

he is warming up, and, suddenly, as he finds a loose board, there is an earsplit-

begins drawing closer with every crack until he is rid of all his frustrations.

o'clock the next morning, when I was busy with my pen, I heard a muffled thun-

ing was in a worse state and that I would

appeared. I knew he was guilty, as he knew I was guilty, but all either of us had to go on was circumstantial evidence. We

Leader columnist for over 30 years. This column first appeared in our edition of October 29, 1966

The Leader Interview Declan O'Halloran, GM greyhound track

Ready to come out of the traps at top speed

As Limerick's new €20m greyhound stadium opens its doors this Friday, the track's general manager Declan O'Halloran reflects on the challenges he will face as he leads dog racing in the Mid-West into new territory

Kevin Corbett



YOU would be surprised what you can pick up on a building site. As the Leader gets the grand tour of Limerick's all-but completed new greyhound track from Declan O'Halloran, we're instructed in the feng shui of modern sports architecture.

The general manager of the new €20m facility in Greenpark that opens this Friday indicates the flow of the rooms with a sweeping hand, stressing the architect's vision of functionality and style in a building for which he foresees many uses.

He sounds like an old hand at this, but he turns and grins: "I just learned fast over the last few weeks."

It's not all he has been learning since being appointed to the role in mid-July when the curtain fell on 77 years of greyhound racing in the Markets Field.

The bedding-in period has been a useful one, giving him the opportunity to go to other tracks and benefit from the experience of other general managers, so he can take the best of what he has seen and distil it into making Limerick the leading track in Ireland.

It is an impressive beast too. Architect Seamus McCloskey, who designed Cork's greyhound track, saw what he was missing down there and applied the lessons to Limerick.

There is a wide array of seating and viewing areas on three levels, two bars, a 190-seater tiered restaurant and corporate entertainment facilities for groups of 30 and 50 people, a dance floor and stage and over 300 TVs to view racing, betting figures and other major sporting events.

Easily accessible from the ring road, tunnel and Dock Road, it is walkable from town, but if you don't know it, it's



Declan O'Halloran: 'We think this is going to be a great addition to Limerick, a new attraction along with Thomond Park'

PERSONAL FILE

Born: Liverpool (brought up in Limerick)
School: ArdScoil Ris

attendances at greyhound tracks have been in freefall. Last year alone they fell by a total of 21 per cent, and while official figures for this year are thus far unavailable, anecdotal evidence suggests a further slide

€10, some finger food for a few euro more. "On the corporate side, we're offering a value for money proposition too. The most expensive meal here on a Friday when we open will be €45 and for that you get your

racing and the catering will provide a reason to come back.

"What I'm going to be doing from a marketing point of view to get them back in is, to number one make sure the experience is good the first time, secondly target families, maybe do deals like kids eat free, during the midterm break.

"We have to be creative and innovative and work very hard to make sure that the people who may not have a huge interest in the sport itself have a reason to come back. That will be based around the value proposition - good value food and a great night's entertainment.

The sport itself, though, is no mere sideshow, as he acknowledges: "I would encourage the people to come down and experience the night. The level of racing is going to be top class, not just from here but around the country. We will be trying to raise the profile of the sport in the region and make it relevant.

"You have Munster rugby fans who are hugely passionate about rugby, you have greyhound fans who are as passionate about their sport, and we need to expose people to that because it's infectious. I knew nothing about it a few weeks ago and now I'm in the middle of it and it is infectious."

He is ambitious regarding his targets, believing there is a pent-up demand in the region for the facility, something he bases on the 1,600 or so restaurant bookings he has already received.

"Obviously we've set our budgets out, we have to make this a commercial success, pay its way. That's my job. From an aspirational point of view, we would love to see 100,000 people coming through the door next year, but you've got to be realistic and as we discussed already, with discretionary income tight, you're better to set your stall out and beat expectations than be too ambitious and fall short."

