

Tom O'Dwyer - An Outstanding Greyhound Owner & Trainer

Tom O'Dwyer of Knockahallow and Cashel is still training greyhounds at the age of 83 years. He's not seen on the roads around the town any more leading a pack of dogs in the early morning, doing his best to keep them in check. Instead his dogs do their walking on a treadmill, except coming up to a major race when he gets somebody to take them on to the road. The usual route is out to Killystafford Cross and back over the Furry Hill. Walking the roads is virtually impossible any more, he claims, because there are so many small dogs on leads, which are a huge distraction to greyhounds. However, the road walking is much better for the dog because he is alert to birds, animals and other movements along the way, whereas the treadmill is a monotonous movement with no distractions.

Born in Knockahallow, Knockgraffon, New Inn in 1934, Tom was one of a family of ten born to Patrick and Ellen O'Dwyer. Breda was the eldest and she was followed by Val, Eileen, Mary, Rosie, Philip, Betty, Josephine, Thomas and Andrew. Eileen, Betty and Andrew are still alive, as well as Tom.



Rattle the Key photograph with John O'Dwyer and Monto Carlo in 1962

He went to Knockgraffon National School until sixth class, when he finished his primary in the National School in Cahir. The journey from Knockahallow to Cahir was about four and a half miles, but was shortened by a mile if they crossed the Suir and went along the opposite bank. After primary school, Tom went to St. Joseph's secondary school in the town for about two years.

A Draper's Assistant

Leaving school at about 16 years he went to serve his time in the rag trade with W. F. Keating, Draper, in the town. The premises is today a bookie shop. He spent four years there learning the trade during which he received 10 shillings a week. He believes that as a result of his training he is a good judge of a suit. Having completed his apprenticeship he went to work for Bill Gannon on Main Street Cashel. After two years there he opened his own shop in what is today, O'Dwyer's Pharmacy, and traded there until the mid-sixties. Most men had their suites tailored at the time. Tom recalls they would come into him, purchase the suit makings, have their measurements taken, and he would send the material to the Crescent Clothing Company, Limerick to be made up. It would be returned for a fitting before the tailoring was completed.

In an interview with Yvonne Nolan in the Sporting Press in January 1987, Tom told an interesting story from his days as a draper: 'While Prince Margaret was on a visit to Ireland, she sent her chauffeur into Tom's shop to buy some cushions, which were displayed in the window. Characteristic of the British royalty's love of animals, the cushions she chose featured prints of Irish terriers and cats. Tom remarks wryly 'We didn't even spend the bloody cheque, we still have it.'

While still in the shop Tom married Mary McGrath of Deansgrove in 1962 and they ran the shop together until the lease expired. Mary was to share the passion for greyhound training with Tom and to produce some notable national and many other racing successes in her own right as a greyhound owner and trainer. She was an expert judge of pace. She could watch a pup galloping and predict if it would be moderate, average

or a flying machine. Mary was also active in the community. She was a founder member of Cashel Bridge Club, which was formed in 1966, and was a great exponent of the game and regarded as a terrific player. She was a president of the club and an organiser of bridge tournaments. She was also a prominent member of Fine Gael and a founder member of the Women's Executive of Fine Gael in South Tipperary. Her death in 1994 was to leave a major void in Tom's life and in the life of the Cashel community.

Greyhounds

As early as the mid-fifties, Tom became involved with dogs. His father used to keep a few and his older brother, Val, was also involved. He used to walk the dogs before he went to work. When he came to Cashel he rented a house in the Green and kept them behind the house. Later he had his kennels in Nagle's, in the front of the hospital, where the motor factor shop operates today.

