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I have been involved with greyhounds most of my life in some form or another, adding up to over 30 years of direct involvement. I grew up in Northern Ireland at the height of the troubles in the '70s and '80s. My Da always had a couple of greys at the bottom of the garden in our council house in Antrim town and later in Belfast. So as far back as I can remember there was always a greyhound or two knocking about in my formative years. I recall going to collect the Sporting Press newspaper from a shop in Belfast city centre at seven years of age on my own one morning, which involved me getting a black taxi to and from the shop. This would be unthinkable today to send a seven-year-old on an errand like this, but I was always big for my age and acted older. Plus, I'd done this journey every week with my Da since I was a toddler, so he had no doubts I could do it. I couldn't see my seven-year-old son doing this today and I certainly wouldn't allow it.

I can remember some things well from this early period; despite the memories being over forty years old. My Da was friendly with a school teacher called Gerry Gorman who lived in Stoneyford, which is a rural area about six miles from Belfast. Gerry, who taught in the Christian Brothers Secondary school on the Glen Road in the city, was a greyhound enthusiast who had land and kennels. My Da later kept his dogs at Gerry's place and we used to spend a lot of summer evenings and weekend time

there all year round. I don't know if my Da paid him for the use of his kennels or why they lost touch in the years to follow. I was very young at this time, but remember Gerry playing football with me, and my Da telling me Gerry had been a professional footballer who had played with Toronto Blizzard in Canada. After this period, I remember we had several pups reared with Joe Farmer near Keady in Armagh and went down every Sunday to see them. I remember we'd always take them out of the paddock they were in and let them gallop freely in an open field. Joe Farmer was known to have reared many champion dogs including 'Make History' the 1988 Irish Derby champ. I can't remember much about specific dogs of this period or how these pups turned out, but I can remember loving the conversations about dogs that I'd hear my Da and others having, soaking it up like a big sponge. There was another man by the name of John Mahon who lived in Portaferry; he and my Da had dogs in partnership. He had a small amount of land too and I remember visiting his place on certain Sundays, which necessitated getting the ferry from Strangford lough. These memories are very dim, but I recall him having young kids and we always had tea in their happy home after we'd seen the dogs. When any of the pups were reared, my Da would then take them home and start training them.

Of the dogs, I remember as a child, there was a dog called Fighting Mac my Da bought as a sapling along with a litter brother that turned out to be not much good. Fighting Mac was by Mic Mac who had been a decent staying type dog by Monalee Champion. I don't know any more details on the breeding, but these pups were born in Northern Ireland and were very reasonable as regards to purchase price or my Da wouldn't have bought them as he hadn't much money at this time. Fighting Mac (such a poor name for a genuine dog) caught his first hare at six months and became a fantastic catcher of hares in the brief time we owned him. We lived in a housing complex at the time in Rathinraw, which was a new, sprawling council estate at the time on the outskirts of Antrim town. In those days, the area was sparsely built up and there were fields galore all around the estate. One thing I got an appreciation for with dogs from my Da was giving them plenty of free running all year round and Fighting Mac, or Dusty as he was known to us, had a knack for catching hares that I've not seen the like of since by any other greyhound. The fields around Antrim at this time were rampant with hares and foxes. Nowadays, of course, hunting hares is illegal, but even today if you're exercising your dogs and they put a hare up, what can you do? They're going to give chase as they're doing what they're bred for and it's not as if anyone can accuse you of organised hunting.

Very few greyhounds develop the knack for catching hares. Partly, this is due to most of the fields in Ireland being too small and tight with multiple hedging around them that allows the hare to slip away much more easily than she might in a big open field. Another reason is dog's tiring from lack of stamina when they've been turned a few times; most aren't fit for sustained running. This is why many lurchers are superior to greyhounds

