

You're thinking this fella could be worth the price of a small farm' - Meet the headmaster of the school for jumpers

John Nallen has an eye for a foal that can be turned into a highly valuable racehorse

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John Nallen: 'They're toys for big boys and you just keep moving them on. It's about getting them over the line.' Photo: Dylan Vaughan

John Nallen is an important cog in the National Hunt racing sector and yet the regular follower of the sport knows nothing about him. When people think of Minella Indo, Minella Melody and Notebook, Henry de Bromhead and Rachael Blackmore readily come to mind. Yet Nallen is a common denominator from before the trio ever rocked up to Knockeen. That they were reared by him on feed bought from Blackmore's father Charles is just another delicious little twist. Notebook and Minella Melody are favourites for the Arkle Chase and Mares' Novices' Hurdle at Cheltenham this week. Minella Indo is second favourite for the RSA Chase.

All three were taught the intricacies of racing and jumping by Nallen and his team. It is a stupendous return to have three novices with such serious chances at the most important, most competitive National Hunt meeting of the year, given the number of young horses entering the system annually.

For good measure, another Nallen protégé, Minella Rocco, is second favourite for the Foxhunter Chase. Nallen's first winner at the Festival when claiming the National Hunt Chase in 2016 - Indo followed up in the Albert Bartlett Hurdle last year - Rocco has also finished second in a Gold Cup.



Minella Till Dawn, Minella Fair and Minella Charmer hold entries in a number of the handicaps too.

By now, readers will have noticed a common thread, and the one obvious exception, which we will come to. The Minella prefix comes from the Clonmel hotel Nallen runs with his sister Liz Bowen. It is ubiquitous, particularly in Britain, where they joke that it is only a matter of time before a race is contested entirely by Minellas.

What makes the success rate even more incredible is that unlike most of his peers in the point-to-point production business, the majority of his graduates have been brought through from when they were foals.

The model employed so successfully by the likes of Colin Bowe, Donnchadh Doyle and others is purchase three-year-old stores in May and June, put them through an intensive education process to have them ready to win a four-year-old maiden early the following year and sell them quickly.

With the eye-watering sums of money forked out now by rich patrons in search of ready-to-run racehorses, the price of these untested stores has rocketed. Nallen still searches the market for value but he is now more active at foal sales.

he advantage with that is that the initial outlay is significantly lower. The risks are higher, however, in terms of even having a horse three, four and five years down the line. So much can go wrong in that timespan.

Nallen has an eye though, and he has contacts. He learned from his parents Babs and Jack. They were immersed in greyhounds too and the sale of one particularly good hound funded the purchase of Hotel Minella and the land at Lavally, where the equine operation is based.

"We've been very lucky over the last eight or nine years," he says. "We try to buy good stock. Sometimes we buy three-year-olds but mostly we buy them as foals and rear them. The foals are the best job as you have the first of them. You could end up with a three-year-old that's a very valuable store but you couldn't buy him as a store because he's too expensive. Foals are getting more expensive now but the stores are on a different level altogether."

Liz's 14-year-old son Seán is a talented rider on the pony racing scene and a key member of his uncle's group of horsemen, along with James 'Corky' Carroll and Johnny Barry. Barry rode Notebook, Minella Indo and Minella Melody to their point-to-point triumphs.

Notebook is the only one of hundreds of horses that passed through Nallen's hands without the Minella moniker. He is also the sole graduate to carry Gigginstown House Stud's maroon colours.

"He already had his name registered when we bought him as a foal in Goffs. Michael O'Leary wouldn't buy the Minellas. 'I'm not advertising your hotel for you' he said, and I said 'Fair enough so!'" recalls a laughing Nallen.

There have been plenty of other buyers but it was fortunate for O'Leary that Notebook's German breeders had already registered a name for the son of Samum, a very unusual occurrence for a foal.

Not many had him slated for stardom after an underwhelming hurdling career, but Nallen was convinced by what he had seen in the effortless maiden success at Dromahane in a lightning quick time.

"Notebook is probably the best horse to jump we ever had," he said in an interview in *The Irish Field* last July, before the horse had made his track debut over the larger obstacles. "He was no star this year but he could be anything over fences next year I think."