The beginning of Tom's success came in 1958 when he, and his brother, Andy, bought two greyhounds, a dog and a bitch, at the cost of £17 for the pair. Rattle the Suir and his sister, Red Hot, were by An Tostal Pleasure out of Lady Belengis, and the good breeding paid off because Rattle the Suir took the final stake at Cashel, the Going Smith Cup at Knockgraffon a dog puppy event at Cappoquin and was the last dog to win the Fitzgerald Cup at Boherlahan. Red Hot won her bitch trial stake at Knockgraffon and the all age event at Cappoquin. Rattle the Suir was later sold to Sir Eric Ohison for £300. Tom says it was sold on condition that it passed a veterinary inspection and he bought him to James Farrell, the man who owned the Fourth of July. Farrell asked him how much he had got for the dog and when he told him, he responded that he thought he was a great man to ask such a price! Rattle the Suir later went on to run at Altcar, but was put out by Linden Calypso in the third round of the 1959 meeting.

It was the bitch, Red Hot, says Tom, which really set him on the pig's back. He bred her to Man of Pleasure at the stud fee of £30, which was miniscule by later standards. The resulting litter was a good one, including Rattle the Kee, Rattle the Door, Mighty Lucky, Milehill Treasure and Flying Feathers. Nearly all of them were to win trial stakes except for Rattle the Door. In 1961 Rattle the Kee and Milehill Treasure both won trial stakes at the Blarney meeting and Milehill went to the last four in the Oaks. Rattle the Kee later went on to win the Produce Stakes at Clonmel in 29.45.

Hurling and Football interest

It wasn't all dogs during these years as Tom played hurling and football with Knockgraffon, Rockwell Rovers and later, Cashel King Cormacs. The O'Dwyers lived close to the banks of the Suir and had a boat on the river. There were four boys in the family and in their younger days they were inclined to play with St. Pecauns, a team across the river in the parish of Bansha and Kilmoyler. There was no great difficulty in crossing over the river to play. Malachy Brett was their contact across the river and he usually picked them up when they landed. The team got to the final of the 1950 championship, but were beaten by Solohead.

In 1955 Tom turned out with Knockgraffon, who affiliated a junior football team and continued to do so up to 1958. During these years Tom also played with The Rockwell Rovers senior team. He is of the opinion that the Parish of New Inn and Knockgraffon was originally a hurling stronghold but became a footballing force during the fifties. He believes that hurling was too expensive with the cost of hurleys and sliotars. Football was simpler and had less expense.

He recalls that many of them played football in the heavily nailed, farmer boots, which were the common wear at the time. They were quite suitable for kicking a football. At some stage, when Nicholas Tierney got involved, they got access to real football boots. Nicholas worked in Rockwell College and, when the students went home for the summer holidays, the locker rooms were cleared out. In many cases there were plenty of discarded football boots, some pairs, but also some singles. Nicholas collected

these and took them to training sessions where it was possible to get a pair that fitted. According to Tom the two boots may not have been the same pair or the same colour, but they served a purpose.

Tom was secretary of the Knockgraffon club. He doesn't remember many formal meetings and there was little organisation involved. Transport to games was provided by Tom Hennessy, who had a car, which had special seating arrangements, which made it capable of carrying many. Other players he remembers include John Joe O'Brien, Mortlestown, of later hurley-making fame, and Bill Bradley from Clare, who was a good cross-country runner, as well as a footballer.

Tom also remembers that Fr. Meehan, who was C.C in the parish at the time, wasn't too favourable to the existence of Knockgraffon. This was a time when the policy of the G.A.A. was to curtail the proliferation of junior teams for the benefit of parish unity.

Tom continued to play with Rockwell Rovers until about 1966 after Knockgraffon went out of existence. He had moved into Cashel some years earlier and opened a drapery business, where O'Dwyer's Pharmacy is located today. He continued to play hurling and football and one of his lasting memories was playing in a town hurling league in 1972. He was on Joe Byrne's team and they won. He has the medal to prove it.

When Tom finished up as a player he continued his interest in the games as a supporter of the Cashel King Cormacs and Tipperary. Outside of his involvement with dogs, it continues to be his greatest interest.

