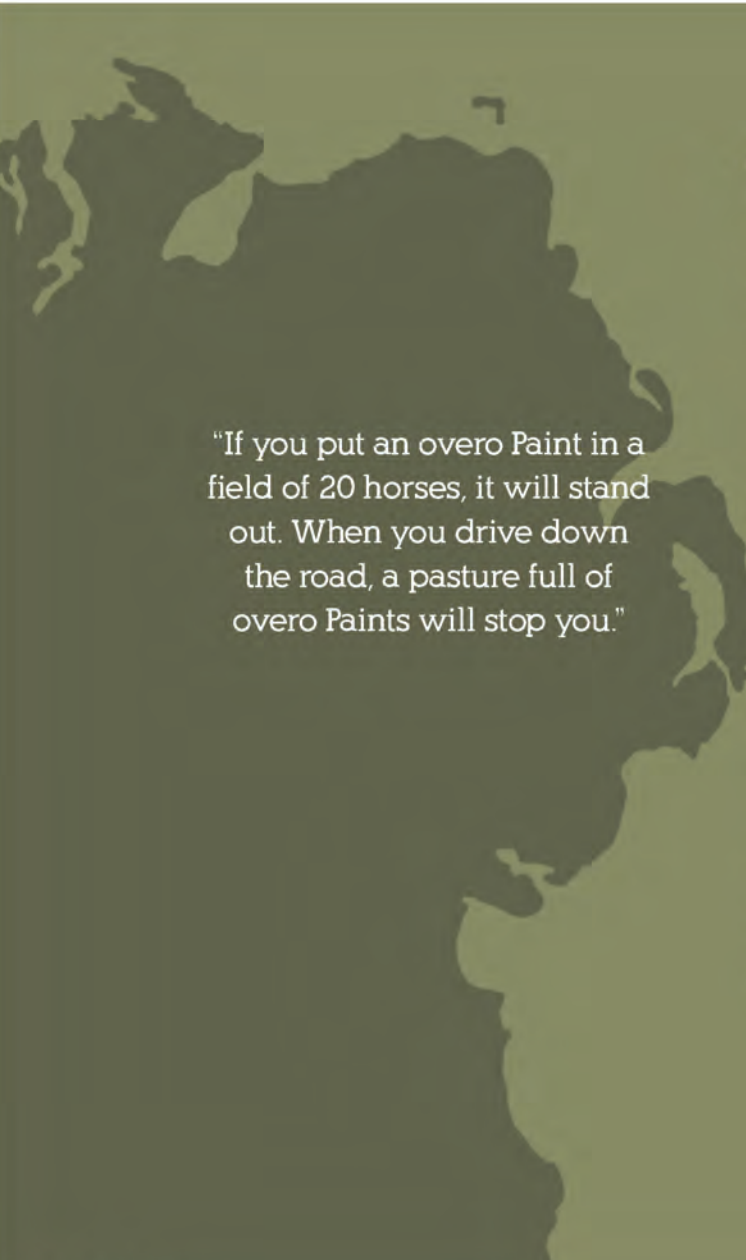


Painting the Emerald Isle



Article & photography by
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While colorful horses aren't new to Irish equine enthusiasts, Stephen Cox's homebred overo Paint Horses are turning the tide and bringing riders over to the Western way of life.



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The rain landed so lightly and quietly, whispering downward from the gray, overcast sky, that one might not recognize it was falling, at least until not until you feel the drops caress your cheeks upon stepping outdoors. The soaking rain, in stereotypical Irish fashion, lasted all day, but the moisture only enhanced the white splashed across the overo Paints trotting over the vibrant green pastures in County Kildare. A herd of Paint Horses, wet or dry, always catches one's eye, and horseman Stephen Cox is banking on that fact.

Bull Horn Ranch, near Carbury in County Kildare, Ireland, is home to a herd of loudly colored Irish-bred Paint Horses. The cowboy way of life is thriving on the Emerald Isle, though horse lovers and tourists might have to dig a little deeper to find it.

“If you put an overo Paint in a field of 20 horses, it will stand out,” Stephen said. “When you drive down the road, a pasture full of overo Paints will stop you. This country is crying out for good, loud Paints, and I am breeding them.”

With studied bloodlines, intense self-instruction on the ins and outs of Western events, and a laser-like focus on his goal, Stephen is building a Paint Horse following in Ireland and across Europe. It's the start of a wave—the quake that begins a tsunami, he hopes—that will paint the Emerald Isle and its love of sport horses in black, white, red, tobiano and overo.

TRADITIONAL TABOO?

