



Racing out of the traps

■ Pictures found in the Leader archive a vivid reminder of the greyhound scene of yesteryear

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MENTION the Markets Field in Limerick and a wistful look appears in many an eye. The stadium evokes blissful memories of the heyday of Limerick soccer — and happily it has now been reborn as a modernised facility for a resurgent team. For many, however, the Markets Field is synonymous with another of Limerick's great sporting passions — greyhound racing.

Today we bring you some of the magnificent photographs taken by the late Limerick Leader photographer, Donal MacMonagle, at the Markets Field in the 1950s and 1960s. Do you see anyone you know among the owners, officials and punters?

Bórd na gCon — the Irish Greyhound Board — the semi-state body responsible for the greyhound industry, was established in 1958 and was based in Dublin. The story goes that Donogh O'Malley, then parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Finance, was keen to bring a new industry to Limerick but — struggling to do so — he decided his hometown should have a semi-state body. In 1961, Bórd na gCon moved to 104 Henry Street, Limerick, famously the one-time home of William Cecil Pery, Bishop of Limerick from 1784 to 1794. Thus, the building is also known as the Bishop's Palace.

You will see that one of Donal MacMonagle's striking photographs features dogs and their handlers (Seamus Flanagan; PJ Maguire, chairman of Bórd na gCon; Pat Dalton and Pat Holland) before their trip to the USA in 1962. The story behind this photograph is fascinating. West-Limerick man, Sean Collins, former chief executive of Bórd na gCon, explains that the preservation of the integrity of the Irish greyhound was high on the agenda from the outset. At



The late Des Hanrahan, formerly sports

The American Track Operators Association had never held a meeting outside the US but Des Hanrahan invited them to hold meetings in Ireland, which they did, in Shannon and Dublin. Des also suggested the creation of the World Greyhound Racing Federation, a worldwide organisation, comprising over 20 countries. The first president of the Federation was Seamus Flanagan from 1986 to 1987, who was succeeded by Seán Collins from 1993 to 1995.

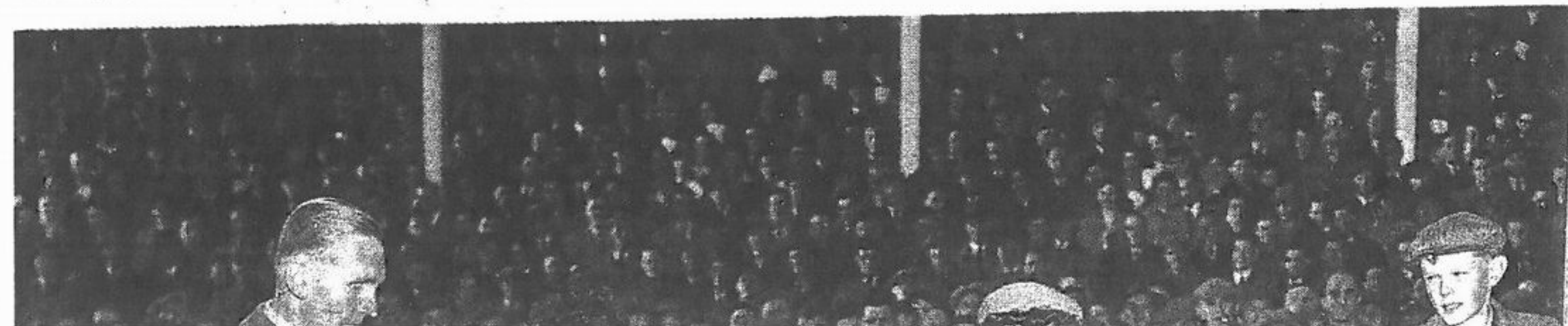
Some names well-known to the greyhound racing fraternity in Limerick include Seamus Flanagan, who had been a civil servant and served as secretary to the advisory committee on the Irish Greyhound Industry, whose report led to the establishment of Bórd na gCon in 1958. Seamus subsequently became the first chief executive of Bórd na gCon. Jim Frost from Cratloe, was a member of Bórd na gCon also. Des O'Malley, then a solicitor and, of course, more famous now for his political endeavours, was for a time a steward at Limerick Greyhound Track and, according to Seán Collins, something of a "disciplinarian".

Dr Patrick J Maguire was the first chairman of Bórd na gCon, a medical doctor by profession and who had previously been a Fianna Fáil TD for the Monaghan Constituency, elected in 1948 and 1951. He was a director of the Clones Greyhound Track and used to drive to Bórd na gCon's headquarters in Limerick every week. Sean Collins of the well-known West-Limerick political family, was originally a teacher, began his career with Bórd na gCon in its infancy in 1958 and served as chief executive from 1989-1997.

