

# Transforming foals into prized pointers: John Nallen explains the Minella method

## Martin Stevens meets the man who launched Notebook and Minella Indo

Friday, Jan 24, 2020 Racong Post Article.

Guests tend to leave John Nallen and his sister Elizabeth Bowen's Hotel Minella contented, rating it the best in Clonmel on Tripadvisor. Equine residents of Nallen's farm nearby seem to benefit from their stay there, too, with plenty having gone from success in the point-to-point field to renown under rules.

Recent graduates include Minella Indo, a Grade 1-winning novice hurdler at Cheltenham and Punchestown last spring who got off the mark over fences at Navan on Saturday; Minella Melody, victorious in a Listed mares' novice hurdle at Punchestown last month; and Notebook, a rarity in not carrying the Minella prefix having already had his name registered as a foal, who delivered in the Grade 1 Racing Post Novice Chase at Leopardstown last time out.

The horse who sums up Nallen's business plan is Minella Rocco: sourced for €48,000, sent out to win by a wide margin between the flags at Horse and Jockey, sold to JP McManus for £260,000 at Cheltenham and later a National Hunt Chase scorer and Cheltenham Gold Cup runner-up for his new owner.

That was not always the career path of the Minella horses. They used to be reared at home before going into training with Aidan and Annemarie O'Brien – Hotel Minella, Minella Express, Minella Gold and Minella Lad were all Graded winners for those connections in the mid-1990s – before they headed instead to Annemarie's father Joe Crowley after the couple's move to Ballydoyle.

“Back then you could buy a well-bred horse and race them yourself, there were no superpowers, you'd be competing against similar people to yourself,” reflects Nallen. “Horses weren't nearly as expensive as they are now and yet the prize-money was about the same; you see plenty of horses sell for £100,000 these days but how many would actually win that much on the track?”

“Okay, we used to pull off the odd stroke and win 50 or 60 grand but those punts are a thing of the past. You won't get laid 8-1 for five grand any more, you might just about get even money or 6-4. There's no market any more, information is too easily got and everyone knows your business. It's a different game now.”

Hence Nallen has found the best method of making money from horses is preparing them to win at a young age from his Lavally base and selling them on. He is ably assisted in this pursuit by head man James 'Corky' Carroll and nephew Seanie Bowen, a 14-year-old rising star of the pony racing circuit.

“The only sustainable situation is trading the horses,” he says. “It's not all roses but one good result can carry five or six unprofitable ones. Cheltenham sales are the Mecca, and it all revolves around public auction now. There's no private market at all, people would very seldom ask to buy a horse from you at home; sales work because the trainers are protected by the agents, and the agents are protected by the auction house.”

“But it can be hard for the vendors. If you get into the top five or six lots it's great, but below that you're only just washing your face. However, when you get a big, big sale – now that's the thing.”

A lot of point-to-point handlers do their shopping at the store sales but Nallen sources much of his stock as foals.

“When you buy them as foals you rear them and get a good idea of what you have,” he explains. “You'd have some with problems, but at least they're of your own making.”

There is also an obvious financial advantage to buying point-to-pointers as foals.



Notebook: the Racing Post Novice Chase winner was sold by Nallen for £70,000

“Foals have got more expensive but the three-year-olds have got very, very expensive,” Nallen says. “So the game is trying to buy the foals you wouldn't be able to afford if they were pinhooked and resold as stores.”

“The market for those three-year-olds has gone crazy. Okay, the number of them making colossal money has fallen, but the overall average has increased; the amount making €70 to €100,000 has risen and risen and risen. Going back a few years, you'd step back from the obvious top lots and you could buy away, but now they're more expensive.”

The extra keep costs for a foal versus a store are negligible, Nallen goes on to say, so the earlier purchase does not eat into potential profits.

“When you have the set-up, rearing them is not a big expense compared to other costs – as long as they stay healthy,” he says. “A thousand euros a year would go an awful long way. The horses can only eat so much.”

On the subject of nourishing stock, he adds: “We feed them every day, oats 90 per cent of the time. I find the oats harden them and they don't bloat on the grass. You're making their stomach – a bit like myself, they'll have a bigger gut so you're not straining to get the feed into them, they'll have the space.”

Nallen always has one eye on the future, which is unsurprising when he is thinking of trading his purchases four or five years down the line. For that reason, he does not treat the foal sales as a beauty contest.

“If the foals are too pretty, they'll always be pretty,” he says. “The plainer the head on them, the bigger the horse you're going to get – they're going to grow into that head.

“If you bring back a foal and say to yourself 'Jesus he's lovely, he's made', you've gone wrong because that's exactly what they are: made. They'll stay small. You have to get them raw.

“I got an Accordion foal one year, my God was he weak. He was so weak I thought he was going to die, but he came back and just thrived. Every day he lived here he looked better and he eventually won his point-to-point. You're better off getting them a bit poorer than the finished product.”

When it comes to pedigree, Nallen is largely broad-minded, although he admits to going for fairly fashionable sires – “but you'd have to want the individual”.