He wasn't lying "I couldn't understand last year," he says now. "I told somebody the first day he ran (over hurdles), 'This horse won't be beaten'. He was second to another Gigginstown horse (the ill-fated Sometime Soon). I couldn't understand it because we thought that on good ground he was the real deal."

A four out of four record chasing confirms the belief, the latter two at Grade 1 level where leading rivals, Fakir D'oudairies and Cash Back were victims, the former in receipt of seven pounds that won't be available to him at Cheltenham.

Notebook's considerable over-exuberance prior to his most recent win in Leopardstown is a concern, though it did not seem to rob him of his reserves of energy as he galloped through the line. He has previous at Cheltenham in this regard, but Nallen is unconcerned less by that than other factors. "He will stay galloping. He favours right-handed is the only thing although I know he's won twice at Leopardstown now. The better the ground the better he would like it. He is hardy enough but all those fellas are. You wouldn't want to be winding him up. You wouldn't need to blow a trumpet before you put a saddle on him, or a hunting horn. But he's fine once he gets racing."

Minella Indo is a dual Grade 1-winning hurdler highly-tipped to add the RSA Chase to his Cheltenham tally, even though he has only run twice over fences under Rules, won once and not competed in graded competition in this sphere.

Thanks to Nallen though, he is well schooled again over the larger obstacles and de Bromhead is an acknowledged genius with chasers too. The defeat to Laurina was not a problem over an insufficient two and a half miles first time out and Captain CJ has gone on to frank the form of the Navan triumph since.

"I bought him in Fairyhouse as a foal off Dick Lalor. The day I saw him, he would kind of jump out at you. The first day we put the long reins on him and we had him in the lunging ring, he got away and galloped for a half an hour and I thought he was going to get killed. We couldn't stop him. We were happy enough with him after that and we just waited and waited. He won on a snowy day in Dromahane in March.

"I wouldn't worry about his lack of experience or his jumping. Henry jumps them horses for sport. They do savage schooling. He'll be ready. He is a big heavy-topped horse. He wouldn't want it too good so he won't mind the ground the way it is. When he gallops away he just goes at the same speed. He tanked up the hill last year, there wasn't much Rachael could do, she was only strapped onto him!"

Minella Melody was purchased as a store from Ciara and Michael Carty. It was familiar territory for Nallen in that he had also bought Minella Rocco from them. She heads to Gloucestershire on the back of an impressive defeat of Colreevy in Grade 2 fare at Fairyhouse.

"She has presence. She has savage pedigree. She is a grand mare. I paid enough for her, €60,000. She jumped at you. She is a quality mare. In the beginning she was hot but she levelled out. She won in Boulta. We thought going there we had the deal and she won well. She has done very well since, won in Gowran, was second in Aintree when it was too sharp. She was very good the last day. Of the three of them, she wouldn't mind it soft the most. The softer the better for her. The further she runs the better she will be so two miles is probably a bit short but it will be soft enough by the sounds of things so that will help." Underfoot conditions won't be in Rocco's favour however but he has already delivered for his current connections and those involved in his creation as a racehorse.

It is one thing producing an animal that suits market trends but it is results that determine whether buyers will return. Type Minella into racehorse databases and you get almost 170 results. Not all are Nallen graduates, but the vast majority learned their trade at Lavally. They have advertised a thriving hotel in Clonmel, but most of all, shouted about the consistency of the production line on the Tipperary-Waterford border.

Nallen would be delighted if just one of his budding stars did the business in the Cotswolds, but the greatest excitement probably comes closer to home.

"The best thrill is bringing them off, looking at the ones you bought last week, seeing how they jump, even if it's only a 12-inch pipe. One of them will attack it, another will be cowardly. When you're looking at them going into the last in a maiden looking like they're going to win and you're thinking to yourself, 'This fella could be worth the price of a small farm, I hope he gets over it.' That's some feeling. And a fella says, 'He was a certainty, why didn't you back him?' And you're sweating on the value of him coming to the last.

"They're toys for big boys and you just keep moving them on. It's about getting them over the line. Find out as much as you can about their ability without wrecking them. They have to deliver the goods on the track after. You can't come into the hotel and go out hungry. For Minella Indo to win in Cheltenham and go on and win the Grade 1 at Punchestown after, that's as good as you can ask for."

This week, there could be plenty more to come.