

How the Leader's Des saved dog racing

John Martin's history of greyhound racing tells how a former Limerick Leader sports editor helped save the sport from extinction

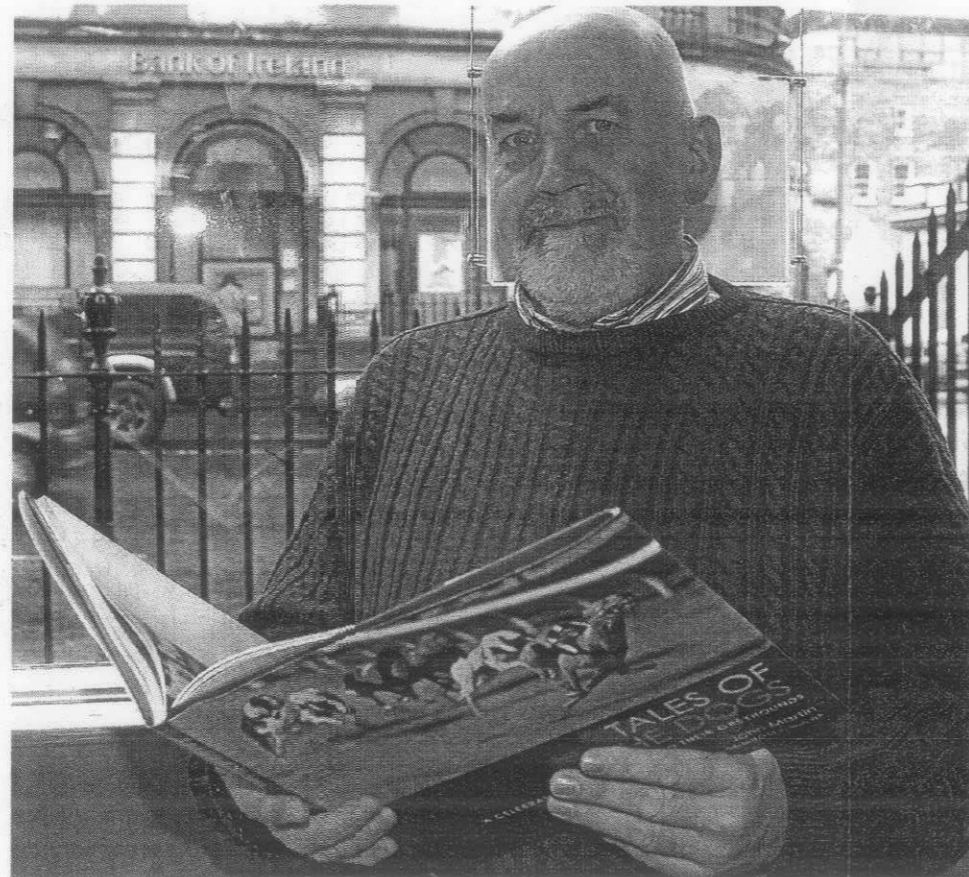
Kevin Corbett

AS Limerick's new greyhound track finally goes up, built with the final breaths of the expiring Celtic Tiger, it is worth a look back to the 1960s when one Limerickman, a former sports editor of the Limerick Leader, made a decision that has been credited with saving greyhound racing itself.

A lofty claim, but not without justification. Then, as today, state intervention was key. Today, the ruination of our economy, brought on by rampant capitalism, has to be staved off by the State and taxpayer in the form of NAMA - we hope.

Back then it was rampant capitalism, from which something had to be saved. More specifically, in the first flush of property speculation in Ireland during the 1960's boom, Bord na gCon chairman Des Hanrahan saved Shelbourne Park from the developers by taking it into state ownership on January 2, 1968.

It was, according to journalist John Martin, "the seminal date in the sport's being: the day that Bord na gCon bought Shelbourne Park for the state and the people. It may be fair to conclude that had greyhound racing remained in Irish Coursing Club control and had Bord na gCon not existed, the State would never have countenanced backing the initiative of chairman Hanrahan and his chief officer, Seamus Flanagan, and that the sport, as we know it, would be no more".



John Martin's *Tales Of The Dogs* reveals how Limerick chairman of Bord na gCon Des Hanrahan was instrumental in saving greyhound racing stadia from property developers in the 1960s

PICTURE: ADRIAN BUTLER

All this and more is revealed in Martin's terrific history of greyhound sport in Ireland - and beyond - 'Tales of the Dogs', a must in any household with a love of greyhounds, track or field.

A hefty hardback, it is accessible and readable from the first page and is replete with wonderful photographs, many previously unpublished,

and dating from as far back as the early 1900s.

John takes up the story: "Des was sports editor of the Limerick Leader and his coursing club was Limerick city - everyone had to be involved in a coursing club in those days to get in to Bord na gCon. While he never struck anyone as being a dynamic person, he got things done in his own way.

"In the 1960s, when the first property speculation was taking place, the main thing he did was to save Shelbourne Park. His period from 1965 to 1983 as chairman is highlighted by all these tracks being bought, Shelbourne Park being the most important one."

