



■ Redevelopment at the Curragh racecourse; Pat Smullen wins last year's Irish Derby on Hazard. There is speculation that the flagship race may be moved elsewhere.

PHOTOGRAPHS: LORRAINE O'SULLIVAN

Demolition of grandstands cuts Curragh racecourse capacity to 6,000

New facilities at Co Kildare venue to open in 2019 after €70m redevelopment

SARAH BURNS

A €70 million redevelopment of the Curragh racecourse in Co Kildare is under way, with the east and west grandstands at the venue being demolished.

The new facilities at the racecourse, the headquarters of the Irish racing industry, are due to open for the 2019 season. They include improved hospitality facilities, a museum, parade ring, weighroom for jockeys and refurbished stable yard.

Funding for the redevelopment, originally estimated to

cost €65 million, has been provided by the State, through Horse Racing Ireland, and private investors.

The Curragh's capacity will be reduced to about 6,000 – about one-third of its normal size – for this and next year's racing seasons, due to the works. This has prompted questions, including from the Aga Khan's Irish representative, as to whether the flagship Irish Derby meeting between June 30th and July 2nd should be moved elsewhere.

Derek McGrath, chief execu-

tive of the Curragh racecourse, said it was a difficult call as to whether the event should remain at the Co Kildare venue while its capacity is reduced.

'Bigger crowds'

"I understand people will say that we've bigger crowds at the derby in the past and it was a difficult call to make. But I do think that it is right that the derby is held in a track that has held the derby for many, many years," he said, adding that the course could still accommodate some 18,000 people over the three-day meeting.

Mr McGrath said that, following the redevelopment, the Curragh would be able to cater for an extra 10,000 people, bringing its capacity to 30,000.

The Curragh began as a race-

track in 1741 and all five of the Irish classic races are run there during the flat racing season.

Jockey Pat Smullen said he had been visiting the Curragh since he was a child and, as well

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Jockey Pat Smullen

as being one of the best tracks on which to race anywhere in the world, it had also been a lucky venue for him.

"I was lucky to win the Irish Derby twice and the Irish Oaks,

and the two Guineas and four Ledgers, so it's been a very lucky place for me. I have huge memories from it," he said. "Obviously the racetrack itself is not changing and that's very important because it's one of the best racetracks in the world, the surface and that."

Smullen said that the once "huge atmosphere at the Irish Derby at that time" has been lost in recent years but he hoped the renovated venue could "attract big crowds and create a great atmosphere that the Curragh deserves".

Former jockey Mick Kinane, who won the Irish Derby at the Curragh in 2001 and 2002, said it was exciting times for a racecourse that offers "a true test for horses", but needs to be brought "into the next century".