He also expresses a preference for proven sires and, although homing in on Saddlers' Hall and Definite Article proved “disastrous” for him, he has struck lucky with the likes of King's Theatre, Shantou and Beat Hollow.

Notebook is by a sire Nallen was unfamiliar with when he purchased him for €27,000 as a foal at Goffs in 2013, being by the late German Derby winner Samum, but he knew all about the bay's maternal pedigree.

“Roger Brookhouse had given £200,000 for the half-brother Neck Or Nothing just a few weeks before I bought the foal, and I started to wonder whether the vendors were mad letting him go so cheaply or that there must be a dodge and his heart was rotten or something,” he remembers.

“But if you think there's evil in everybody you won't speak to anybody. You don't want to get caught out at the sales but you have to take chances. It's like if you opened a shop and made it so secure no one could rob you – your customers wouldn't be able to get in either.”

Time would tell that there was no dodge to Nallen's acquisition and he had found himself a bargain. Notebook fell at the first on his point-to-point debut at four, didn't get home in testing ground next time out and then fell ill before being brought out after a five-month break to win at Dromahane in the May of his five-year-old season. The margin of supremacy over the runner-up was 12 lengths and the time was fast.

Just over a week later he was sold at Cheltenham to Mags O'Toole for £70,000, delivering Nallen a tidy profit, though one perhaps a little inhibited by the lack of a trendy sire and the fact three runs were needed to shed the maiden tag.

Now trained by Henry de Bromhead for Gigginstown House Stud, Notebook won the Grade 2 Craddockstown Novice Chase in November on soft and the Racing Post Novice Chase last month on yielding but, remembering that emphatic victory on good spring ground at Dromahane, Nallen feels he could be even better when the leading Arkle fancy hears his hooves rattle.

“If the ground is good at Cheltenham he'll do okay, although going left-handed is a bogey for him,” he says. “He always favoured going right, we didn't really want to run him that way at Dromahane, though he ran left-handed okay at Leopardstown. But the ground is key. If it's good he'll run well.”



Minella Indo: had an unconventional start for Nallen  
Patrick McCann

Minella Indo, a son of Beat Hollow bought by Nallen as a foal at Tattersalls Ireland for €24,000, looks a far more straightforward project having won by six lengths at Dromahane on his debut at five before being sold privately into De Bromhead's stable.

Indeed, it was love at first sight when Nallen saw him in his box at Fairyhouse.

“He had a really good presence to him, he was just the real deal,” he remembers. “He'll do me, I thought, and it was only after I'd done the bidding that someone pointed out to me that he was the last foal out of a 22-year-old mare.”

It was not all plain sailing with Minella Indo, though.

“He was always a hardy horse and the first time we put the roller on him, I'll never forget it, he took off with long reins on him,” he says, signalling at a far-off paddock. “He galloped up there for half an hour – we couldn't stop him. I thought if he's not dead after that he'll never die.”

The relentless Minella Indo's point-to-point victory was not as smooth as it appears in the form book either.

“We knew he wasn't going to make an early four-year-old, so we waited and waited with him,” Nallen says. “It was snowing the first day we wanted to run him so I rang Corky and said there was no point loading him up as the racing would be called off, but lo and behold it went ahead and by then there wasn't much time to get to Dromahane.

“The lorry wouldn't get up the hill, we had to go around the back way, and by the time we got there the first race was off, and we were in the second race – the jockey had already weighed out. From getting the horse off the lorry to him running and winning, it all happened in about 20 minutes.”

It might be noted that both Notebook and Minella Indo were sold as five-year-olds, when the majority of blockbuster-priced pointers are traded at four. It is no coincidence.

“You get less money for them as five-year-olds but you end up with a better average across your stock because you won't break as many of them,” Nallen says. “They need time to develop.”

And finally, the crunch question: who will be the next celebrities to check out of the equine Hotel Minella?

“I like Minella Choice, a four-year-old by Beat Hollow, and Minella Fashion, a son of Flemensfirth from the family of Cab On Target, looks to be a nice horse,” Nallen says. “Minella Escape has had one run [fourth at Boulta] and is a work in progress but he's done plenty to show us he'll be okay.”

### **A LOT AT STEAK IN THE NAME GAME**

Nearly all of Nallen's horses, if not already named, carry the 'Minella' insignia.

“We're very proud of the hotel and it's good to promote it, and we have some fun thinking of the names,” he says.

However, Nallen once got carried away with his pride in the cattle he keeps at Lavally and eventually serves as beef to guests at the Hotel Minella, by giving a son of King's Theatre the dubious name of Minella For Steak.

“He won by four lengths at Durrow and I got a good offer for him from an agent and had him sold,” Nallen says. “But a day later the agent called back to say the deal was off as the owner's wife found out the horse's name.

“I would never expect anyone to go against his wife's wishes so I accepted my fate, and as it turned out I got the horse sold well anyway. But I resolved then to take naming the horses a bit more seriously in future.”