Counted among the most recognizable horse breeds in Ireland are the Connemara pony, the Irish Cobb and the Kerry Bog. Horse-racing enthusiasts, however, know Ireland breeds quality Thoroughbreds for both racing and jumping, and the Irish Sport Horse—a cross between an Irish Draught and a Thoroughbred—is well known for being a hardy and athletic competition horse. But soon, the Irish Paint Horse might join the ranks of these venerable breeds.

Stephen has been breeding Paint Horses in Ireland for more than 15 years. His vibrant overos attract riders, buyers and general horse lovers due to their stocky build and unique markings. The horses he's bred are spread through-

out the island, have been shipped to Poland and France, and are making a splash of color among the sorrels, chestnuts and bays. However, it was not long ago that Paint-like markings raised Irish eyebrows for a different reason.

"Colored horses were a taboo in Ireland about 30 or 40 years ago; [they were considered] Gypsy horses, traveler horses," Stephen said. "People wouldn't touch them. They called any color piebald or skewbald. They were not regarded highly."

Yet when Stephen was 7 years old, he spied a true Paint Horse—one without feathers draping over its hooves or the cob's customary large head—and set out to learn more about these horses. As the years progressed, colorful Irish Sport Horses competing at high levels have also helped pave the way for the horse-loving Irish public to appreciate horses of a different color, and Stephen's found they have a special affinity for overo Paints.

"In the Irish Sport Horse, people saw a horse with color that could hunt and jump. Tobianos were brought in, and they began seeing tobiano horses. It became a fashion to have a colored horse," Stephen said. "Years back, I was at a sale and you couldn't give a colored horse away. Then, after some [Irish Sport Horses] did well, an 8-month-old foal went for 12,000 Euros and he was out of a colored horse. It was unheard of. It just took off!"

With the horse public turning tide toward appreciating a painted horse,

Stephen dove into his dream of owning a facility that could breed and train Paints in Western disciplines while also catering to tourism and riding lessons.

A COWBOY, THEN A HORSEMAN

The tan truck bumped through the stonewall opening that led to the pasture housing Bullhorn Chic Hancock and two mares. Stephen's eldest son, Séan, sat in the driver's seat on the right side, shifting gears with his left hand—quite odd to a visiting American—and honked the horn. Stephen closed the gate and gestured toward the tree line.

"'Shotgun' will come right from those trees," Stephen said. "I have horses here and around because we don't have the facility complete. All my gear is in the truck. There are not many people in Ireland who drive around in a truck and wear a cowboy hat every day; it's part of what I do."

As Stephen had predicted, Shotgun, a 2011 black overo stallion by Allstar Crash Hancock, appeared from the tree line and trotted up to the visitors. Stephen saddled him, with the help of Séan and his younger son Stephen, then worked the fresh out as the two joined up in John Lyons-style of training. It's a dance they do easily, routinely. Like a seasoned horseman, Stephen waits and watches for the signs indicating that Shotgun is ready to listen: the flick of an ear, a dropped head, an eye trained on the Irish cowboy.









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Growing up, Stephen’s family used horses to work their farms, employing the beasts daily through the 1970s. The young man was keen on anything cowboy—horses, Wild West movies and Western riding. With a wiry build and enthusiasm for all things equine, Stephen often worked with newly started colts or horses known to buck, and he devoured books on the early teachings of Monty Roberts and Pat Parelli. And while horses might have been in his blood at an early age, it was Hollywood that introduced Stephen to the Paint Horse.

“One film sticks out in my head—*The Big Country* with Gregory Peck and Charlton Heston,” Stephen said. “The overo Paint Charlton Heston rode in the film always stood out. Since then, I’ve always had a love of colored horses.”

Like many other enthusiasts living far from the true West, Stephen embarked on his education of Western riding through books, videos and the occasional Western-focused clinician traveling to Ireland to conduct a seminar or clinic; in-person learning opportunities were

few and far between.

In spite of the challenges to pursue his chosen riding path and become a Western trainer, Stephen stuck it out. He and his wife, Sinead, thrived under his construction job, and their prosperity allowed Stephen to pursue his dream of owning a Paint Horse—one who had the potential of becoming the cornerstone of his own Paint breeding operation in Ireland.

Like many stock horse owners outside of North America, Stephen had to import his dream horse. Breezezy Country, a 1995 black overo stallion by Country J Son Cody and out of Miss Bucks Breeze, left Ohio for Ireland in 2004.

“I found him in the *Paint Horse Journal*,” Stephen said. “He was nicely trained, about 14.3 hands and of stock-horse conformation. I had him about a year, stood him at stud and then he had an accident. He got kicked by a mare and broke his leg. It happens, but it was hard for me. The experience taught me more about how to bring over good horses to continue breeding.”

