

# RACING *the*



Harness racing in Wales has

# WELSH WAY

BY PETER WHARTON

**ALL OUT:**

Pacers race at Tregaron, one of the premier grass tracks in Wales.



a strong tradition and bright future

Think of horses and Wales, and the one breed that will come readily to mind to most people is the Welsh Mountain Pony. And, you could be excused for thinking that the Welsh Mountain Pony is the only breed of horse in this small country in the United Kingdom.

Well, think again!

Harness racing has been a premier horse sport in Wales for more than 100 years.

And, while the number of foals born there has dropped in the last decade, the sport is as relevant today as it was throughout the 20th century.

An unbridled passion for the industry can be felt right through from breeders, studmasters, owners, trainers, drivers, and officials to the fans.

Though the stakes money may not be at the levels of North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, it has in no way dampened the enthusiasm of the participants.

The sport in Wales is administered by two organizations: the British Harness Racing Club, the official governing body of harness racing in Great Britain; and an unaffiliated organization, the Wales and Border Counties Racing Association (the “border counties” are in neighboring England).

All racing is done in a counter-clockwise direction (just like North America) from behind the starting gate over distances from six furlongs up to 1-1/2 miles. The most popular distance is one mile.

The British mile record holder is the imported Canadian pacer Doonbeg, a diminutive son of Camluck who earned \$724,498 in North America before coming across the pond to be clocked in 1:53.7 (1:53.3) at Amman Valley in 2010.



The BHRC has five hard tracks and 20 grass tracks and conducts around 90 meetings a year – mainly on Sunday afternoons with some Saturday nights, from April to October, in Wales, England and Scotland.

The Wales and Border Counties Racing Association (Wales and Borders) has 26 tracks, racing mainly on Saturday afternoons and some bank holidays. Its premier meeting is at Penybont, in Mid Wales and has been conducted on the first Wednesday in August for almost 100 years.

All the tracks operated by Wales and Borders are grass with the exception of Amman Valley, in Carmarthenshire, which is a hard track.

There are also events staged at the Royal Welsh at Builth Wells in Mid Wales and Haverfordwest in Pembrokeshire.

The two clubs at the fore of harness racing in Great Britain are Tregaron and Ceredigion, both grass tracks that handed out more than 100,000 pounds (around \$130,000) in total purses. The Ceredigion track is situated on the edge

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of the coastal town of Aberystwyth, while the Tregaron track is nestled by a backdrop of the Cambrian Mountains.

“These two clubs between them host five days of unrivalled harness racing,” said Gwenan Thomas, a director of the Standardbred and Trotting Horse Association of Great Britain and Ireland (STAGBI). “They are undoubtedly two of the jewels in the crown of harness racing in this country.

“What is most staggering is that these two meetings are two of the richest meetings in Great Britain, yet they exist in the most rural of areas. These two meetings are festivals of harness racing, where the crowd is three or four deep cheering on the home stretch, where the atmosphere

is electrifying, the passion for the sport is palpable and the elation of winning is full of emotion.”

Wales and Borders conduct one race per meeting for pacers under saddle and a race in the saddle and cart for the juniors.

It is not uncommon in Wales for horses to compete twice on the one day with heat and final racing.

The majority of races under the BHRC jurisdiction are for pacers, but with the advent of French trotters to Wales in recent times, the race programs now provide for at least one event for the square-gaiters.

Bookmakers field at all race meetings and there is no on-course totalisator. Off-course betting is limited to only a few BHRC meetings.

#### **GROWING THE SPORT:**

*Opposite:* John Wright, who with his wife, Grethe, operate Rhyd Stud. There they stand See And Ski—a half brother to Well Said—and Hasty Hall, a half brother to Blissfull Hall.



**HARD-WORKING TEAM:** Far left: Sandra Weigel, a director of the Standardbred and Trotting Horse Association of Great Britain and Ireland (STAGBI) and a committee member of the Wales and Border Counties Racing Association, said that most Welsh horsemen participate as a hobby. Left: Maureen Lloyd, STAGBI director and press officer for Wales and Borders, said that visitors must visit the Penybont meeting, known as the "Wembley of Wales." Bottom left: The field spreads out down the stretch at Tregaron.



## Tir Prince Raceway

Tir Prince, a half-mile oval located at the seaside resort of Towyn in North Wales, and Amman Valley, based at Ammanford in South Wales, are widely recognized as the premier trotting tracks in Wales.

Modelled on Freehold Raceway, Tir Prince was built in 1989 by the late Billy Williams, a Standardbred horseman from a showman background.

Williams' son Adam, the track's owner and managing director, said: "My father came here when he was very young and settled down in North Wales. He then went to visit a racetrack at Prestatyn back in those days.

"On his first visit there he managed to swap his car for a horse and took the horse back home and that began his love affair of harness racing.

"Then in 1989 he built Tir Prince Raceway. It was his love; it took over everything else he did, rightfully or wrongly."

