

ARE THOROUGHBREDS NOT THOUGHT THROUGH?

Are you going racing this year? Have you ever thought about the people who get the horse to the track? It is not just fancy dress and drink. It is hard work.

About 30,000 people are employed in the Irish horse racing industry. It is an industry where you can make it big or lose it all. It generates about €2.46 billion annually. However, if you own a stallion, it is tax free.

In 1968, Charles Haughey removed the tax paid on covering fees. This made breeding more profitable and a lot easier to enter.

In a world where princes and paupers rub shoulders, strict regulations and vets' bills shut out low-level breeders. Artificial insemination (AI) can change this. It can make the thoroughbred breeding world more accessible to everyone.

AI is when mares are artificially covered. Instead of a stallion mounting a mare when she is in season, semen is inserted into her cervix by a vet.

Mares covered by fresh semen have a 70%-80% chance of becoming pregnant compared to only 59% of mares covered naturally. In 2010, 42% of all broodmares were covered by AI. Not only that, but AI can keep stallions safe and reduce the risk of infection being spread between mares by a stallion.

Undoubtedly, AI is successful. However, in thoroughbred breeding, it is banned. Foals born to thoroughbred parentage, but who were artificially conceived, cannot be classed as thoroughbreds.

Official bodies cite that the complete and outright ban on AI is acceptable for three main reasons. It prevents the shrinkage of the gene-pool. The value of stallions remains high. If mares are not in foal through covering, owners are entitled to a return of the covering fee.

Perhaps gene-pool shrinkage would be a concern in the last century. Model stallion, Sadler Wells, covered 2,259 foals compared to his father, Northern Dancer, who covered 635 foals. Today, stallions cover up to 10 mares daily.

There are thousands of horses walking the earth with a direct genetic link to Northern Dancer. AI cannot shrink the gene-pool further. Winfield Farms shrank it with Northern Dancer. John Magnier then shrank it further with Sadler Wells. The gene-pool has already shrunk to a puddle.

Another argument is that without AI, the value of stallions remains high. If AI was allowed in thoroughbred breeding, stallion owners would have complete control over the availability of semen.

With AI, the semen can flood the market and become cheap or it can be rationed and the value can skyrocket. It would be exactly the same as natural cover.

AI would also offer stallions incapable of breeding naturally a second chance at life. El Gran Senor only sired 22 foals due to fertility issues. If Coolmore Stud was offered the chance to use AI, he could have had more foals and potentially sired winners.

Live cover puts stallions at risk. If a mare is not in season, she can severely injure the stallion. This can leave the stud farm in financial limbo. An injured stallion may not want to mount. His semen quality will be affected, resulting in less foals. If the injured stallion is a top-earner at a stud farm, the stud will make an inevitable loss. It can take a while to earn lost money back and consequently could lead to job losses.

When mares are to be covered, they must be swabbed and tested. It is done to ensure they do not have any infections. Stallions cover lots of mares daily so infections spread fast and far. With AI, infection control is much easier. Fewer stallions are put in a position to spread infection. Thus, mares do not need to be tested as often or as invasively.

AI also opens up the world to a stallion. In the 1980s, Godswalk was the first stallion to successfully stand in Coolmore, Fethard and in Australia. Semen can be flown across the world for much less than the price of a horse, not that the cost of the plane ticket would bother some owners.

Transporting horses can cost a fortune depending on the destination. Before travel, mares must have bloods done, be swabbed, and transport must be arranged, all while mares are in season and not to mention the massive associated vets' bills. Furthermore, mares will be scanned daily by a vet after they begin to show signs of being in season. This will carry on right up until they are off to be covered.

So, if official bodies allow AI, monstrous debts can disappear. A closed door empire can become a place where small time breeders have a shot. People could make money, grow and succeed.

Charles Haughey changed the industry when he removed the stallion tax. It is time it changes again. Unlike Haughey, however, there are no selfish intentions here. It is time racing moved into the modern world.