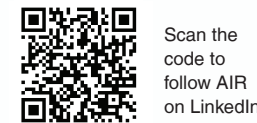


INSIDE TRACK



Latest news from the Association of Irish Racecourses

Fairyhouse and Tipperary sweet on new plastic hurdles

Trials have been taking place at Irish tracks involving a new design of plastic hurdles this month

► Mark Boylan

RECENT trials of a new design of hurdle at Fairyhouse and Tipperary have been described as successful, though the fresh Easyfix build is set to be tested further this winter to build a larger trialling sample. Earlier this month, Fairyhouse played host to two meetings in the same week with the modernised Easyfix hurdles in place, while Tipperary's Super Sunday raceday – featuring two Grade 3 hurdle races – took place over the obstacles that are primarily made of PPR plastic. Unlike the typical green Easyfix hurdle seen at many tracks in Ireland, the redesigned, one-fit unit visually gives the impression of a traditional timber hurdle. The build does not allow for any splinters to be picked up, with no broken top-bars or moveable padding. Should the ash leg of the hurdle break, it can be replaced within seconds, while the whole hurdle can be dismantled and reassembled in minutes using a spanner. Fairyhouse manager Peter Roe says the course spent close to €20,000 on its hurdle reparation and building in 2023 - with 178 hurdles broken in the calendar year - and that the necessary ash now needs to be imported from France due to ash dieback in Ireland. Easyfix's latest

design is guaranteed to last for eight to 10 years. Roe told *The Irish Field*: “Trialling any product on ground that is good, good to firm in places is a fair test, and that’s what we did here the other day. The hurdles held up remarkably well through the card while still requiring plenty of jumping - that’s what you want. “On the first card, a horse hit one of the hurdles so hard that the two legs of the hurdle broke and the obstacle collapsed, but the horse didn’t fall and there was no injury picked up. From speaking to the vets, the initial indications are very positive about the hurdles. “From the start of next season, there is a move away from birch hurdles so some form of a different form of hurdle needs to be implemented. This is just part of a trial the IHRB is working on. So far, it has been successful, though it’s early days and we haven’t got enough data yet. **Further testing** “All of Fairyhouse’s inside track fixtures before the end of the year will trial these hurdles again, and other courses are doing similar. The hurdles are in plenty of leading trainers’ yards and the feedback has been positive towards them, but you want them tested properly under racing conditions. That’s what we’re doing. It’s a major change from traditional hurdles.”



There were only a total of 18 runners across the three hurdles races that Tipperary hosted earlier this month, but racecourse manager Andrew Hogan was pleased with the design’s performance. “I think using these hurdles is a no-brainer,” said Hogan. “We were delighted with them. One horse stepped slightly at the second-last hurdle in one of the races and he didn’t lose much momentum, whereas our existing Easyfix hurdle would have taken his momentum back more. I received no

negativity on the day. All the on-course vets said they had no injuries from any horses.” He added: “Maintenance isn’t an existing issue for us as we already have a previous style of Easyfix hurdle here but, with the benefit of horse welfare, these hurdles jump much more like your traditional hurdle. We see them as a benefit to the horse and there would be a huge saving on labour for those switching from using traditional hurdles. We’re keen to use them going forward.”

A trio of runners jumping the new design of Easyfix hurdles in the Grade 3 BoyleSports Novice Hurdle at Tipperary \ Healy Racing

Down Royal set to kickstart jumps season next weekend

► Amy Corrado

THE Ladbrokes Festival of Racing at Down Royal is less than a week away. Starting next Friday, this two-day meeting kicks off the National Hunt season and the road to Cheltenham every year. This year, a total prize fund of €425,000 is expected to draw in some of the best jumping talent. The Festival’s impressive roll of honour includes Kau-to Star, Beef Or Salmon, Don Cossack and Frodon, to name just a few. Emma Meehan has been CEO of Down Royal Racecourse since 2019 and she is looking forward to the Festival just as much as anyone. “I’m absolutely buzzing for the Festival,” she told us. “Speaking to trainers, the early entries have been very positive and people are happy to be back. It’s our flagship festival, with the leading light being the Grade 1 Ladbrokes Champion Chase on Saturday.”

Last year’s Festival was scheduled, as usual, for the first weekend in November but was postponed a week due to a waterlogged track; this year the weather seems to be playing ball. **Enigma** “Last year was an enigma, it started raining in September and didn’t subside and the reality is, there’s not much we can do. We’re on a flood plain here, enveloped by the River Lagan. Arguably, the course could have been raced on the original date last year, but we were submersed in the office, car park, parade ring and stable yard. “Our main priority is the safety of the equine population and the function of the event. Thanks to Horse Racing Ireland allocating us the following weekend, we were able to salvage last year’s Festival, but there’s no concern for this year.” The wider racing community aside, the Festival is a huge event in Lisburn and the surrounding areas, always

drawing in a big crowd, it’s a big deal for the local community. “Lisburn and Castlereagh Council, via their tourism fund, fund a portion of the Festival because it’s a significant piece of their objectives as a local council. For us to extrapolate that support, the racecourse has had to deliver the numbers in terms of the crowd. “The racecourse team work tirelessly 12 months of the year, so we always look forward to opening our doors to welcome the industry and the public to our racecourse where we see the fruits of our labour being enjoyed. It’s even more exciting for a festival as prestigious as the Ladbrokes Festival of Racing, we look forward to it tremendously. Without them we wouldn’t have achieved what we have over the past five years. “Being afforded the opportunity to take over the running of Down Royal has been massive. I was hungry for the opportunity and I’m very excited for the future. There’s more to come.”