Tir Prince hosted 12 meetings in 2017, including all the major BHRC classics such as the Breeders Crown for 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds. Other feature races staged there included the Crock Of Gold free-for-all series with a purse of 40,000 British pounds, the Billy Williams Memorial for free-for-all pacers, and the Le Trot for 3-year-old trotters carrying a purse of 50,000 pounds.

Eric Witherspoon, the business development manager and racing manager of Tir Prince, said: "We're very upbeat at the moment; we're trying to push the job forward. We're using our public business interests to bring sponsorship into the job.

"We've got sponsorships from breweries and arcade equipment suppliers and other people that we do a lot of other business with we're encouraging them to come into harness racing.

"Wales has just got caught onto the fact that it is quite a popular

destination and was underselling itself. North Wales has just been voted the fourth-best place in the *Lonely Planet Guide* to visit, so suddenly the local authorities are getting onto this and we're trying to get involved with them because we think we can offer them one of the best nights out in North Wales.

"The facility that we've got is on a par with anything else in Europe and the world, in fact."

While Welsh racing officials are working on attracting patrons to the track, international horses are starting to come out to race as well.

"Trotters are coming over from France due to the Le Trot initiative," Witherspoon said. "Initially they sent over aged horses, but this year they sent over a batch of horses including 2-year-olds who weren't quite up to qualifying in France.

"They sent over a batch of 50 which people have purchased and people are now in the process of

training these horses and qualifying them.”

Witherspoon said that more than 180,000 pounds in purses were distributed at Tir Prince in 2017.

## Grassroots Racing

The BHRC has a national handicapping system, while horses in Wales and Borders are graded from Nursery (first starters) to Grade A and are handicapped back to a maximum 60 yards. Every time a horse earns 300 pounds, he goes back 10 meters in the handicaps, while every time an Open horse (Grade A or B) loses four races it will be moved up 10 yards.

There are more than 100 drivers competing at Wales and Border meetings each year.

Maureen Lloyd, also a director of STAGBI and press officer for Wales and Borders, said: “I think that Wales and Borders has always been the strong point probably in Britain. We are catering for the grassroots and hopefully that’s what will sustain us in the future. Basically, we enjoy a family sport here where most of our owners train their horses and drive them and the family are all involved.”

Lloyd said that there is one race meet that visitors to Wales must attend.

“Penybont is still the meeting of the year,” she said. “Racing started there in 1921 and they nicknamed themselves the ‘Wembley of Wales’ (after Wembley Stadium, home of the Wimbledon tennis tournament). The crowd are all in the center of the track and the viewing is pretty limited, but

the atmosphere is wonderful.”

Sandra Weigel, a director of STAGBI and a committee member of Wales and Borders, said that there is a wide variety of competitors with men and women of all ages.

“They come from all walks of life and they do it as a hobby; it is not a profession for them,” she said. “We have a few ladies from the medical profession including nurses, a [lawyer] and bank manager. Among the men drivers are farmers, builders, [truck] drivers and even a debt collector.”

## Bloodstock

There were more than 500 foals born in the U.K. in 2016 – down from 900 a few years ago – mainly by the country’s 25 Grade A stallions.

The majority of broodmares in Wales are serviced from three major stud farms – Rhyd Stud in north Wales, Talgrwn Stud in west Wales and Brywins Stud in the south.

Gwenan Thomas, the manager of Talgrwn Stud and a former presenter on Welsh television, said: “The foal numbers have dropped over the years, but the quality of horses we’re breeding has improved dramatically. People know that you have to have a pedigree behind your horse to make it a racehorse.”

Founded in 2002, Talgrwn Stud, conducted by Gwenan and her husband, Richard, one of Wales’s leading reproduction equine veterinarians, currently has two stallions, Doonbeg (by Camluck) and Rogue Hall (by Cambest), standing on

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—ERIC WITHERSPOON





their picturesque 50-acre property.

Talgrwn breeds more than 250 mares of all breeds every year including around 100 Standardbreds.

A winner in 1:49.3s at Mohawk Racetrack and winner of the 2006 O'Brien Award as the top 3-year-old pacing colt in Canada, Doonbeg set a string of track records in the U.K. as well as a world record of 1:53.7 on a track less than a half-mile.

"He's the best horse I've seen racing in Wales," Thomas said. "He's proven it by taking the British record. His ability to adapt to racing in this country on the smaller tracks and the grass tracks that aren't always level was incredible."

Doonbeg's oldest crop in Wales are 5-year-olds and Rogue Hall's first crop are yearlings.

Rhyd Stud, located in Rhyl, Denbighshire, is owned and operated by John and Grethe Wright, both directors of STAGBI.

The beautiful 110-acre, heritage-listed property is home to two superbly bred American imports: Hasty Hall and See And Ski, the former a half-brother to the Triple Crown winner Blissfull Hall and the latter a Somebeachsomewhere full brother to New York sire So Surreal and a half-

brother to the 2009 Dan Patch Pacer of the Year, Well Said.