Despite huge crowds going racing in those days, increased regulation thanks to Bord na

gCon which had been founded in 1958 and decentralised to Limerick in 1961, meant tracks were no longer simply gold mines for their owners.

"There was more money in selling the stadia for property," says John. "There was huge crowds going to greyhound racing in London, you couldn't ask for a bigger population, especially with the large Irish community and White City used to be packed. But when property speculators moved in in 1984, White City closed just like that," he says, snapping his fingers. "It was the same with valuable city sites in Ireland in the 1960s."

Limerick's fingerprints are all over the formation and running of Bord na gCon, now known as the Irish Greyhound Board, a fact illuminated by John in the book.

Jim Frost sat on the original committee that reported to the government in 1952 and recommended the establishment of Bord na gCon. His son Kevin would later become chairman of that body from 1989 to 1994.

Donough O'Malley was instrumental in having the newly-formed board decentralised to Limerick in 1961, where it took up the offices it still occupies in 104 Henry Street.

Original chief executive Sean Flanagan's right hand man was Sean Collins, of the famous political family from Abbeyfeale. His father James was a TD, while his brother Gerry, is former Minister for Foreign Affairs. His son Niall Collins, is a TD for Limerick West today. Collins was a school teacher before he went in to Bord na gCon where he

eventually succeeded Flanagan as chief officer.

Other prominent Limerick people have played their part down the years including Patrickswell's Michael Field as chief executive, Ann Barry as a board member and former Munster selector Cyril Downes as accountant.

John's book will come to be known as the official history of greyhound sport in Ireland and given his vociferous and at times controversial differences with the board over the years, the genesis of the book will come as a surprise to many.

"The publishers thought there was a void in the market," he says, "so they approached Bord na gCon who thankfully recommended myself to do the book."

"There was nobody more surprised than me, I can tell you. Even now I would still be quite critical of them, but they've been gracious enough to accept the criticism and certainly under the current regime they've been quite gracious."

Few sports have benefitted from the Celtic Tiger as greyhound racing has, with healthy government investment allied to the vision of chairman Pascal Taggart, who led the board from 1994 to 2004. Under the Northern Irishman's stewardship, stadia were modernised and the sport's image overhauled and shifted from rural pastime to urban leisure industry with huge success.

John reserved much of his criticism in the past for Taggart, but admits, "I would have recognised some of the extravagances that were unhealthy, but would always have

acknowledged the benefits he brought and was always a great believer, as he was, in the board standing on its own two feet."

The irony of Limerick's deep involvement in the sport's administration is that it has had to wait until now for its own new track to be built and to catch up with such peripheral areas as Galway, Lifford and Dundalk.

"The great shame is that with Limerick being the headquarters of the operation and Pascal Taggart gone now for five years, I'm sorry to say we're still waiting for the new Limerick track," says John.

"Sure it's going up now, but it should have happened a long time ago. The money that was earmarked for Limerick originally went to Lifford. There was another tranche of money earmarked for Limerick and that money went to Galway."

How did this happen? "Political pull. At the time when the money was going through Lifford, Lifford was well represented in the corridors of power, so Lifford got the money. With Galway it was more the fact that they had ministerial pull, that Limerick did not."

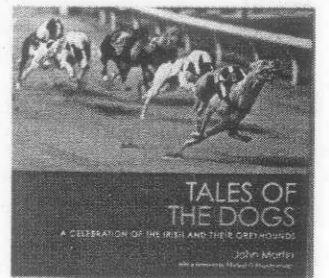
"I think (current chairman) Dick O'Sullivan has recognised how ridiculous it is that Limerick is the kingdom of greyhound racing without a palace," says John.

That said, there will be those who miss the Markets Field and its history when the time comes to move on next year. Racegoers will never forget some of the great St Leger nights in the Garryowen venue down the decades.

"Markets Field is a unique track, because it is the only track of which I'm aware that the finish line is so close to the first bend. It requires a particular type of dog to win the Leger and the great trainers have specialised in it, Ger McKenna and Matt O'Donnell, for example," says John.

"In my own opinion one of the great dogs to win was the Stranger in 1983. It required a very robust kind of dog. There's a bit of a climb down the back straight. You need a very muscular, physical dog to get around there. It's a long run home, though a little downhill so they're freewheeling. I always think getting to that third bend is the hard part."

Such intimate knowledge courses through the book, casting a light on the great competitions, the great competitors and characters who have made the sport down the decades and is bound to make rewarding reading for any fan of the long tails who gets their hands on a copy.



'Tales Of The Dogs - A celebration of the Irish and their greyhounds', by John Martin, is available in all good bookshops

Limerick to celebrate its queen of caberet with burlesque show

'I believe in angels', says author Francesca

Petula Martyn

MANY might raise their eyebrows and take a cynical view of a middle-aged woman who



was dying of a terminal illness that an angel appeared to her in her home to prepare her for his imminent death. Despite referring to him as the angel of death,

what they want you to see. Sometimes they will be just brilliant bright lights, or sometimes they will be colour; beautiful colours, maybe red or blue