It is no exaggeration to say the track will be looked upon by the IGB as the main means of dragging up attendance levels. It's a beacon for the sport in tough times and to be the man tasked with making it a success must bring an amount of

RELIVING THE NEWS

with Sean Curtin

Limerick-born bishop's appeal
From the Limerick Chronicle
Saturday, February 17, 1968

AN SOS from Limerick born Bishop Joseph Whelan, CSSp, in Biafra - the state blockaded by forces of the Federation of Nigeria - reached his native city this week. The message: an appeal for help for Biafran children in dire need of protein food.

The plea came via Fr Raymond Kennedy, CSSp, a Dubliner in the United States.

Cecilia Oblamine, chief nursing officer in Biafra, wrote to him saying: "I need your assistance on behalf of the children of Biafra who are now in dire need of protein food. This food is scarce due to the present position of the country.

"It will be appreciated if you will arrange to send, among other things, dried milk, the same type that we used to get from Catholic Relief in the USA.

"This milk will prevent malnutrition in children as well as assist as curative measures."

Then Bishop Whelan of Owerri, contacted Father Kennedy.

"I add my appeal to that of our chief nursing officer. Do please answer her appeal... Give my love to Father Alo and to any friends you may meet."

How did the appeal reach Limerick?

LIMERICK BISHOP

SOS FROM Limerick-born Bishop Joseph Whelan, CSSp, in Biafra - the state blockaded by forces of the Federation of Nigeria

Fr Kennedy sent the letter to his brother, John O'Loughlin Kennedy in Dublin, and he got in touch with the Limerick Chronicle.

"I am sure that many Limerick people will want to respond to Bishop Whelan's request," he commented.

Donations, which will be acknowledged, should be sent to Mr Kennedy, at 82 Northumberland Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin.

He will do the rest.

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Easily accessible from the ring road, tunnel and Dock Road, it is walkable from town, but if you don't fancy it in high heels, ladies, there are shuttle buses leaving and returning at intervals from Brown Thomas and Markets Field.

Apart from overseeing the final stages of construction, O'Halloran has spent much of the rest of the time networking – after our interview he is off for his induction into the local Rotary Club.

Having spent his formative years in the city, he might have a huge amount of personal contacts, but he admits: "There are a lot of people in Limerick I don't know."

Born in Liverpool, the son of Peter and May O'Halloran grew up on Ennis Road in the city. People will know his mother from her acting work and for being one half (with Pearl Kiely) of one of Limerick's most renowned drama schools, Expressive Arts Theatre School.

O'Halloran will only admit to being on stage once and is more willing to talk about his sole TV performance when his mother dragged him along to an episode of Crimecall to shoot a reconstruction. He wasn't cast in the role of the villain, however, just a petrol pump attendant.

If the acting bug was flying around their home, it didn't bite him, or at least he managed to treat the infection. Instead, his spare time was devoted almost entirely to rugby, following his father's obsession in this case.

A graduate of Ardscoil Ris and University of Limerick, O'Halloran played rugby to a very high level for Shannon as



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PERSONAL FILE

Born: Liverpool (brought up in Limerick!)
School: Ardscoil Ris
Family: Sean, 5; Ava, 3, and a new addition in November
Favourite Book: Ten Men Dead by David Beresford
Favourite Food: Pasta
Favourite Holiday Destination: Kilkeel

attendances at greyhound tracks have been in freefall. Last year alone they fell by a total of 21 per cent, and while official figures for this year are thus far unavailable, anecdotal evidence suggests a further slide.

Limerick's central location and its traditionally strong level of competition is likely to draw support from Ireland's greyhound folk, but that is a community whose strength and numbers ebbs and flows with economic times.

Right now it is at a low point and the success of the new track will depend on large part in penetrating a fickle leisure market. O'Halloran knows he has to focus his fire.