BOOM TO BUST

As it goes, misery loves company, and Stephen was not the only horse enthusiast about to be hit by hard times.

The 2007 worldwide economic recession and drastically reduced recreational activity income hit Ireland especially hard, snuffing out the country’s fledgling interest in Western riding as horse owners and lesson-takers had to tighten their belts.

“People before the recession, they had a general interest. The recession in this country put a lot of people on the road,” Stephen said. “People couldn’t afford their horses.”

Stephen watched friends and neighbors give up on Ireland altogether, leaving the country in search of opportunities abroad in Australia or Canada. He thought about leaving too, but his vested interest promoting Western riding in Ireland kept Stephen planted on the island.

“The recession killed riding in Ireland. Now, it is coming back,” Stephen said. “People are spending the money for a horse—and colored horses. It is fashionable.”



FASHIONABLE ENTERPRISE

A wide, tall, slate-gray tour bus squeezes between Stephen's truck and the stacked stonewall, barely making it through before barreling down the narrow Irish road. Here in Carbury, close to Dublin and on the route toward the Ring of Kerry tourist destinations, buses are not in short supply. It's the tourism factor that has Stephen itching to build his Bull Horn Ranch.

"Three years ago, we bought land and are developing it now. I believe if you want something, take the bull by the horns and take it on," Stephen said. "I want a facility, a clean place for people to come, see the horses, learn to ride, take a trail ride and maybe buy a horse."

Currently, there are only two facilities dedicated to Western riding in Ireland; Stephen's ranch will make three. In contrast, there are more than three times as many English facilities that cater to tourists looking to ride across the fields or along a beach.

Tourism, Stephen says, will bolster the Paint Horse breeding business—and it's the driving force behind the horseman's plans.

"We need more horses. It is crying out here for Western! I can only breed five or six [horses] a year, and I breed for overos," he said. "This country is crying out for good, loud Paints. I ride a Paint because I like standing out. People are spending more on leisure than they were years ago, and horses and riding are getting the interest."



"This country is crying out for good, loud Paints."



The architecture plans for Bull Horn Ranch sprawl across the Cox family's dining table and show a multi-use facility that will not only house horses but also a tack store. Stephen plans to offer riding lessons and trail-riding ventures. The property is near Board Na Mona, Irish state land, and Stephen has access to the many trails and acres to ride.

Few custom leather craftsmen in Ireland and England can make a Western saddle or a pair of chaps, so Stephen typically has to import his tack and riding apparel—it's another challenge for those who desire to ride Western in Ireland. With the high cost of importing goods, and issues with cost and postal delivery of leather items from other countries, Stephen recognizes an untapped market.

"We need a Western tack store. We have to get it from America, and the cost is high," he said. "There is work here, for tack and for horses. That is my plan."

Stephen is well on his way to building a herd of quality Paints trained in barrels, poles, reining and cow-horse events, yet suitable to pack tourists along the Board Na Mona trails. He has eight horses of riding age under saddle, with four younger mounts coming along. Soon, Ireland might well be a must-see Western riding destination.

Bull Horn Ranch, Stephen hopes, will be a one-stop shop for all things Western. With a solid foundation of horses coming to riding age and an eye to improve and increase Western-riding offerings in Ireland, Stephen hopes to re-energize the Irish Paint Horse Club, which has been inactive for a number of years. After all, he is turning the traditional green fields to black and white with his Paints. 🐾

Horse Haven

Waterford Crystal, rolling hills and whiskey aren't the only attractions that bring tourists to Ireland. Vacationers flock to the horseback-riding opportunities available from outside Dublin to the Ring of Kerry and west, to the beaches of Cleggan. Here are some hot spots to plan for a visit.

- Dartfield Country Estate and Horse Museum – Loughrea, County Galway; dartfield.com
- Dublin Horse Show – Dublin, County Leinster; dublinhorseshow.com
- Fethard Horse Country Experience – Fethard, County Tipperary; fhcexperience.com
- Insh National Stud – Tully, County Kildare; inshnationalstud.ie

East Goes Western

The Western riding industry is small but enthusiastic in Ireland. Look up these facilities and groups to continue learning about this growing segment of the Western horse industry.

- Bull Horn Ranch – Carbury, County Kildare; bullhornranch.com
- Drumcoura Equine Center – Ballinamore, County Leitrim; drumcoura.ie
- Fossey Mountain Springs Ranch – Timahoe, County Laois; fosseymountainsprings.com/apha