Luck shines with ILDRA

Thursday 16th July saw the Irish Endurance Team from all over Ireland start the Long journey to Ludlow Shropshire for the annual Home International and Celtic Challenge Competitions, against teams from Scotland, England, Wales and Cornwall. With all horses travelling well the day before, Friday saw the official start to the weekend's endurance with the team vetting. With the weather being so beautiful in the past weeks no one expected to see the heavens open. Despite the rain all team horses passed the intense vet checks with all achieving low heart rates and trotting up well.

With everyone tucked up for the night, Saturday came very quickly and at 8.30am Robyn Catterall on Ellanora and Thomas Roche on Jaisone set off on their 1st 160km ER (100miles). They were accompanied by experienced Co.Down rider, Helen McFarland on Just C'Mall who was riding in the 120km (75miles) class. 10mins later ILDRA's newest members Carmel Quinn on Bluebell and Aisling Byrnes on Polly set off on their 1st 80km ER (50miles). Both girls have successfully completed their bronze, silver and gold shamrocks this year, only the 3rd and 4th riders to do so in ILDRA's 19th year of running.

With all five riders safely over the busy railway crossing they headed out across Oakly Park and towards Bringewood. Reports had come back of very muddy and slippery conditions and this was definitely the case because by the time the riders had arrived at checkpoint 1, three greys had indeed become skewbald. Well watered the five headed through checkpoint 2 and towards Leinthall Earls at checkpoint 3 where ILDRA's static crew, John and Margaret Gilpin were anxiously waiting. Mars bars galore kept the riders going to the 1st vet gate where their crews had been stocking up on water from John Anderson's van.

Back at the venue Cora Roche on Beancroft Joe Hatter, Allison Sloan on Madison and Hannah Catterall on Holly's Dream Flight set out on the first day of their 80km 2day CTR. With the same mud problems their spirits were kept high by the constant chatting from Hannah. Time soon flew by and before they knew it they were back at the venue. With a nod from Cora, 14 year old Hannah picked up the pace (the finish after all was on a race course) and the 3 girls crossed the line with smiles. With 40km done and 40km to go, their concentration quickly turned to the other riders out on course. Much to the relief of the team chef, Larry O'Neill, it wasn't long before they were all safely home.

With a little bit of Irish luck all horses safely made it through the trot up on day 2 and with only 40km to complete Helen was soon out on course. Heavy rain through the night had made a tough course even tougher and by the time Robyn and Thomas started it looked like the rain was there for the day.

After the longest change of a horse's shoes in history, Allison, Cora and Hannah were joined by novice riders Kate Russell on Ultimate Pride and Jenni Cunningham from Ballygowan who is riding on the team for the first time on Breeze. Husbands and Parents sighed a huge relief as they waved them off. Two teenage girls and three women mmmmmm!!! Although I was later informed that they couldn't do much talking as the tracks were narrow and they had to ride in single file.

Meanwhile already on course was Judith Hyndman on Misty and Brona Kearney on Charmer. They were riding a total of 50km (31miles) Misty was a reserve horse and was given to Judith after her young Arab went lame only a few days before travelling and Brona, who suffers from Fredricks Ataxia was attempting to complete her forth year on the team. With Helen and the rest of the ladies all home safe, excitement stared to build as Ireland were now a strong contender for both competitions.

While some ILDRA members groomed Kate's horse Pride, for the pending parade of competitors, the rest went out on course to give encouragement to Robyn, Thomas and a Scottish girl, Lorna Hogg, who had been riding with them. Literally only a few miles from home a sea of Irish green and Scottish blue gathered at the finish line with flags flying and cameras at the ready. Instead of the noise of a train, a cheer was heard and the supporters knew that the riders had entered the racecourse. To rapturous applause and cheers, the riders crossed the line. An even bigger cheer went up from all when the vets said pass to the three riders. What a finish!

With all competitors home, spectators were given a chance to see the riders in their nation's colours at the parade. Cornwall took first prize for best turned out in the Celtic Challenge while Ireland took first prize in the Home International. I think it was the green shamrocks painted on Pride's hooves by Jenni that clinched it.

Ireland's luck stayed with them as they picked up 1st place in both the Celtic Challenge and the Home International team competitions and then went on to win the overall top nation. The prizes didn't stop there with Helen taking first place in the 120km class and Robyn taking 2nd and Thomas taking 3rd respectively in the 160km class.

An extremely proud chef, Larry, was still on cloud nine when he reached his home in Donard, Co. Wicklow and he would like to thank all riders, crews and supporters who had taken the time to travel across. Congratulations to Larry and all the riders.

Celtic Challenge Team
Hannah Catterall, Alison Sloan, Kate Russell, Thomas Roche,
Judith Hyndman and Aisling Byrnes
with Chef D'Equipe Larry O'Neill

Home International Team
Robyn Catterall, Brona Kearney, Cora Roche, Jenni Cunningham,
Carmel Quinn and Helen McFarland
with Chef D'Equipe Larry O'Neill