



Gerhard Schöningh: explaining at the ITBA Expo just how he is revitalising Hoppegarten

Hoppegarten under Schöningh impressing

THE public will get its first glimpse of the new Baden Baden in September but some of the changes at Hoppegarten are already in place and Berlin's racecourse and its new owner, the London-based racehorse owner Gerhard Schöningh, who was little known in German racing until two years ago, have impressed many people.

"He is doing just an incredible job," said one insider, while another remarked, "other people announce what they are going to do – Hoppegarten sends out press releases saying, we have built a new press room; they get things done."

Schöningh has always loved racing and his own professional success has allowed him to play an active part in the sport. He set up Ennismore Fund Management in 1999, an investment fund specialising in small European companies, and sold his 50 per cent share in early 2006. By that time he was already a successful owner whose horses with Henry Cecil have included the Group performers Brisk Breeze and Tempelstern, as well as this year's promising three-year-old Channel Squadron.

In 2008, a company he established for the purpose, bought Hoppegarten, the capital's racecourse which had never recovered from its years in East Berlin, despite a brief moment of hope in the early 1990s.

"Hoppegarten had," he says, "a lot of negative publicity since reunification. A lot of people locally and in the media were cynical when I turned up – there had been plenty of false dawns during the 1990s. People are on the whole more supportive now."

If Schöningh has convinced many people it is because the figures speak for themselves. Since he took over, attendances on course have been up by about 50 per cent and betting turnover by 25 per cent both on and off course.

"We have bigger crowds," he explains, "and more competitive racing. Beforehand the races were framed for the local trainers, but now we have the enthusiastic support of all of the big yards."

Schöningh acknowledges that many of the changes he has introduced were inspired by his experiences as a racegoer in England.

"In England, racecourses have a diversified revenue base. A racecourse is a complex

beast," he adds with a new metaphor, "and it is exciting to shake all of the trees and see what falls off. There are many more trees than I had imagined at the beginning."

He cites two examples, the first of which is gate money. "Our revenue from the gate is up far more than the 50 per cent attendances have risen. A great deal of money is spent in Berlin and the city has a competitive entertainment and media market, which has helped us get exposure.

"We introduced family entry tickets for €12 on ordinary days and €18 on days with Group races. Small money compared with England, but far more than is charged in France or on other German racecourses. It has been very successful as people compare the price with other alternative entertainments and think we are offering good value. We have continental-type boxes or 'loges' and here again we have put up prices and increased the number of rentals by offering a better product."

When Schöningh arrived the racecourse catering was losing money and he was told it was a hopeless prospect.

"We do our own catering now," he says, "and we make a profit of at least €7,000 a meeting. When I arrived every meeting cost money to put on whereas from next year every meeting will make money."

"We have also increased total prize-money from €400,000 to nearly €800,000 and plan to take on more racedays in the future."

The critics say it is easy to make improvements if you throw enough money at a project, but Schöningh rejects this analysis. "We have a full-time staff of eight or nine people, but if you want to do your marketing properly and engage with the media, you need a professional team.

"We have a young team which is still finding its feet, but I think the days when you could successfully run a racecourse with an amateur club and one full-time manager have passed."