

# GOING BEHIND THE SCENES AT ONE OF THE MOST EQUINE-DIVERSE AND HISTORIC OPERATIONS



**Aisling Crowe**  
meets an eclectic group of stallions  
at Tullaghansleek Stud in County  
Westmeath

**T**HE stone walls that attend the driveway up to Tullaghansleek Stud are as solid as the days they were laid by hand, generations ago, and the earthen mounds of the double ring fort stand to attention as rigidly now as they have done for centuries.

People have lived in this Westmeath townland for millennia and, as long as humans have inhabited this midlands dwelling, horses must have accompanied them.

Tullaghansleek Stud has a history on this land all of its own, and while the Carey family has stood stallions in this ancient place for more than 160 years, the farm, with all its store of success, its archive of knowledge, is but a child when such long years of life are counted up.

Still, in all that time, there have been few storms like the one which ripped across the land last month, Eowyn's fury laid bare in the fallen trees that remain on the fields and in the hedges.

The wind's ferocious power is visible too in the stallion box, now open to the skies and elements and that was supposed to be home to



Lecky Watson: heading to the festival next month

Tullaghansleek's new thoroughbred sire until Eowyn in her rage plucked the roof of the building and deposited it in chunks around the land.

The hay shed which holds the grain for a farm that is probably one of the very few remaining to successfully combine standing

thoroughbred, Sporthorse and Connemara stallions, was not spared the storm's wrath, but the grain store was saved by some ingenuity on the part of Tim Carey, the sixth

generation of the family to stand stallions at Tullaghansleek.

Valirann, sire of Cheltenham Grade 1 aspirants Lecky Watson and Potters Charm, was purchased by the Careys from the O'Neill family of Whytemount Stud and is standing for the first time in Westmeath this season.

The handsome son of Nayef is clearly the apple of both father and daughter's eye.

"He's such a good-looking horse, you'd be surprised if he didn't get a good one - his conformation is excellent, he has brilliant front legs and a powerful hip with a beautiful head," enthuses Tim as he watches the now 15-year-old parade in the yard with Claire. In Potters Charm and Lecky

Watson, along with Knappers Hill and Val Dancer, Valirann sired more than one good one in the ten seasons he spent at Whytemount in County Kilkenny.

History, which is everywhere in the present at Tullaghansleek, could have been different, mind, and Valirann might always have resided in Westmeath following the end of his racing career.

"I was following him for a while and I was late on the ball originally," Carey admits of a missed opportunity - but he was never going to make the same mistake twice.

"I kept seeing stock by him that was very nice and his results on the track were always noteworthy," he says.

"His strike-rate is very good. Out of every 100 runners, he has 33 winners. "He's had a Welsh National winner and

Lecky Watson: heading to the festival next month

**HE'S SUCH A GOOD-LOOKING HORSE - HIS CONFORMATION IS EXCELLENT, HE HAS BRILLIANT FRONT LEGS AND A POWERFUL HIP WITH A BEAUTIFUL HEAD**



Claire Carey with Valirann at Tullaghansleek Stud where she will be the seventh generation of her family to stand stallions

two Graded winners this season - Lecky Watson and Potters Charm - plus a raft of horses who have been placed in black-type races.

"You can't buy a middling horse because the competition is so keen."

**V**ALIRANN'S strike-rate in National Hunt black-type races is impressive, albeit from a small sample. The

Group 2 Prix Chaudenay and Group 3 Prix de Lutèce winner has three winners from six runners in that arena: Grade 1 Formby Novices' Hurdle and Grade 2 Hyde Novices' Hurdle winner Potters Charm, Lecky Watson, who won a Grade 3 novice chase at Punchestown last month, and Val Dancer, successful in the Grade 3 Welsh Grand National and third last weekend in Haydock's Grand National Trial.

Of Ireland's living National Hunt sires, only Walk In The Park, Mahler, Affinisea and Getaway have sired more stakes winners this season

than Valirann, whose three winners tie him with Jukebox Jury and Yeats.

Valirann has more than Blue Bresil and Diamond Boy, among others, from fewer runners, and his highest advertised fee from his time at Whytemount was €2,000, which he stood at in each of the last three seasons.

Valirann too has a rich history, a theme which you cannot, and do not want to, escape in these parts.

He was bred by the recently deceased Aga Khan, and won four of his five starts, which all came as a three-year-old for Alain de Royer-Dupre and his owner-breeder. Valirann's only defeat was on his debut when runner-up.

A half-brother to the Prix de Diane winner Valyra, by Azamour, he is also a half-brother to the Listed Prix Matchem winner Valiy, by Alhaarth, and the Listed-placed Valasrya, who is by Sinnadar.

Valasrya is the dam of the Listed-placed Vadsariya, by Exceed And Excel, and Varana, a daughter of Sea The Stars who is herself the dam of the Listed Prix de la Cocherre winner Varkesha.

Valirann's dam Valima is by the enormously influential Linamix, sire of the excellent National Hunt stallion Martaline, among others, and she was successful at Listed

level in the Prix Imprudence.

She, like her sire, was among the 222 horses the late Aga Khan purchased, along with Haras du Val Henry, from the estate of their breeder Jean-Luc Lagardere 20 years ago.

The pedigree is there, the performance too. And while he covered small numbers of mares in recent years, just nine last year and 11 in 2023, he received 64 mares the previous year. Without enormous representation, Valirann has made his name and there is more to come.

Claire Carey says: "He has a crop of four-year-olds now that could be anything. He has plenty of horses to represent him, it's just a matter of going out and doing it."

Tim adds: "He was a good racehorse and is from a top Aga Khan family, he's French-bred too so ticks all the right boxes."