at catching all kinds of creatures as they've usually more stamina and often more brains, despite a slower top speed. The Lurcher learns to run clever from experience, whereas many greyhounds are not allowed free access to areas where they might put up hares or rabbits, denying them the same level of experience. They're kept away from much free running in fields in case they get injured or hurt, yet I believe you need to take that risk. Coursing men don't want their greyhounds to see much action outside regulated meetings as they don't want their dogs to learn to 'run clever'. Running clever, as I put it, means learning to run in such a way that the dog learns the best way to catch whatever quarry he's chasing. Greyhounds are much faster than hares, but without a lot of experience, invariably run straight at the hare. The hare then turns abruptly causing the dog to overshoot the turn by some yards, giving the hare an advantage of whatever time it takes for the dog to get back on terms. With experience, the dog can learn to run alongside the hare and wait until she makes a mistake, before committing himself and thus giving him a much better chance of a catch and less overshooting. This is running clever. In coursing meetings, the dog that is in front when the hare makes his first turn usually wins, so a coursing trainer certainly doesn't want his dog learning to run alongside the hare as it would let the dog behind him make the hare turn first as he was running straight at it. Dusty, as I said, developed this knack of catching and I don't know how many hares he caught, but it was a lot and the area at the time was teeming with wildlife other than rabbits as myxomatosis had practically obliterated them. Dusty and his brother took a fair number of foxes too. Dusty wasn't big, about 64 lbs, but was leggy and athletic for his size. He was a predominantly black dog. We ran him mostly at Dunmore over the 435 two bend course that was well suited to strong galloping types as the finish had a slight uphill gradient. Many people travelled to Dunmore thinking they'd have a chance there if their dog didn't get 525 yards, but with that uphill finish, a dog needed to get at least 500. Dunmore is sadly no more and it's a pity as it was ahead of its time as a running surface. It was a big wide all sand galloping track, more typical of something you'd see in Australia. Dusty started slowly as a pup and had a bad experience with the door of the traps hitting him when schooling and as a result, he was always last out of the boxes. I can't remember what times he was doing but he lost his first two races after walking out of the traps and catching the eye by making up a huge amount of ground and was ahead at the pickup in both. He won next time out despite a repeat performance at the traps and won easily. Again, I can't recall the time, but I remember my Da being approached afterwards by a couple of different men looking to buy the dog. Initially, he said no, but succumbed shortly after as he needed the money. Speaking to him years later about this, he said another factor in his decision to sell was the lack of staying races available at the time and he lamented the fact he'd sold the dog far too cheaply. There were plenty of sprint races and 525's, but even 550's were scarce unless it was an open event and it was obvious to him that Dusty

was going to need longer distances to fulfil his potential. Sometime later I remember being in the bookies with my Da and watching Dusty win an open stayers race at either Harringay or Hackney (I can't remember which). My Da backed him that day and won a few quid, but always regretted selling the dog.

I also remember, around this time, a small blue brindled bitch called Buffy Marie (named after the Native American folk singer) who won a sprint stake at Dungannon. She was a lively little 54-pound bitch who was by Ceili Band out of a coursing bitch. Lively Band (Ceili Band's sire) had famously fought in a big race and there were some doubts over the progeny of this sire line, but this bitch was very genuine and gutsy. She too was sold soon after.

A lot of people reckon that good rearing can only be done on farms where the dogs have open access to wide spaces, but I can tell you that many champion dogs were reared in and around Belfast in terraced houses and undoubtedly many more in other urban areas in the UK and Ireland. As long as pups get the chance to gallop daily, it matters not where they sleep.

Interestingly, in these times there were no complete dog meals available as there are today. Men fed their race dogs on brown bread and raw beef. There was mixer type biscuit meal such as Winalot, but you had to add meat to it and it wasn't favoured by doggy men of this time. I remember us going to Cobb's Pet store (which is long gone) on the Crumlin Road for the loaves of unsliced brown bread, which was broken up and soaked in hot water or tea, then mixed with the meat and sometimes a raw egg and usually a drop of cod liver oil. Pups would usually get a cheaper, fatter grade of meat or tripe mixed with the bread. It was believed at the time that many badly reared dogs and pups were fed a diet that consisted of just bread and milk.

My Granny lived off Springfield Road in West Belfast, and we lived there too for a time. I remember there was a Peter Pan bakery around the corner and local greyhound men knew it was a source of cheap bread for their dogs (and probably themselves too). A fella was working there and if you went to him and asked for a bag of dog bread, he'd take a black bag and fill it full, not only of brown bread but often soda's, potato bread, pancakes and whatever it took to fill the bag. Dog bread, as it was called, should have been bread that was taken off shop shelves for losing its freshness, or maybe damaged, but this fella would never refuse you! If he had no dog bread, he'd take fresh bread off the conveyor belts, making the odd hole here and there with a stick as if to justify giving it to you. He must have cost the bakery thousands. Maybe that's why it closed down a few years later. A black bag full of this bread cost ten pence in the late seventies.

Things improved on the work front for my Da and he started to make decent money working for himself painting and papering, as they call it in Belfast. He found a small paint company in Liverpool that made decent paint at low prices and started buying it in pallets to use on jobs, and he

also started selling it from the house directly to the public via a small ad in the Irish News daily paper. This later led to the opening of a couple of paint and wallpaper shops in the city and the family's fortunes looked a little brighter. The shops did well for a few years before the big sheds and multinationals started to pop up everywhere. They offered plenty of parking and big stores to walk around with no obligation to buy.