Pictured (l-r) Emma Meehan, chief executive of Down Royal Racecourse and Nicola McGeady, Ladbrokes head of PR.



Gowran Park unveiled a state of the art new weighroom in January \ Vicky Comerford

Gowran Park continues revamp with plans for new club lounge

► Amy Lynam

GOWRAN Park unveiled a state of the art new weighroom in January, but the Co Kilkenny value isn’t stopping there. Roofs have been refurbished and flooring replaced, as they await final planning permission for the development of a club lounge for members, owners and trainers in the main grandstand. Racecourse manager Eddie Scally reported: “We’re hoping the final stages of planning will go through by the end of this month and that we’ll be going through to tender before Christmas, with the plan to start building work straight after Holden Plant Rental day in early March. “We’re quadrupling our current members’ area in size and giving it a private viewing area in the stand, so that from one side, it overlooks the betting ring and from the other side,

they’re overlooking the winning post.” The new area will accommodate 300, as the track aims to cater to bigger crowds on key race days, with the development of new public toilets on the middle floor being undertaken for the same reason. “We’d really love to have it finished in time for the EBF Gowran classic, that’d be the target,” Scally explained. “It’s probably more realistic with ladies’ day in July, but we’ll be targeting the June bank holiday, and we’ll be putting pressure on everybody to try and have a finish for that. **Vital funding** “I’ll have this finished before Christmas if I got grant aid from Horse Racing Ireland,” he adds, as Gowran Park will itself fund the latest developments, which are expected to cost €1.3million. The ground floor of the new weigh

room received funding from Horse Racing Ireland, as weigh rooms are a focus of HRI’s throughout the country, but Gowran Park footed the bill for the roof and also decided to add a second floor as part of the works. **Strangest thing** “But for the grant aid from Horse Racing Ireland, you wouldn’t be able to take on projects like that cost two and a half million,” Scally said. “The strangest thing in racing is the grants from Horse Racing Ireland is only for specific to jobs that HRI wants you to do. So hypothetically, they decide that every course needs new stables, or every race course needs to rubberize parade rings and rubberize trot-up areas. Tracks themselves know what they need best to improve their own business, and I think that’s where we are missing a trick a little bit sometimes.”

“The strangest thing in racing is the grants from Horse Racing Ireland is only for specific to jobs that HRI wants you to do

Navan Racing Festival around the corner

THE Navan Racing Festival takes place on Saturday and Sunday, November 16th and 17th. The team at Navan are looking ahead to the highlight of the National Hunt calendar at Navan, the weekend featuring the Bar One Racing Troystown Chase and the Railway Bar Lismullen Hurdle. Navan can expect to host some of Ireland’s best and most promising jumpers on this weekend, when there will be over €450,000 in prizemoney on offer. With eight races each day, live music and entertainment, the Navan Racing Festival is being billed as the ultimate weekend for fun with friends, family or colleagues. Racegoers are invited to take a table with a view and make the Navan Racing Festival a weekend to remember with their all-inclusive hospitality package. **Web:** navanracecourse.ie.

Two Grade 1 races on the card at Punchestown

THE Punchestown Premiere Weekend is a two-day festival on November 23rd and 24th. Day one features the Grade 1 Unibet Morgiana Hurdle alongside live music, delicious dining and festive fun. The day two highlight is the Grade 1 John Durkan Chase alongside graded, listed and cross-country action. Racegoers can complement each day with delicious dining and festive fun through one of the many hospitality options on offer. There’s also a two-day weekend ticket available, which is great value at €25. **Web:** punchestown.com

Fairyhouse Winter Festival not to be missed

JUMP racing weekends don’t get much bigger than the Bar One Fairyhouse Winter Festival, which takes place at Fairyhouse on Saturday and Sunday, November 30th and December 1st. The racing on this weekend is always top class. The Bar One Racing Hatton’s Grace Hurdle, Bar One Racing Drinmore Novice Chase and the Bar One Racing Royal Bond Novice Hurdle are acknowledged major events on the calendar. There will be live entertainment at the track each day, plenty of delicious food and drink options, and family fun activities. There are some fantastic hospitality packages available including the Bobbyjo Bistro Package with a sumptuous three-course lunch, enjoyed while overlooking the track. **Web:** fairyhouse.ie

No better place than Dundalk Friday night fun

DUNDALK Stadium, Ireland’s only all-weather racecourse, has just restarted its popular Friday Night Lights Series. From now until December 20th, each evening features both horse and greyhound racing. There are a variety of hospitality options to suit every taste and budget, with packages from €25. **Web:** dundalkstadium.com