That marked the beginning of an axis without equal in the sport. Doyle now buys around 80 per cent of Hannon's annual yearling intake. Of this year's vintage, Canford Cliffs, Dick Turpin, Paco Boy and Zebedee were all sourced by Peter Doyle Bloodstock. And when both men eventually retire, Hannon's son, Richard jnr, will take up the baton with Doyle's son, Ross. The young tyros have already unearthed Paco Boy and Zebedee for themselves.

Could one man function without the other? It's an interesting question. Hannon has trained the winners of 113 two-year-old races this year alone. He could probably win a seller with the stable hack. Doyle concedes the point with a genuine smile, but then, his record pre-Hannon was hardly shabby.

"Good trainers make everything a lot easier," he admits. "The first yearling I bought for [the late] Paul de Moussac was Savoureuse Lady, a Caerleon filly who Andre Fabre trained to win a Group 3. Now Andre is a great trainer. I bought other yearlings for De Moussac by young stallions that turned out to be bad sires, like Henbit and Wassl, yet he trained them to win good races.

"In 1990 I bought them a yearling for 30,000gns by Law Society, another disappointing sire," Doyle continues. "Andre came up to me at Royal Ascot and told me it was the best two-year-old he had. But it was beaten on its debut in November and I thought: 'Typical trainer, talking up his horses'. The following season he won his maiden, then a Listed race, then a Group 3 and then the [Group 1] Grand Prix de Paris. He was favourite for the Arc but injury ruled him out. Homme De Loi was his name."

As Doyle, 64, remembers past purchases he offers details that allude to a photographic memory. He has an uncanny recall of dates and places, the money he paid, how this yearling was small, how that one turned out in front. Yet he is surprised at your



Peter Doyle (centre): now buys around 80 per cent of Richard Hannon's annual yearling intake

surprise. He ascribes it to a rigorous pre-sale routine that sees him and his team examine every yearling at every auction he attends. When the shortlist is compiled he will then see every one at least twice more.

"The ones you like make an impact on you straight away," he says. "For that reason, you remember them well. The first horse I saw at Fairyhouse two years ago was Dick Turpin and I told Ross that no matter how much he made, we wouldn't be leaving without him. In the end he cost only €26,000."

Doyle believes his intense, pre-sale sifting is the key to his success. When he first met Hannon at Deauville, Hannon told him he was on holiday and wouldn't be buying anything. When, "a few jars later", Hannon's resolution waned, Doyle had the shortlist ready. They bought two and were underbidders on 20 others.

Doyle maintains there are many

facets to Hannon's successful stable, beyond buying the right horses. It is genuinely a family effort, from Hannon's wife Jo to his daughter Fanny, who helps Doyle compile his sales shortlists, and his son Richard, who will take over the licence. The whole show is underwritten by loyal owners Hannon goes out of his way to entertain.

WHEN the sales round is complete Hannon gathers all those owners at Herridge for the mother of all champagne lunches – and promptly sells the yearlings off. As the years pass he has become increasingly nervous he will be left with too many on the books, yet that rarely happens.

Doyle knows well that a lid must be kept on prices. "Richard never gets orders," he says. "If he didn't buy

anything off his own bat, he'd have had nothing to train." Two years ago Canford Cliffs was the last horse to sell; Hannon's clients felt £50,000 was plenty for a son of Tagula, but Robin Heffer, a new owner, took him on. "I imagine Robin will be good for one or two this year," Doyle smiles.

Hannon aside, Doyle has between 30 and 40 regular clients. Many dip in and out, but he does regular business around the world. Nothing, however, can be as rewarding as his association with Hannon, who is threatening to retire if, as seems likely, he wins his second trainers' title at the season's close.

"I have no idea what he will do," Doyle says, "but I don't think he will ever retire from coming to the sales. Or the races, for that matter. He loves it too much to give it up. As he says himself, when he retires the name on the licence will not change. And the show will go on."

Hannon taught me 'the rhythm'

BLOODSTOCK agents have several guises. For those working in harness with trainers, as Peter Doyle does with Richard Hannon (right), it is imperative the agent understands the type of yearling his trainer prefers.

Regular paddock-watchers can spot a Hannon-trained horse from 100 paces. They come with strong frames and project a rugged demeanour with bold, inquisitive heads. "Over the years we have learned to recognise what Richard likes in a horse," Doyle says. "He taught me about the movement of a horse, allied to music. He calls it 'the rhythm'; a bit like a serenade, perhaps.

"It must also have a good attitude," he continues. "The way it walks is important, as is the head. There must be width between the eyes, with a good, big ear. And we don't like to buy horses with too many faults." If one of the two men

is not keen on a horse, they won't buy it.

Hannon is not one to spend hours looking at yearlings ahead of a sale. "One year at Goffs, Richard saw a horse for a few seconds just as it was about to be knocked down in the ring," Doyle recalls.

"He immediately told me to bid on it and we got it for IR13,000 gns. It turned out to be Hurricane Alan, who won Group races and more than

£400,000 in prize-money."

In recent years the quality of yearling has increased even if the brief remains the same. "Prices may have come down but the type of horse we want is becoming more expensive," Doyle explains. "Having said that, I don't think buying expensive horses will ever be the goal. Why change a winning formula?"

Why indeed? "Last year Richard insisted he wanted to cut back on the [70] yearlings we'd brought the previous year," Doyle recalls. "So one evening in Newmarket he asked how many we'd got, and when I told him 73, he said: 'Jesus, we'll never sell them on'. In the next breath he asked me whether there were more yearlings selling that night, and when I replied that there were, he said: 'Well, we'd better go and see what we can find'."

One thing is plain. The Doyle/Hannon alliance has some way yet to run.

DOYLE'S DIAMONDS



Canford Cliffs

Purchase price: £50,000
Prize-money won: £645,951
Big-race wins: Irish 2,000 Guineas, St James's Palace Stakes, Sussex Stakes

Dick Turpin

Purchase price: €26,000
Prize-money won: £722,776
Big-race wins: Richmond Stakes, Greenham Stakes, Prix Jean Prat



Paco Boy

Purchase price: 30,000gns
Prize-money won: £1,004,213
Big-race wins: Lockinge Stakes, Queen Anne Stakes, Prix de la Foret, Bet365 Mile

Zebedee

Purchase price: 70,000gns
Prize-money won: £162,819
Big-race wins: Molecomb Stakes, Tattersalls Millions Auction Stakes, Flying Childers Stakes

