

The Focardi way



Italian Davide Focardi practises physiotherapy and chiropractic methods on horses using Chinese and Japanese therapies, writes **Roisin Sheridan**

ITALY's loss was the Irish equestrian community's gain when Davide Focardi decided to make Ireland his home 20 years ago. Born on his family's farm in Tuscany, Davide has been riding since childhood. He competed at international level in both show jumping and endurance riding and qualified as an instructor in 1993.

"I had always had a fascination with Ireland; I can't really explain why, and following a holiday here in 1998, I made the decision to return as soon as possible.

"I sent out my CV and was lucky enough to be offered a position at the Mullingar Equestrian Centre with Robert Fagan. I rode there for about a year and haven't looked back since," he explained.

"After I finished up in Mullingar, I began to actively study and practise traditional physiotherapy and chiropractic methods in association with Chinese and Japanese therapies.

"I began my education in alternative and complementary medicine by working with human patients before applying my knowledge to equine athletes.

"I then went on to study equine biomechanics and anatomy to try to understand the functioning equine body. I then spent several years developing and perfecting my own techniques which, to this day, have been tried and successfully proven on thousands of horses."

Tried and trusted

It is from these evidence-based results that Focardi Master Therapy was born; a method which is now widely recognised by top competitors in show jumping, eventing, dressage and racing.

Included in Davide's list of clients are World and European Champions as well as Olympians including Greg Broderick, Judy Reynolds, Padraig McCarthy, Sarah Ennis, Sam Watson and Cathal Daniels, to name but a few.

"When I look back over the past 20 years, it's hard to believe so much has happened," he added.

"From my initial intent to understand and learn about the how the horse's body works, and how it can be made to perform to the best of its ability; to today having the horses I work with competing at the very highest level and even travelling to the Olympic Games in Tokyo next year; it has been quite a journey.

"In the case of the Team Ireland horses, a lot of the time I am working very closely with team vet Marcus Swail, we have a very good relationship, we work together well and he will often refer horses to me and vice versa.

"For the majority of my clients, horses are their business and a lot of the time we are dealing with animals at the top level of their sport.

"Over the past few years, the FEI medication rules have become so strict that there is more of a demand for alternative and drug-free therapies like mine.

Developments

"There have been huge developments over the past decade which has seen a lot more science being published to back up and understand how alternative therapies work and I think that this has helped people understand and have more faith in other ways of doing things.

"Of course there are always things

that a vet will be able to do for a horse that I can't; but in the same way there are things that I can do, which are completely drug-free. When there is co-operation between the two, it has proven to be very successful. When I look at a horse for the first time, I like to not be given too much information to begin with.

"I like to see how it behaves when resting and then to see it walk, trot and canter. I assess its biomechanics, how straight it is, its spinal movements, how comfortable it is and how the horse is using its whole body.

"There are so many things to consider when assessing a horse's movement.

"I will look at a whole range of things; how the saddle fits, shoeing, the physicality of the rider and how the horse and rider move together.

"For example, a horse may well move differently for a very tall rider than a shorter lighter one; all these things have to be taken into account when assessing the best way to have a horse use his body to maximum effect.

"Once I have worked with a horse, I will try to establish a plan

with the rider, often with a competition target in mind so that together we can bring out the best in the horse. I think that it helps that I rode competitively myself, I'm maybe more inclined to understand where a professional rider is coming from in relation to goals and ambitions.

"I'm very lucky because I get to travel to a lot of top competitions with some of my clients and I really enjoy that.

Olympics calling

"It was when I was at the Rio Olympics with Greg Broderick and Going Global that I first met Judy Reynolds. She was very open to the work I do and asked if I would take a look at JP [Vancouver K]. That was the first time I ever worked on him; it was the day before she took part in one of the most important competitions in the world, so she showed a lot of faith in me.

"As it turned out, she was happy with how he felt afterwards and I have been working with him ever since. I find it very rewarding as he presents his own challenges; he is now 18 years old and I think is moving better than he ever has.

"The feedback we get from his performances means that hopefully the programme we have for him is helping him use his body well.

"Over the past 10 or 15 years, international competition horses have come under a lot more stress and pressure. They compete a lot more, travel further and the challenges they face have become more technical and faster.

"This means that every tiny detail needs to be considered. When I travel to shows, I am watching the horses before and after they compete.

"I look at their body language in the stable, how they move in the warm-up, how quickly they recover from exertion.

"By monitoring them at all times, we can hopefully prevent injury from occurring and make sure that they have sufficient opportunities to recover so they will perform at their best when required.

"At a championship event, there would be constant co-operation between myself and Marcus (Swail), we will both be monitoring and constantly checking the horses so that they will be performing at the optimum when it counts the most.

"We will never take a risk, but we will sometimes push our luck and play every card we have at our disposal to ensure the best results possible.

"At the moment I absolutely love the work I do and feel very fortunate to be involved with so many amazing horses and riders."

As our conversation came to a close, I asked Davide what his immediate plans for the future were. He answered that he was heading off on holidays; refreshing to hear from someone whose feet have barely hit the ground recently.

Not all that surprisingly, he then added: "Not before I check in on a few young horses heading for Lanaken."



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