

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
HONORARY CONFERRING
Monday, 1 September 2014 at 4.30 p.m.

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **DR EMMELINE HILL, UCD School of Agriculture and Food Science** on 1 September 2014, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa* on **Jim Bolger**

President, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

There have been many great racehorse trainers, but few have reached the realms of legends. Jim Bolger is a legendary trainer and breeder of world class Thoroughbred racehorses. On this island, where Thoroughbred horseracing is competed at the highest level we can claim several Irish men and women who perform at the top of the world stage. But what makes Jim Bolger stand out, even among the best, is that in achieving excellence, he has been a transformative influence and a disruptive innovator that has helped to irrevocably change the face of international Thoroughbred horseracing. In an industry that is renowned for deep-rooted dependence on tradition, it is a testament to him, that as recognised leader in his field, he has chosen to embrace new technologies and science, having already succeeded in establishing a remarkably accomplished career.

Jim Bolger is one of Ireland's best known racehorse trainers. He has ranked among the top five in this country for the last 30 years and has a reputation that reaches far beyond these shores. He has trained Group 1 winners in Europe and Asia which have included winners of the prestigious Classic races - Epsom and Irish Derby, the Oaks, the 2000 and 1000 Guineas. Not only is he a champion trainer, uniquely he breeds many of the horses he trains which have included multiple Irish, European and World Champions.

Unlike many in the breeding and racing game, the foundation of Jim's success was not inherited. With no background in racing, he grew up with farm horses in Co Wexford and determined that one day he would work with the animals that he clearly had a natural affinity with.

What makes Jim transformative is that while he trained as an accountant, he stands alone in the industry in being, in fact, a scientist. His approach to training and breeding has not been to accept the *status quo* and carry on as generations have before, but to challenge accepted principles and strive to do better. A scientist is driven by a curiosity to better understand a discipline, to acquire new knowledge through the rigours of experimentation and to apply new knowledge in practice that is evidence based. His approaches may have seemed bold and revolutionary to many who did things the way they always were before, but they have been key to his success.

He didn't stick to accounting for very long, the draw of the horse from his early years must have been too strong. He started riding and training show-jumpers before training racehorses in the Phoenix Park and later establishing his world class training facility in Coolcullen on the Co Carlow / Kilkenny border where he has been training for 35 years. He chose this site with purpose – it was at altitude and there was a hill with a slope to design a gallop that would maximise the training effort of his horses. He was among the first to install weighing scales and hydrotherapy spas, rubber matting and a treadmill, a yard laboratory and GPS and heart rate monitors, he always chose the best feed for his horses and the hardest working staff and expected excellence.

He now employs more than 120 people and trains over 200 horses each year. Since 1977 he has trained more than 2,500 winners and currently holds the record for the greatest number of flat race winners in a season. Not only is he a champion trainer, he is also a breeder of champions. Last year *Dawn Approach*, foaled at his breeding farm in Co Wexford, won the 2,000 Guineas and was the highest rated three-year-old horse in the world. But perhaps his most remarkable feat, among the many triumphs, was winning the Irish Derby last year with *Trading Leather* – a horse bred by him, trained by him, whose sire was bred and trained by him, owned by his wife Jackie and ridden by his son-in-law Kevin. This extraordinary ability to operate and succeed at the highest level in both the highly competitive breeding and racing industries is unmatched by any single person.

His transformative approach to science is most evident in the past ten years, in a period when any other would count themselves as contented with their achievements. In the past ten years Jim's scientific approach to his operations has crossed into the academic world and he has demonstrated a commitment to academic scholarship which is singular. Since 2004 he has actively contributed to research programmes led by UCD researchers in the School of Agriculture and Food Science and the School of Veterinary Medicine. The collaboration between UCD and his training establishment was initiated by his curiosity about genetic science and the opportunity to gain new knowledge from the application of new technologies. It is worth emphasising the deep traditions that define this industry and the thinking that informs it and how remarkable these efforts are that have pushed boundaries and challenged pre-conceived conceptions to ask questions about the fundamental nature of the animals that he has worked with every day for the best part of his life.

This unique collaboration between academics and the Thoroughbred industry has led to the publication of more than 20 scientific articles, the application for two patents, the establishment of one spin-out company, the education of eight post-graduate students and the enjoyment of many undergraduate students during field trip visits to the yard. His knowledge and interpretation of scientific data in practice has been a large contribution to the scientific output of UCD academics and in particular he made a significant contribution to the discovery of The Speed Gene in Thoroughbreds. In the last five years he has led globally in the translation of genetic information to the breeding and racing industries. His reputation

and unwavering support of the science behind the discovery of The Speed Gene has been central to the establishment and credibility of genetic testing in racehorses that is now accepted and in use in all of the major bloodstock regions of the world.

Not only is he a scientist, he is also a teacher and is renowned for his cooperation in mentoring young people. He was a mentor to champion jockey Tony McCoy and champion trainer Aidan O'Brien, among many other notable young people involved in the industry. In mentoring and teaching he shares insights and challenges every thought and deed, and there are many people indebted to his guidance and wisdom. He leads by example, has an unearthly self-conviction, and sets very high standards. He is on the gallops every morning, casting an astute eye over his charges, and his claim to 100 push-ups before breakfast would be hard for anyone to equal. But in the Bolger academy of life anything is possible if you work hard, play by the rules and are dedicated to winning.

It is an honour today to recognise his commitment to excellence, by conferring on him the title of Honorary Doctor of Science.

Praehonorabilis Praeses, totaque Universitas,

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus Scientiae; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.