Hasty Hall has been the premier sire of Breeders Crown and sire stakes winners in the U.K. for many years and the leading overall sire for the last 10 years.

The Wrights have won the U.K. Derby as owners twice: in 2002 with CP's Village Jigsaw and in 2003 with Shady Romance. They have bred the winners on four other occasions: in 2001 with Kentucky Silk, 2005 with Star's Dragon, 2006 with Rhyds Hallstar, and 2010 with Rhyds Fivestar.

They have enjoyed unprecedented success with progeny of broodmares they purchased in North America. CPR, a Life Sign mare the couple bought at the 1998 Tattersalls Sale, became the dam of the Breeders Crown champions Rhyds Destiny, Rhyds Desire, Rhyds Topaz, Rhyds Decoy, and CP's Village Jigsaw. She was subsequently named British Broodmare of the Year.

The Cam Fella mare Keystone

Matrimony and Albert Albert mare Tonda Star, who were both secured at the Standardbred Horse Sale in Harrisburg, Pa., have achieved great success in the broodmare barn.

Keystone Matrimony is the dam of Shady Romance, winner of the 3-Year-Old Derby, Tregaron Classic and Famous Musselburgh Pace and the second dam of Rhyds Hasty Affair, whose successes include the Famous Musselburgh Pace and York Flying Mile and who once held the Tir Prince record for 1-1/2 miles.

Tonda Star left three black-type winners in

Rhyds Hallstar, a triple sire stakes champion and the British 2- and 3-year-old record holder; Rhyds Five Star, the British Horse of the Year and 2-Year-Old and 3-Year-Old of the Year; and Stars Dragon, winner of several major classics.

Another of Tonda Star's progeny, Rhyds Megastar, sold for a British yearling record of 51,000 pounds at the Bulth Wells sale, but unfortunately died as a 2-year-old.

The Wrights currently own 10 broodmares, nine of which are American-bred.

Brywins Stud, located at Sennybridge in Carmarthenshire, is conducted by Brian Davies, a former leading amateur driver with 400 winners in three continents to his credit and a leading studmaster and breeder.

The first horse to stand at Brywins was the Direct Scooter horse Master Scoot, the premier sire in the U.K. in the 1990s. He later stood the Artsplace horse White Heat and the 1997 North America Cup winner Gothic Dream



with only moderate success.

Brywins is currently standing a pair of young, royally bred American stallions in Share The Delight p, 4, 1:48.4 (\$540,952), a son of Bettor's Delight and the fastest horse ever to stand in Great Britain; and the Astreos horse Star On The Beach p, 2, 1:54.2s, a half brother to Somebeachsomewhere who was injured at 2.

Share The Delight's first crop of 4-year-olds include IB Coyote, winner of the prestigious Vincent Delaney Memorial fillies' division last year, and the potential topline Llwyn's Delight. Star On The Beach's initial crop are currently racing as 4-year-olds and from only four foals he has produced a smart customer in Brywin's Magic Beach.

Davies, who held the world sheep-shearing record, has enjoyed great success in almost every sector of the industry.

"I started in the sport as a hobby in Wales and I ended up driving winners in Australia, New Zealand and America," he said.

Marc Jones, the Sennybridge-based horseman, is one of the sport's leading all-rounders. A master farrier, Jones trains and drives the stock he bred with his wife, Jenny, on their 100-acre spread.

"I shoe between 40 and 50 horses of all breeds on average per week," Jones said. "If trotting in this country could take off like in America, Australia and New Zealand, I would give up shoeing and concentrate on breeding and training."

The Joneses have achieved outstanding success from only a handful of broodmares. Infinately (1:56.4), the fastest horse ever raced in Wales and Borders, and Jessie's Conquest, last year's leading 3-year-old filly, are the best performers they've bred.

Twice written off due to soundness, Infinately's best wins were the Tregaron Classic, the 3-Year-Old Championship, the 4-Year-Old Derby and the Welsh Classic, while Jessie's Conquest was the Welsh 2-Year-Old of the Year in 2015 and 3-Year-Old Filly of the

Year in 2016. She was undefeated in her 3-year-old campaign. The mare is named after the Joneses' daughter, Jessie, who was photographed by Jenny after winning the Breeders Crown and won the Fan category of the *Hoof Beats* Photo Contest last month.

So while the number of horses bred has been stable, those racing and breeding in Wales say that their stock has improved. According to Thomas, one business move could help them take the next step as a force on the world stage.

"If we want to move more forward

we have to somehow get off-course betting," she said. "There is no doubt about that. It's the way the rest of the world survives.

"As much as I say that the enthusiasm and passion is important, we do need an outside revenue and that may mean getting a little more recognition from the British Horse Racing Authority to acknowledge harness racing as a sport."

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**TREGARON AND BEYOND:**

*Opposite top:* Celebrating a win at Tregaron. *Opposite bottom:* Brian Davies, who stands such American standouts as Gothic Dream and Share The Delight. *Left:* The race is done. *Below:* The trophy stand at Tregaron, with the Welsh flag behind.

