

Man with a system

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17 September 2011

It is not only the Arabs who have an intimate, almost mystical involvement with the horse. In Istanbul for the Topkapi Trophy, sitting beside the largest kebab I have ever seen (and, I kid you not, it was more than 12 feet long), I was reminded by my genial host Mehmet Kurt that the horse was special to the Ottomans, too. Their warriors, he insisted, were unbeatable. They never changed horses and their equine partners often saved their lives with their uncanny ability to anticipate and counter the enemy's moves. There was perfect synchronisation of thought and movement between horse and warrior.

Mehmet Kurt's own orange and white colours have twice been carried to victory in the Turkish Derby at Veliefendi and the prominent Istanbul owner, a construction and property millionaire, plans to have horses soon in Britain. Touring his stables some 50 minutes out of Turkey's liveliest city there was plenty on which to feast the eye, notably nice two-year-olds by Montjeu, Rock of Gibraltar and Galileo. I particularly liked the look of South Center, by Royal Abjar.

But Mr Kurt is not just bringing some of his equine stars to Britain. Provided he gets the final go-ahead from the Berkshire planning authorities, he will also be establishing at the former Kingwood Stud in the training centre of Lambourn an ingenious system he has pioneered that could revolutionise the preparation of horses for racing.

Talk to Mehmet Kurt and you cannot fail to be struck by his almost spiritual commitment to the horse. Like any successful businessman he likes winning, but he is not just interested in victory on the racecourse.

He is also fascinated by what makes horses improve and he is determined to reduce the injury rates suffered when they are in training. To that end he has spent upwards of

20 million developing a system which aims, as far as possible, to eliminate human error in the physical and mental preparation of horses.

Racehorses start competing at two but they are still growing at the age of three and four, and arguments have continued for many decades over the wisdom of racing them so early. Some have argued that the earlier you start hard training the stronger and more resilient the animals become. Others, though the economics of racing make it unlikely, would prefer to see them started later. Mr Kurt sees no reason why two-year olds should not be raced but he has devised a system that enables horses to be prepared slowly and steadily so that their bones and muscles grow in a balanced way and which avoids them being soured at an early stage by grumpy stable lads sawing at the mouths of nervous animals after a heavy night.

After lengthy experimentation with motorcycle- and car-driven contraptions, Mr Kurt has developed a monorail which runs around a seven-furlong sand track. Beneath it runs a linked series of two-horse capsules or cabins, open at the front, to which the horses are attached by bands around their bodies. Initially as foals they carry no weights and cover only short distances.

Unridden, they walk, trot and slow canter as the operator alters the monorail speed.

As the animals' strength grows the pace and the number of circuits are increased and weights, but not yet jockeys, are added.

Progress is recorded not just by noting the horses' bone development and muscle tone but with heart monitors and spirometers to measure breathing as well.

The big question is: does it work? My first reaction on seeing the system in operation was similar to that of trainer Andrew Balding, who races horses with great success at Turkey's leading meeting: 'It looks like something out of a James Bond film.'

But like me he was amazed by how well the horses seemed to adapt to the system and would have no worries about a horse being subjected to it for pre-training. 'They can certainly get more exercise than they would do otherwise.'

Mechanistic it may be, but walking through a pack of Kurt yearlings in the paddock as they jostled, bragged and nipped each others' necks while playing grandmother's footsteps with us there was no doubt that these were happy horses. He works closely with veterinary scientists and while he has no scientific dossier yet to offer conclusive proof he says that 70 or 80 per cent of his horses brought up by traditional methods used to suffer injuries in training.

Now he reckons that is down below 10 per cent. Results have been beneficial for trotters and camels, too, and there are obvious advantages for horses in rehab after injury being handled by Kurtsystems.

We will have to wait and see what he can achieve here, but this is an enterprise as much concerned with animal welfare as with potential profit and therefore doubly welcome at this troubled time in Britain's racing history. We should not neglect the commercial possibilities. As one senior Jockey Club official and owner put it to me at Veliefendi, 'In racing we are all looking for an edge. It could just be that this is the system to provide us with one.'