The Smokey Line

Tom O'Dwyer was always of the opinion that a good brood bitch was the best buy. With this in mind he was always on the lookout for a good bitch pub and when Peter Arthurs of Belfast asked him to rear a bitch pub by Woodford General out of Minty Flavour, he liked the look of the bitch. He asked Peter for a pup out of the next Minty Flavour litter. He was brought down two black bitches and he picked Smokey Flavour.

In the beginning it looked as if Smokey Flavour had nothing in her favour but her breeding. Her dam had been nervous and this trait was passed on. When she was called in for her grub she would duck away. Then she met with a serious accident damaging ligaments and tendons on her front legs. Tom operated on her himself: 'I bored a hole through her two nails and tied the two toes together, I put them in a clamp and kept her in her kennel for three weeks. Then I kept her on a lead for six weeks. When she came in season I was delighted because it meant another twelve weeks rest.'

When Tom started to prepare Smokey Flavour for coursing, she had a tendency to go lame on the leg she had injured, and her first outing was no star debut either. However, matters improved on her second outing, which was a trail at Rathdowney. She beat a fairly useful dog well and he knew she was exceptional. He came home and said to Mary: 'We have something really good!'

It wasn't all plain sailing. There was more trouble when his kennels were hit by an outbreak of dysentery just before the bitch was due to run at Dungarvan. She got the virus and was weak and dehydrated. Tom gave her some medicine and she won her first two courses. Following the second win Tom gave her a full glass of brandy and fed her by hand. She was drunk going home. The next morning she was walked and he thought they might as well run her as it was her last chance of qualifying for the Oaks. She won her trial stake and went on to win the 1978 Oaks final at Powerstown, Clonmel, beating Tender Heartburn by a just up.

This was an important moment for Tom and Mary O'Dwyer who had won their first classic.

Out of her first litter to Careful Pat the classic winner produced Smokey Bacon, Smokey Major and Smokey Eyes, which was beaten in the 1980 Oaks by Wingbell Wendy. Smokey Eyes went on the following season to win the O'Meara, Mount Coote and Hitchin Post Cups. The next litter to Best Man produced Five to Eight, which won the Oaks in 1981 and Smokey Sparrow, which got to the semi-finals of the Oaks. A later

mating with Scotch Lundy produced Smokey Alice, which gave the O'Dwyers their second Oaks win in 1984. They were to win a third Oaks with Smokey Marion. They also bred the 1985 Derby winner, Townbrook Bimbo.

A Coursing Judge

While Tom's brother, Val, judged at the national meeting for about 22 consecutive years. Tom's tenure in the position was much shorter. He judged all over the country for five or six years and loved it, but found it too time consuming when combined with training. For example he was away for two days judging at Ballymote and Nenagh, when an outbreak of dysentery hit his kennels and he returned to find that Smokey Flavour had caught the virus. From his time as a judge in the 1970s and 1980s Tom had a good overview of coursing and was critical of some aspects of it. He was also at one stage a member of the Irish Coursing Club Executive, as well as one of the most successful breeders/owners in the coursing game.

He came to the opinion that the public were dissatisfied with the standard of slipping and judging. He was particularly critical of the discrepancy between slips. In one course the hare would be turned at 200 yards from the escape, while in the next the hare could get home without a turn. He recommended that any slipper who allowed a final to go home without a turn should be automatically suspended for one week. He was also critical of the Slip Steward, whose only function should be to check the dogs going to slips. He said that no slipper should lift a dog and his experience was that many dogs were injured by the actions of the slipper.

Tom had further criticisms of other aspects of coursing. He took issue with the inconsistency in the reaction of Judges in cases when the hare got home without a turn. He was in favour of an imaginary line some distance before the escape and giving the verdict to the dog first past that line.

Tom was also keen on the proper preparation of coursing fields. He believed that the practice of using a lawn mower to cut a small strip up the middle of the field was totally wrong. There should be sufficient grass at the top of the field for dogs to work the hare without incurring injury.



