

Tuesday 26th November 2024, day one of the Tattersalls December Foal Sale, will go down in racing history.

That morning, Shirley Anderson-Jolag stepped onto the podium at Park Paddocks in Newmarket, wielding the gavel as the first female bloodstock auctioneer in Britain and Ireland. A spontaneous ripple of applause, something usually reserved for multimillion-guinea purchases, met the sale of Lot 211, a Ubettabelieveit filly out of Totes Emosh.

“I wasn’t expecting the applause,” mused Anderson-Jolag recently. “It was lovely to see everyone coming in during the five minutes before my first stint, including clients who’ve become really good friends.”

Employed by the sales house for around a decade, Anderson-Jolag says she was always keen to try her hand at auctioneering.

“A client reminded me recently that we’d met when I joined Tattersalls,” she recalled. “They remembered me saying then that I thought auctioneering would be cool. I hadn’t really thought it could happen until we had an outdoor podium during Covid.”

After that sales season ended, Anderson-Jolag approached her boss, Tattersalls Chairman Edmond Mahony, to suggest the idea of her stepping onto the rostrum, not as a spotter, but as a fully-fledged auctioneer.

“Edmond thought it was wonderful and was keen to help me on the journey,” she explained. “He has been a fantastic mentor. I stopped the process once or twice when I was overcome with nerves, but Edmond helped me through.”

For months, Mahony gave lessons in juggling spotting and patter.

“My first lesson was at 9:30am,” Anderson-Jolag remembered, “but the Park Paddocks team opened the sales ring for me at 5:30am so I could practice before Edmond arrived. I think if the lessons go well, you’re onto a winner. It’s fairly nerve-racking when it’s just you and one other person.”

Further preparation was made in the car. Anderson-Jolag, like many of her colleagues, wears a number of hats, not least, in her case, as the recently appointed Sales Manager of Tattersalls Cheltenham Sales, something that necessitates many hours on the road.

“Instead of listening to music or fun podcasts,” she confirmed, “I spent a year listening to replays of our auctioneers. I’ve also practiced at home with the horses... selling the dog, selling anything.”

Real-life rehearsal came courtesy of charity auctions and stints at Rowley’s in Ely, where she sold art and antiques. Two weeks before her Foal Sale debut, Anderson-Jolag could be spotted doing the honours in the Huntingdon winner’s enclosure after a selling hurdle.

Her spiel may have needed finessing, but she was no stranger to public speaking. She attended drama school after graduating from university and has bountiful experience treading the boards as an actress, singer and dancer.

“I’ve performed on West End stages, but auctioneering is different,” said Anderson-Jolag. “The nerves are high when you’re performing, but they’re even higher for this because you’re playing yourself. As I develop my style, I’m going to take elements from the auctioneers I like and put my own twist on it. If I can throw a bit more Shirley in there, that’ll make it more ‘me’.”

With her attentions pulled in so many directions – alongside Tattersalls roles, she is an active owner/breeder – finding time to step onto the podium may prove challenging.

The auctioneers’ roster arrives a few days before each sale. A meticulous note taker, she says she could “write an essay” on the lots she’s selling by the time they go through the ring. Copious observations are made both when the roster comes out and when she sees each lot in the flesh. These are then whittled down to three or four key lines.

“Running the Cheltenham sales is my main priority,” Anderson-Jolag clarified.

“Auctioneering will fit around the Newmarket sales. If I manage to be on the rostrum for a few shifts, that would be fantastic. I’m not planning to become a full-time auctioneer, but hopefully I can build it up slowly.”

Anderson-Jolag may be the first female bloodstock auctioneer in the British Isles, but she was preceded by Stephanie Grentell at Inglis, who took to a podium down under in 2014, and by Aurelie Branere of Arqana, who stepped up in France a year later.

“Stephanie [Grentell] reached out to me, which was lovely,” shared Anderson-Jolag, adding that she doesn’t know why it has taken so long for a female bloodstock auctioneer to spring up in Britain or Ireland.

“I can only speak for myself,” she continued. “I’ve received nothing but positivity. If I’m totally honest, before I did it, I hadn’t put much thought into the fact that I’d be the first female auctioneer at Tattersalls. I’m sure there’ll be plenty more female auctioneers now, though, which is fantastic. The many messages and the love I’ve had has been incredible. I’ve been overwhelmed by the number of people who’ve come forward.”