e you'll find young jockeys g trained and horses ooled. GERALDINE IMISKEY explains.

IORNING ESSONS N THE URRAGH ALLOPS

EAGER HOPEFULS . . . Young jockeys, Tim Kavanagh (top), from Cabra, and below, Darren O'Sullivan, North Circular Road, Dublin, and Sean Stack, Listowel.

Pictures : Ronan Quinlan

ESE STUDENTS are poring over racing forms, tead of Shakespeare. All young trainee jockeys, y have just come back from exercising horses local trainers.

uring their English lesson they write about the ning power of famous stud stallions and read ks on successful jockeys.

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 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 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 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 Maddenstown. 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 jockeys — are treated better these days than they were in the past," says Derek. A stallion is occasionally given stout or beer to keep his strength up but the horses are as strictly disciplined as the jockeys.

Overseas

The young jockeys eat at the Turf Club and have classes in the afternoon. Subjects include stable management, veterinary science, rules of racing and racing tactics. After classes, they have P.E. and after tea they are allotted 90 minutes for recreation — facilities include TV, snooker and table tennis. Bed is early at 9.30, but welcome.

Past pupils of the RACE have included two European Apprentice Champions — Joe Deegan and John Hyde. "Most of the good apprentices riding now have been here. We have past pupils in every country where there is racing," says Joe.

The instruction manual published by the RACE has been translated into Japanese, French and Chinese, and the centre runs courses for foreign delegations. It is one of the Turf Club rules that all apprentices in future will attend the RACE — special courses are organised for those who do not attend full time.

If these apprentices are successful, they can earn about £54 for a ride on the flat and £58 for a steeplechase. If they are blessed with luck and opportunity, they could be very wealthy, but Joe admits it's "very, very hard to make it to the top. Maybe one in a hundred will, and I'm probably being a bit generous about that."

A lot depends on fortune — racing is just as much a risk for the jockey as it is for the punter. Some decide to play safe, like the bookies, and become middlemen. "Once you've worked with horses you'll always find work," says Joe. "You could manage a stud or become a trainer. You don't have to stay a jockey."