He served under seven chairmen: Patrick J Maguire, Des Hanrahan, Paddy O'Neill



Ready to run for Ireland: Seamus Flanagan, P.J. Maguire, Pat Dalton and Pat Holland of Bórd na gCon in 1962. This photograph shows greyhounds before they left for the United States and the tri-distance championships at Biscayne, Florida. These dogs were purchased by Bord na gCon as part of an initiative designed to create a new export market for Irish dogs in the USA. Three Irish dogs - Toast the Prince, Lios Mire and Dai and Duck - were raced against three American dogs - Sonda, Real West and Perfect Tip in three races over eight days. The Irish dogs won the series, 2-1. Three years after this picture was taken, former Limerick Leader sports editor Des Hanrahan became chairman of Bord na gCon, which was based until recent years in Henry Street, Limerick city



the time, the reputation of Irish dogs had been in decline and export markets waning. Bórd na gCon set about conquering the American market. This was no easy task as the American system involved track owners having contractual agreements with a set number of their own greyhound owners. This kept the Irish out. However, following approaches from Bórd na gCon, Biscayne Kennel Club afforded the Irish the opportunity to demonstrate the merits of Irish greyhounds when a tri-distance championship was established.

Three races over three different distances (a sprint, middle-distance and long-distance) were run, with three Irish dogs and three American dogs competing. Sprint racing had been almost unknown in the US up to that point while long-distance racing was something of a novelty for the Irish. Pat Dalton, from Golden in Tipperary, was recruited to train the Irish team.

The pilot scheme was a triumph (the Irish dogs won the event 2-1) and was subsequently developed into the Irish-American International Championships which was run annually and, for the time, awarded huge prize money.

Limerick's Des Hanrahan, chairman of Bórd na gCon from 1965 to 1983, and Jimmy Knight in Biscayne were instrumental in promoting this event. Thirty-two Irish dogs competed against an equal number of American animals.

editor of the Limerick Leader and in his later years an 'immensely popular' and far-sighted chairman of Bórd na gCon

hanrahan, Paddy O'Neill, Noel Brassil, Kevin Frost (son of Jim), Kevin Heffernan

(better known as Heffo of Dublin Gaelic Football) and Paschal Taggart.

Probably the best known character of all, however, was Des Hanrahan. Formerly, the sports editor of the Limerick Leader, Des became the second chairman of Bórd na gCon when Dr Maguire resigned in 1965. Des was to remain in the role until 1983. According to Sean Collins, he was "immensely popular" and to his credit made some tough and far-sighted decisions during his tenure. For example, all the Irish tracks were privately owned and tended to be situated in marketable areas. Des purchased the tracks and guaranteed income for industry. Tracks purchased at the time included Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Clonmel and Shelbourne Park in Dublin.

Limerick greyhound racing remained at the Markets Field until 2010 when a new, state-of-the-art stadium opened on the Dock Road. The latest chapter in Limerick's love affair with greyhound racing was out of the traps. Events like the hugely successful Con and Annie Kirby Memorial have demonstrated that it's now well into stride.

Many of the local families represented in these fine pictures are still involved in the greyhound scene, with the torch passed to new generations.



Ted Russell, who was Mayor of Limerick five times, presents the St Leger cup to Miss K. Roche, Mount Nagle, Mallow. Her dog, Mount Nagle Surprise, won the final of St Leger at a packed Markets Field on July 3, 1954. The dog was trained by Nora Roche and the prize money was £500, then a huge sum. Other dogs in the race were (in order of finishing) Get Up Silver, Jimmy's Love, Knockaveen, Here Comes Ballyneale and Fanny's Son. The winning time was 31.10 seconds

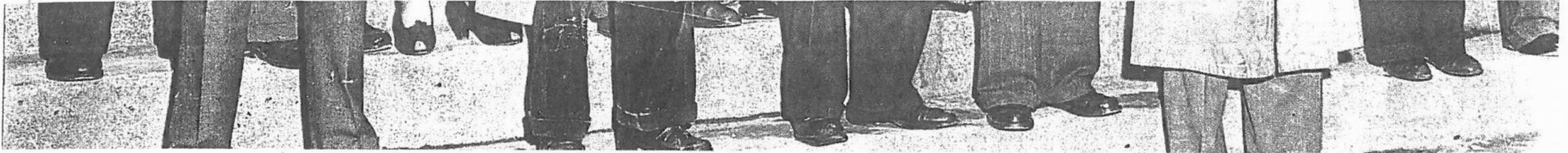


March 18, 1955 was a busy night at the dogs, with photographer Donal MacMonagle taking this fine shot of the large attendance craning their necks to see the action. Perhaps some readers will recognise their younger selves, or a family member here