His progeny do too. Tim's sleuthing unearthed the potential of Potters Charm before the now six-year-old had jumped a hurdle in public, but the man who travelled to the Rocky Mountains to learn the secrets of AI knew the Twiston-Davies team were as secure as one could be in the solidity of their £105,000 investment at the 2023 Tattersalls Cheltenham December Sale.

Potters Charm rather disappointed when weakening

Unbeaten in his two chases, only his stablemate and Grade 1 winners Ballyburn and Dancing City, and Gordon Elliott's Croke Park and Brighter Days Ahead, are shorter than him in the market for the Brown Advisory Novices' Chase.

"If Lecky Watson jumps well at Cheltenham, I think he'll take a lot of beating," says Carey of the eight-year-old.

There is the pleasant symmetry of Val Dancer's Chepstow success to aid Valirann's assimilation into the Tullaghansleek fold, as he joins Golden Lariat, sire of 2022 Irish Grand National winner Lord Lariat.

The son of Mr Prospector, almost certainly the last stallion at stud by the great progenitor, spans the decades between New Frontier and Valirann as thoroughbred stallions at Tullaghansleek, with New Frontier, bred on the reverse of Golden Lariat's Mr Prospector-Sadler's Wells cross, siring an Irish National winner himself in Lion Na Bearnaí.

While those triumphs came for the smaller owner, breeder and trainer, Valirann has reached across the spectrum and is already attracting mares to Westmeath who have never travelled the narrow country road past the Kilbeggan Distillery to Tullaghansleek.

Tim says: "He's as good-looking as you can get, with great depth, and he's the right height, 16.1 ½ hands. My late father used to say that 16.1 was the right height, 16.2 and no more, so he's in between the two. I think a good-bodied horse is very important."

With a mixture of Irish Draught, Sporthorse and Connemara stallions, not to mention the Singapore Cup winner Shadow Gate, by White Muzzle and out of a Sunday Silence mare, to cater for the discerning breeder, one thing stands out; all of these sires, from the top-class dressage star and Irish Draught Steeped In Luck, to Gwennic De Goariva, who on three occasions has been crowned leading Connemara sire at the Horse of the Year Show, and Another Pleasure, the Dutch Nations Cup star and son of the era-defining For Pleasure, excel in their disciplines.

Valirann is joining the elite.

While each of the areas they have performed in are distinct, and Connemara ponies, Irish Draughts, Dutch Warmbloods and thoroughbreds all look different from each other, some more different than others, are there similarities between them all?

Yes is the answer from Claire.

"If you were to put them all out in the yard you'd obviously know they're not the same breed, but essentially you're looking for very similar attributes: the front leg, the joints, the hip, the walk is so important, and they need a good shoulder," she says.

"You need a little bit of height but you don't want a massive horse; you don't want them to be very big for a Grand Prix horse either. They won't look the same in type, but essentially it's the same across the board."

When it's put to her that handling all of these sires places her in the minority of stallion grooms, particularly in the thoroughbred industry, it's clear that it's not really a thought she dwells on.

Working with stallions, both live covers and AI, is just what she does.

"I think there's a misconception about stallions," she says. "I think in many ways they're straightforward. It's different now too, horses are handled better and the facilities have improved as well."

**H**AVING grown up immersed in stud life, Claire worked at Darley's

Kildangan Stud after attending college and then took her skills and knowledge around the world, following a path not all that different from her father.

She says: "I did Australia a few times and Canada loads; my uncle stands stallions in Toronto [Westmeath Stud in Ontario], so for years I went over there for the sales, which are in August, and then I'd go down to Keeneland and do the sales there too. I've worked in France and New Zealand as well."

While the stallion business is much more segregated now, with most farms concentrating on just one type of horse, the boundaries between the rest of the business are much more fluid.

Coolmore are huge backers of leading showjumper Cian O'Connor, with John Magnier's grandsons Tom and Max Wachman trained by the Olympian and now competing on Nations Cup teams for Ireland. At the elite level in both businesses there is crossover, and that continues down through every grade.

"It's a different element of it," says Claire. "You'd do business at thoroughbred sales for showjumping stallions! Every year at the sales I'd meet clients who use Another Pleasure and Gwennic, so it's all connected."

As for the latest on his new charge, who is bay, in contrast to her sister who was grey, Prescott said: "She's grand. She had a worrying start when everything went wrong for the first three weeks, when the poor owner had three terrible phone calls from me, but ever since then she's been fine."

Prescott's yard opens out onto Warren Hill, where Alpinara is out most days.

He said: "She canter well and, as we told everybody at the time, she doesn't look anything like Alpinista. She's better looking than Alpinista was at this stage and is bigger and more imposing."



**Joorabchian** maintains family tradition as he names sister of Arc ace Alpinista

**David Miles**  
Newmarket correspondent

an aggregate of nearly 20 million guineas.

Prescott said: "As you can imagine, Miss Rausing is very pleased with Kia in keeping with the Al tradition going with Alpinara.

"It's a family name that goes all the way back and includes Albanova and Alborada, sisters who I trained."

As for the latest on his new charge, who is bay, in contrast to her sister who was grey, Prescott said: "She's grand. She had a worrying start when everything went wrong for the first three weeks, when the poor owner had three terrible phone calls from me, but ever since then she's been fine."

Prescott's yard opens out onto Warren Hill, where Alpinara is out most days.

He said: "She canter well and, as we told everybody at the time, she doesn't look anything like Alpinista. She's better looking than Alpinista was at this stage and is bigger and more imposing."

"At this point, no-one thought Alpinista would win six Group 1s including the Arc, as she just looked a nice ordinary filly. She wasn't prepossessing, but this filly is scope."

Alpinista won first time up at Epsom in July, but Alpinara looks more like her granddam Albanova, who won first time at Haydock in September, and it could be she would be more likely to be ready around then."