



Here you'll find young jockeys being trained and horses schooled. **GERALDINE COMMISKEY** explains.

MORNING LESSONS ON THE CURRAGH GALLOPS

THESE STUDENTS are poring over racing forms, instead of Shakespeare. All young trainee jockeys, they have just come back from exercising horses for local trainers.

During their English lesson they write about the earning power of famous stud stallions and read books on successful jockeys.

Early morning gallops

They have chosen one of the most dangerous careers and, unless they reach celebrity status after years of hard work, they can expect to earn £114.24 weekly. For those under 19 the wages are even lower; a 15-year-old may only earn £62.49.

The Racing Apprentice Centre of Education (RACE) at the Curragh was set up in 1973 "to improve the social, professional and human development of young apprentice jockeys" and has succeeded in setting standards. The employment rate, says director, Derek O'Sullivan, is 100 per cent. RACE is financed by the Racing Board, AnCO, local trainers and Kildare VEC. Students pay no fee and receive a training allowance of £18 weekly.

Despite the risk of accidents and even death, the 22 boys and two girls at the RACE are determined to build their lives around horses. "I always liked horses," says Sharon Healy (17), from Drogheda. She hopes to manage a stud farm some day and finds the jockey course helpful.

The centre has put her on a work experience placement with trainer, John Oxx. "He's very particular, but I like working there. Mr. Oxx doesn't yell out our mistakes in front of the others — he waits until you're off the horse and

Pictures: Ronan Quinlan

tells you what you did wrong."

She has her own pony at home and began riding at ten years of age, but she was discouraged from becoming a jockey by her secondary school teachers. "They said I was mad and didn't believe me."

When she started the course last August she didn't know what to expect. "It's hard but I enjoy it."

Like all the students she goes home at weekends. Sharon and the other girl, Georgina Collins, from Wicklow, stay in digs while the boys live in dormitories on the premises. "I'm always very tired at night," Sharon admits.

Fitness

"There's not too many kids of 15 or 16 who would work from 5.45 in the morning to 9.30 at night, six days a week," says teacher-supervisor, Joe Curtin, himself an ex-jockey. "They are the best you could find — they're fit, hard-working, disciplined, alert and happy. It's rough but they get used to it."

Not all the jockeys are



EAGER HOPEFULS . . . Young jockeys, Tim Kavanagh North Circular Road, Dublin,

from horsey backgrounds. "Some of the better lads we've had never saw a horse until they came here," says Joe.

Darren O'Sullivan, from Dublin's inner city, used to ride bareback on stray horses near his home. He now works for trainer, Liam Browne.

Weekends

The students are selected in July — they must be at least 15 years old, under five feet tall and about 5½ stone in weight. "We wouldn't put them on diets because they're so young — they would put weight on naturally with their height but later they will have to watch their weight," says Derek.

"You should be able to ride competitively at seven stone, complete with all the gear and saddle, but there's very few who can," says Joe. "I suppose we're looking for freaks — strong midgets. That's why they do so much P.E."

The P.E. routine at the RACE includes gym, football and swimming.

"There's no time for a social life," says Joe. "They only get Wednesday evening and the weekend off." For the young jockeys, it's worth it.

They undergo a medical test at the beginning and must be literate before they can be accepted. There are 26 vacancies on the course, which lasts a year. They spend the first eight weeks at the Army Equitation School, where they learn basic good horsemanship. After that, it's on to the racehorses.

When I arrived, they were on "the gallops" (a long track) at Maddens-town. The morning sun was showing off the horses' hides and their young riders looked like permanent extensions as they floated past. The Curragh racecourse was not far away but it was easy to forget the link between this and the crowds at the races.

I visited Liam Browne's stables where a chestnut horse was having his hooves washed; then on to Jim Kavanagh's yard. Contrary to their temperamental image, the thoroughbreds were as friendly as puppies. "The horses — and the

A deadly game

ASK A JOCKEY about the danger of racing and he's likely to hand you a medical dictionary.

"Within the last four weeks I know of four jockeys who were broken up," Joe Curtin says casually: "Wrists, arms, collarbones, ribs . . ."

There have been many deaths, which jockeys accept as an occupational hazard. But Bernard MacCormack, from Dublin, has been protesting at race meetings since his son, Stephen, died in 1981 after falling from a horse. He complains that very few jockeys are insured, wages are low and apprentices are ill-treated by trainers.

Leopardstown racecourse has an injunction to prevent him standing on their side of the road.

"When Stephen died, I received £1,000 from the racing board and £50 weekly over four years from the Jockeys' Injury Fund — which my son paid into anyway. They shouldn't be

allowed ride without insurance.

"The Jockeys' Injury Fund is a joke! The boys are not in a union; a lot of them are wearing helmets which were banned in 1984 and I've heard of trainers beating boys."

He claims politicians are unwilling to listen to him "because they have vested interests in racing."

Michael Teelan died in 1971, at the age of 20. His father, Felix, accepts that jockeys have "a very tough life" but is naturally unable to forget his shock.

"It was the last day of the flat season," says Michael's brother, Felix (Junior). "Coming to the three-furlong bend at Leopardstown, the horse went down and Michael was tipped to the left onto a post."

He was brought to hospital quickly but died of a bleeding in the brain. The family were not at the races that day. "He put in six years' hard work," says his father.