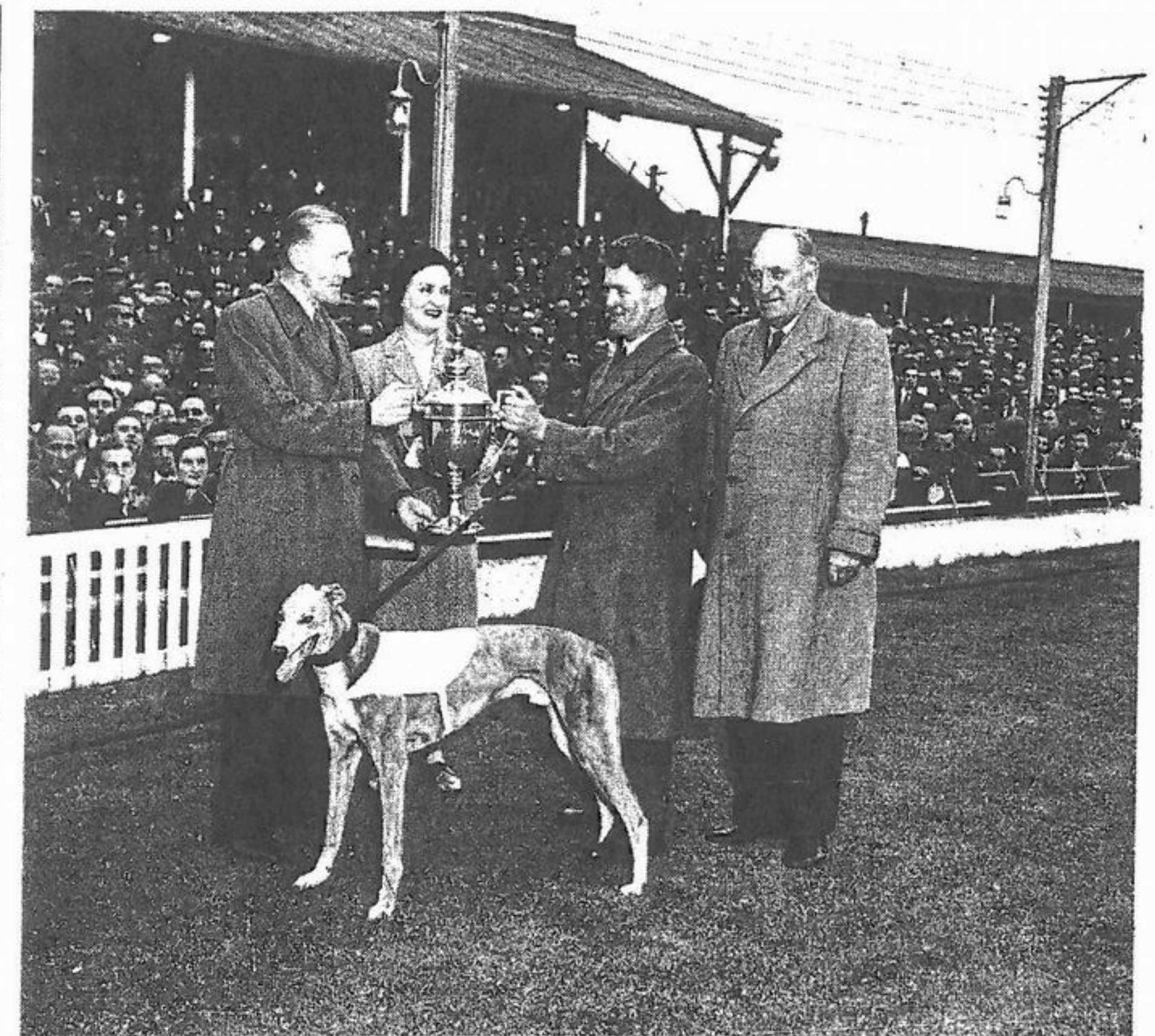


at the old Markets Field





A superb crowd scene from the St Leger Final at Limerick greyhound track on June 17, 1955. This occasion was described in the Limerick Leader at the time as 'easily the most exciting and spectacular night's racing ever at the Markets Field'



A scene from Limerick greyhound track on March 18, 1955. It was the year photo-finish cameras were introduced at the Markets Field but on this particular night the camera was redundant as there were no close finishes. The Limerick Leader's reporter had displayed some expert racing knowledge leading up to the night as four of his first choice dogs, published on the previous Wednesday, came home in front: Office Pet (3-1), Family Pet (4-5), Come on Colleen (6-4) and Stone Park (6-4). The attendance was very big and the racing excellent, according to the Leader man present

That lovely Leger feeling: Mayor Ted Russell presenting the trophy cup to the winner of the St Leger Final at Limerick greyhound track on June 17, 1955. The winning dog, Doonmore Dreamer (Wee Chap-Again Ballyglass) was owned by Paddy Sweeney of Glin. Doonmore Dreamer ran from trap four. The runner-up was Erse, followed by Norway Bay in third



Another shot from the Markets Field meeting held on March 18, 1955. This picture, along with most of the others, was never published - until now



We can only identify the greyhound owner in this picture as a Mr Joyce, but he was pictured by our man MacMonagle in September 1958



Another lovely study of one man and his dog, taken in July 1963. We don't have a name for the dog's owner



The Leader's Donal MacMonagle took this picture on the night of the final of the Tostal Cup at the Markets Field, May 21, 1955. If anyone can identify the woman, email news@limerickleader.ie or contact the Leader news desk on 061 214503