

YOUNGSTOCK – From Frolicking Foal to Ready Racehorse

The Irish National Stud is a farm that specialises in breeding racehorses. Mares (mothers) come here to give birth to their foals in a special stabling area called a Foaling Unit. When they are close to giving birth, they will move into this area and be watched night and day waiting for that special moment. Most foals can feed from their mothers and stand up within half an hour, but if they do need any help, special staff are trained to give it.

When the mare and her new foal are ready to leave, they will be turned out into special fields called nursery paddocks where they can run free with their mothers for a few hours every day, building up their muscles for their future as a racehorse.

Even though they will spend most of their time in the fields whilst they are foals, they still have to have their feet checked by the farrier every month to make sure they are growing properly. The vet might also need to give them some treatment to ensure that their stomachs can digest food properly as they start to eat more and drink less from their mothers. Each foal will also receive a passport which will contain all their markings (perhaps white on their faces or feet), their pedigree (mother and father's names) and details of all their vaccinations.

When the foals are old enough, they will be weaned away from their mothers and put into fields with other youngsters of similar ages. It isn't long before they all feel comfortable with each other and start messing around. When this happens, fillies (girls) have to be split up from colts (fillies) as they become too rough to play together.

Throughout the following year, when the youngsters become yearlings (equivalent to teenagers), they have to start a program of fitness which helps them prepare to become racehorses. They begin by walking on a horse-walking machine each day and then as they become fitter, start to do some cantering in a circle on a lunge rein. They also have to learn how to stand properly so that if they go to a horse sale, they can show themselves off to future owners.

At the end of that year, some yearlings go straight to a training yard to start their careers as racehorses and some go to the horse sales to try and find owners. At the auctions, the very best yearlings can fetch high prices and will hopefully win lots of prize money.

The earliest they can race is as a two year old. All the big races – including the Derby – happen when they reach three-years old. Most racehorses finish their careers when they reach four or five years old.