Tom O'Dwyer, Coursing Judge on duty in Ballymote, Co. Sligo



Tom and Mary O'Dwyer with handler Alice Devitt following success of Smokey Hothead in Corn na Feile at Abbeyfeale



Tom and Mary O'Dwyer receiving a presentation of a silver tray presented by Cashel Coursing Club from Paddy Chambers, President of Irish Coursing Club, with Philip Thornton also present

One of Tom's major initiatives when he was a member of the Irish Coursing Club Executive was to introduce the idea of subs in trail stakes. The practice to then in trail stakes was that if a dog dropped out there was no replacement and the card would no longer be full. Tom argued for a number of subs to be called up as replacements in such cases, as is, of course, the practice today, but he came across a lot of opposition to his idea. However, he persisted and got it through. He illustrates the value of the change with the information that Smokey Marshall was the sixth sub when he won the Derby in 2001!

Training Secrets

Tom doesn't agree that he has special training secrets. It would appear that his success has been due to the perfection he brought to all aspects of training. True, he developed his own particular training regime but it didn't differ that much for other training regimes. He believed that pups should have freedom to develop, Good food was very important. When his mother was still alive she used to bake large brown cakes, which were the basis of the meal. To this he added meat and vegetables. When his mother died he got the Buckley Bakery in Cappawhite to bake a special loaf for him, and he still uses it. Exercise was very important and walking was vital for the building of muscle and stamina. But all of these things didn't matter if the breeding wasn't right. Also, one hoped that the dogs would avoid accidents and disease. There was also an element of luck in the job.

At the height of his breeding and training period, Tom had 100 dogs in his kennels. He used to go all over England to sales. On one occasion he took 18 dogs with him, carrying them in a trailer, with some in the car, to Dunleary. Having got on board the boat he went to the lower deck where there was a special place for tying them up. After arriving in Holyhead he had to board a train, where there was a similar place for tying up dogs. He had to disembark in Crewe and await a connection to wherever he was going. It was still the middle of the night and he sat down on a seat to await his train. He was tired and the dogs were also and lay down to rest. They were all ready to go asleep when a cat appeared, rousing everyone from their slumber and Tom was lucky not to lose any of the 18 dogs.

Honours

Tom O'Dwyer was conferred with a civic reception by Cashel Urban District Council in April 1997. It was a recognition of the Cashel man 'who had made a national and international reputation as a foremost trainer and owner of greyhounds.' In the course of his remarks, Council Chairman, Joe Moloney stated: 'With his late wife, Mary, Tom had built up one of the biggest owner, breeder and training establishments in the greyhound game, and the Smokey prefix was respected in every corner of Ireland.' In the course of his remarks, Jerry Desmond, Chief Executive/Secretary of the Irish Coursing Club, stated: 'Tom O'Dwyer epitomised that coursing was a 32 county sport, where people of both traditions mixed peacefully and came together to enjoy a mutually shared love of sport. Tom O'Dwyer was known and respected in all parts of Ireland, where his achievements were widely recognised.'

Tom's successes in the greyhound world are hugely impressive. Most followers of the sport will be aware of his achievement in winning three Oaks and being runner-up in two more. They will also be aware that he won a Derby with Smokey Marshall, but he also sold two more Derby winners. Probably the greatest measure of his achievements is the seventy-one Trial Stakes that he won during a career of over sixty years. Also the thirty-one Cups he received for his victories.

The story of Country Dan is a nice one to finish this profile. The dog won the National Open Coursing event and cups in Doon and Cappoquin. Tom took him to England for the Waterloo Cup. When they arrived across the water, the transport he expected for the dog didn't materialise and he had to make do with a van. The night was very

cold and he slept in the van with the dog across his feet. They would have been frozen otherwise. The coursing was put off for two weeks because of the weather. He remained in England for the first week but had to come home to look after things for the second, leaving Country Dan beyond. He returned after the week and the coursing took place in snowy weather and the dog was beaten in the semi-final by the eventual winner.

Written by Seamus King



Tom O'Dwyer with his Derby winner, Smokey Marshall, and his many trophies.