

Straight from the horse's mouth

After a decade as team veterinarian for the Irish show jumping and eventing teams, Marcus Swail stepped down in 2013 to focus on his veterinary practice, which specialises in lameness and performance loss in sport horses and race horses

Equine sports medicine is the main focus for the EquiVET Ireland practice owned by veterinary surgeon, Marcus Swail and based in Rathangan, Co Kildare. "We specialise in the investigation of lameness and performance loss in sport horses and race horses. We also do a lot of pre-purchase exams with many of those horses who are expected to be exported to the UK, US and Scandinavian markets.

"It's much narrower in scope than what most of my other veterinary colleagues do. For example, my typical daily duties as an equine practitioner can include: a foal with a cough or a temperature; a horse with colic; a horse with cuts and injuries; or checking a mare to see if she is in foal.

"We also focus on horses that are lame, not jumping to the best of their ability, or becoming difficult on the left rein. I, myself, won a European medal in pony show jumping and I also have a brother who is in the top 30 in the world rankings in show jumping, so I have, perhaps, more of an interest in that particular discipline. In terms of my main speciality, it would have to be lameness investigation."

Marcus says that although veterinary work is one of the best jobs – satisfaction-wise – to be in, work-life balance continues to be one of the most difficult challenges for many in the profession.

"I sometimes feel it's more a way of life than a job at times. You never really get away from it; however, the passion and motivation behind the work is why most people get into the veterinary field.

"As a teenager, riding ponies competitively, I always had great admiration for what vets were able to do in caring for my ponies when problems arose. I remembered having a mare, who had colic and although it was a very worrying experience, my vet, Bruce Steele, arrived at our house, and the way he handled the situation and resolved the problem was probably the turning point for me in deciding to do this job. Bruce is also now a colleague of mine."

IRELAND'S TEAM VETERINARIAN

The hours involved in Marcus's work are comparable to most other vet hours – start early and finish late. Marcus says he is better off than most in this regard. "The nature of my work is that most of it is elective rather than emergency. Therefore, I don't have to work out-of-hours as much as other vets would have to and can manage to get most Sundays off. I also travel a fair bit with work, to do pre-purchase exams and client work overseas. That always sounds more glamorous than it is, it's mostly long hours and hard work!"

Marcus stepped down as Ireland's team veterinarian in 2013, after three Olympic Games, including 2012's London Games, two World Equestrian Games and several European Championships. Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) paid tribute to him, saying he had done an outstanding job for the Irish



Marcus at work in his EquiVET practice.

teams and for HSI. Marcus said family life was one of the main reasons for his stepping down.

"I have three small children with my wife Niamh, all under seven – six, four and three years old. They were my main motivation for stepping down from the teamwork in 2013. I think getting a good work-life balance is still the biggest issue for most of vets."

However, Marcus says that in terms of opportunities, vets have experienced a difficult business environment for the last number of years. Hopefully, he says, there will be an opportunity for the profession to be better rewarded in the future, for the long hours and difficult work that vets undertake.

Marcus started out as team vet with the Irish under-age teams in 2000. In 2003, he was asked to work with the senior eventing team and in 2004, the senior show jumping team also asked him to work with them. "My involvement increased further when I set up my current EquiVet practice in 2008 and when I also attended all the Nations Cup shows with the show jumping team. This effectively meant that from April to September, I was travelling every second week to some kind of competition. I continued in that role until 2013 when I decided to step down.

"The highlight of my career as team vet was always working with the talented riders and horses. I also enjoyed being



professionally tested in the difficult environment that is competition at the highest level of the sport. Working with the riders is probably the aspect I miss most. However, now during my time off I like to ski and snowboard in the winter, and am a fanatical mountain biker all year round. I compete in the Irish Enduro Series and do a couple of races in Europe each year. I feel it's good to have a pastime that doesn't involve a horse!"

FUTURE FOR THE PROFESSION

Marcus says that the profession is becoming increasingly specialised, which he considers vital for its future development. He says his interest in new technologies and emerging techniques contributed to his enjoyment of continuous veterinary education (CVE) and continuous professional development (CPD) courses. "I lecture at conferences, which also contribute to my interest in ongoing developments in the profession. My late colleague and one of the great influences on my work, Ned Gowing, was forward-thinking and open to new ideas throughout his entire career. I think that is how it should be and it's important that the public have confidence that Irish practitioners are at the forefront of best current practice. "I feel the main advances at the moment are in diagnostic imaging. Digital radiography has significantly developed over what was previously available and the newer ultrasound machines are excellent. We also have advanced imaging techniques, such as scintigraphy and MRI, which has dramatically improved our ability to understand and manage bone and soft tissue injuries," he says. Mental health is also a real concern in the profession, according to Marcus.

"The majority of my successful colleagues are durable, mentally tough people. I think the nature of the job is such

that you need to be like that to be able to do it over a long period. Thankfully, awareness around mental health has improved greatly in the last few years, both within the profession and within the country as a whole." Overall, Marcus says he feels that he would still have chosen the veterinary profession.

"Unless I could find the talent to be some kind of top-level sportsman, I think I would always have become a vet!"



Competing in his favourite extracurricular activity – mountain biking.