

Goodbye to all that: Martin Wells with Blue Tango pictured saying goodbye at Markets Field Greyhound Stadium in Limerick. There will be a three-month hiatus before racing resumes in the new stadium at Greenpark, off the Dock Road

PICTURE: BRIAN ARTHUR/PRESS 22

# Farewell to Field of dreams

The Markets Field hosted its final night's greyhound racing last Saturday after 77 years. **Kevin Corbett** reports on a night that was heavy with nostalgia, but acceptance too that the time had come to move on

IT'S a muggy night in July and the rain drizzles down on a queue of people lined up to say goodbye to an old friend.

But tonight as the Markets Field hosts its last night of greyhound racing, ahead of the opening of the new track in October, the people are not crying because it's over, they're smiling because it happened.

The air is thick with reminiscence, as old friends who have not seen each other in many years troop along the path in the shadow of the wall along the back straight to enter the stadium proper and the old, crumbling stand.

After 77 years as the home of greyhound racing in Limerick, traps will rise for the final time at the Mulgrave Street venue and a crowd that would match its showpiece event, the Irish St Leger, has turned out to share the experience and relive the track's greatest nights.

Many here tonight grew up with racing at the Markets Field and can count out their

years with the names of great Leger winners.

Some like Eddie 'Doc' Holliday from the Elm Park on the Ennis Road have even been here from the beginning: "I was here the night it opened, I was 11 years old and I came with my uncle, he had a bitch running." He pauses to recall ... "Orange Lily was her name. I was a regular then from age 15 on, betting and all. You'd have to queue up for an hour to see the Leger in the old days.

"There was a lot of old timers in those days who would come and have a bob on the tote. It was only two and six to get in and there were more than 20 bookmakers in the heyday as well and they'd bet you too, not like these hungry feckers," he laughs, jerking a thumb at the rows of bookies lined up to the front of the grandstand.

He has a smile for them though. "I might have an old bet later on, we'll see."

This used to be a place for crowds. When television sets were the exception in house-

holds rather than the rule, the turnstiles were worn out from clicking.

Willie O'Neill from Pallasgreen used to accompany his uncle to the dogs and made the most of the crowd cover.

"When I was coming in here as a young fella, the crowd would be stretching all the way down there," he says pointing to the end of the track where the 550 yard traps sit off the final bend.

"I know myself because I was kind of starting to have a smoke then, at around 15 or 16, and I'd be in with my uncle, John Maher. Well, I couldn't smoke in front of him, so I'd slip away down there into the crowd at the end and have a smoke. "Now," he gestures to the grey, empty space, "you wouldn't have a hope. You'd be spotted straight away!"

"The biggest crowd I ever saw was when Yanka Boy won the Leger in 1967. If you were up in the stand that night, you weren't coming back down off it."

Christy Kelly from Mullagh in west Clare has come



Lone piper Eoghan Carey accompanies Pa Fitzgerald and Mustang Johnny, the last winner at the Markets Field, to a special presentation on the track last Saturday night when racing finished after 77 years at the Mulgrave Street venue PICTURE: MICHAEL COWHEY

armed with some memorabilia that marked his own time with the venue.

"I brought in a card tonight I had in a box from 1950 and a sales catalogue from 1960, the year I married. It was a nice distance coming down from Mullagh. The money was very small in those days too,

eight pounds to the winner, and a pound to the second.

"In those years, you'd a lot of courtin' couples coming in, it was a cheap night out and it was them that made the craic. I haven't seen that type come here for many years now."

Strange how things move

in cycles. It is this very type of floating voter that the Irish Greyhound Board, realising the niche nature of its sport, has spent the last decade or more trying to attract.

From the 1990s, under IGB chairman Pascal Taggart, an investment programme to modernise facilities swept

around the country.

For some reason, however, this new broom failed to find its way to Limerick and the local greyhound fraternity watched in bafflement, and later resentment, as peripheral towns like Lifford and Dundalk had €12m tracks lavished upon them.

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As the boom began to peter out, hope gave way to resignation that racing in Limerick, without the modern facilities to compete in a fickle leisure market, would be destined to play out to an ever decreasing circle of hard core fans, until a lonely, inevitable closure.

Two years ago, chairman of the board, Dick Sullivan – a man of the soundest reputation – stood on the track after the Leger final and promised a new stadium for Limerick before 2010 was out. It was a measure of the disillusionment that few really believed him.

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