"Realistically what my job is going to involve is selling the restaurant, and making sure we get the parties in for the restaurant, the Christmas parties and so on. Also, I will explore other uses for the stadium; we have a fashion show booked in for November 11 for Young Munsters ladies rugby club and we've given a lot of tours to people who are looking at it for conferences, weddings and functions. It's a magnificent facility so if people come down and see it, they might find uses for it. Whenever we can open it, we'll open it."

There is not a lot of discretionary income going around at the moment, and with the nation braced for not one, but four, forbidding budgets, people's hands might be wedged in their pockets for a while yet. He acknowledges the point, but is confident he has a product for the times.

"Everyone has worries and there's a reluctance in the whole economy to spend, but you still need to live and have interests and get out and you can have a night out at the greyhound track with entrance for

€10, some finger food for a few euro more.

"On the corporate side, we're offering a value for money proposition too. The most expensive meal here on a Friday when we open will be €45 and for that you get your entrance and your racing entertainment too.

"So we're not trying to hit at a really high end, which are the areas I believe are struggling more than others. We're going for a bit of value and we believe we're coming in at the right time with the right product and we're going to price ourselves accordingly."

For all the talk of value for money – and it is the phrase that pays at the moment – O'Halloran is clearly proud to be at the helm of the new facility.

"We think this is going to be a great new addition to Limerick, a new attraction along with Thomond Park, along with the racecourse, along with the GAA and it's another facility the Mid-West can be proud of.

"This isn't an investment for 2010, it's an investment for the next 25 to 30 years for greyhound racing in the region, and with Limerick being the European City of Sport next year, we're coming in at the perfect time to be complimentary to all those facilities. It's something Limerick needs, the place needs every lift it can get," he says.

While doggy men will abide, for the non-greyhound community, there is a chance that the novelty factor will wear off. What then?

"There is a huge population in the Mid-West, and if we can just get these people interested to come, even only two to three times a year, and put on a programme that is exciting and enticing for them, then the total product here with the facilities, the

get families, maybe do deals like kids eat free, during the midterm break.

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"In the motor business they say, 'pressure is for tyres'," he laughs, "but, certainly, for any job at this level, if you didn't feel a bit of pressure, you wouldn't be normal. From my perspective, I've always thrived under pressure, so I know the expectation is there that this is going to deliver a wonderful racing experience and I suppose we'll be judged on our performance over the next three months, the next 12 months, but there's nothing like a bit of pressure to bring out a performance."

If there is pressure at work, there won't be too much relief on the home front for the time being, because not only are he and wife, Cathryn, in the middle of negotiating a move back to Limerick from Galway, they are expecting their third child on November 7.

"We've a busy time all right but I've had great support from my wife and she's handling as much as she can at home. There's a lot going on but I've a big pair of shoulders."

You'd rather be busy.

"Absolutely! I was out of work for a number of months and it's wonderful to be back and a wonderful complaint to be busy and there are lots of people out there who don't have work and would love to be under pressure and love to be doing what I'm doing and I've walked that road. You appreciate the work, you appreciate the job, it's a challenge and it is pressure, but I'd like to think I'm thriving on it."

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- Cecilia Oblamine, Biafra

After the talks which lasted about a half-hour, Ald Steve Coughlan, TD, said that the unique position of Limerick, insofar as they had three regional hospitals to maintain, was explained to the Minister.

These hospitals, in addition to patients from Limerick, catered for patients from Kerry, Clare and Tipperary, but the Health Authority was not getting sufficient contributions from these areas to cover the cost of administration because only maintenance of patients was catered for.

They told the Minister that such a service was deserving of special consideration, and the Minister said that he fully appreciated this position.

The Minister is to discuss the matter further with his officials and will then meet the representatives again.

Beer goes down drain

Half-a million-pints of beer worth £40,000 were poured away at the strike-hit Ansells Brewery in Birmingham yesterday. Pedestrians' and bus passengers had to leap a yardwide flood of beer froth pouring from drains outside the brewery.