Later on, in my teens, the family moved down south to the Irish Republic and opened a shop in Navan in Co. Meath in 1990, in which I was instrumental to its success as for the first couple of years my Da continued to paint houses whilst I sold paint in the shop. The business did well and specialised in decent quality paint and wallpaper at really low prices, which was ahead of its time as there were no B&Q's, Woodie's, or big hardware chains like there are today. They came to the North and the UK a few years ahead of Southern Ireland and Irish prices for most consumer goods at this time were ridiculously high.

Within two years, we opened a second shop in the same town and the business continued to flourish. This enabled my parents to buy a house with four acres of land about three miles outside Kells in Co. Meath. It was at this time that we initially bought two sapling pups and started to build a kennel in earnest with paddocks and utilised outbuildings already there. These worked great as kennels with a stable for a whelping bay. Later on, we had a kennel block constructed that further improved our facility.

The saplings that I refer to above were bought from an advertisement in the Sporting Press. They were five months old by Bold Rabbit x Rhincrew Spark. The 'Rhincrew' prefix belongs to the Barry family outside Youghal in County Cork and they are synonymous with the Skipping Chick dam line that included Lemon Soda and many prolific producers of early pace for many generations. What was remarkable about this dam line was its propensity to produce open class winners from bitches that were moderate or average on the track themselves. The skipping chick line had some coursing blood in it. Another more recent dam line I regard as similar to this one is the Minnie's Nikita dam line that also produced flying machines in many instances from bitches that had no racing ability themselves or who were littermates of an exceptional dog or bitch. Bold Rabbit at the time was a very fast son of Whisper Wishes out of a top-class bitch called 'Contact Breaker' who ran in a top company in England. Bold Rabbit wasn't long at stud at the time, so was unproven as they say. I travelled down to Youghal with a girlfriend and picked out two dog pups, a fawn and a black and gave seven hundred pounds for the pair. Both littermates won races. The fawn dog (Lucky Fawn) won more races, but only got about 350 yards before blowing up. The black dog (Solitary Man) won a good race in Navan over 525 in 29.50 (TR 29.10 at the time) but lacked a couple of yards of early to the first bend to avoid a lot of the trouble he found in races. He was the faster of the two though, if not just as tough and determined.

The Barry family offered me a brood bitch to lease (Rhincrow Exile) who was by Knockrour Slave out of a daughter of Skipping Chick. The terms were a dog pup back at twelve weeks. We decided to mate her to 'Make History' who had won the 1988 Irish Derby over 550 and previously won the Puppy Derby over 525 yards. Despite his quality, his first crop of runners was considered by breeders to be a tad disappointing, but my Da reckoned this was partly due to the fact he was based in Armagh in Northern Ireland, which limited his appeal as very few Irish breeders will travel north as has always been the case since the likes of the brilliant Newdown Heather. Likewise, the great I'm Slippy started his stud career in Northern Ireland but was wisely moved to Cork, where he became one of Ireland's best sires, particularly of early pace.

Our litter only yielded two pups, a dark brindled dog and an almost pure white bitch named Sneachta Ban (Snow White in Irish). The bitch was very decent and won about 50% of her early races which included a 29.70 at Harolds cross at sixteen months, which was a good run on the old grass track in winter. She was third in a very good, graded bitch stake at Shelbourne Park that was won by a bitch called 'Fusion' who later became a terrific bitch winning many open races. Fusion was from the same litter as Ratify who was the best-staying dog in Ireland of his genre and broke four track records as well as winning many top races including the Cesarewitch 600 in Navan (twice). He was also a decent stud dog from limited opportunities. Limited because Irish breeders were loath to using stayers.

It's difficult to know how good Sneachta Ban would have become as she got a bad injury after only a handful of races and she'd shown improvement in every win. The bitch Fusion wasn't very much ahead of her and she turned out to be one of the top bitches in Ireland. Sneachta won in Shelbourne Park, Navan and Harolds Cross. We entered her in a coursing oaks bitch trial stake in Cavan and she made the semi-finals. She was then taken to Mullingar for a 550 yards race and was three lengths in front going into the first bend but went unsighted between the first and second bends and was knocked over the hare rail by a dog running into her when she slowed down looking for the bunny. There was a lot of money for another dog in the race and I've no doubts that her 'accident' was the work of the hare driver speeding up the hare, as it approached the first bend enough to make her lose sight of it as she reached the turn. But, how do you prove these things? I gave the hare driver a bollocking; but what was the point? She was badly injured in this race with a torn muscle and was never the same again. Her litter brother wasn't in the same class. He had no early pace but was above average for a pup over 525 and really motored down the back straight. He was sold to England where he would get longer graded races.

We never got the chance to breed Sneachta Ban as she was later savaged in a kennel fight and had to be put down. I always lamented this fact as I think she'd have made a great brood. She was about 59 lbs and a really good-looking bitch with a great temperament and a genuine attitude. She

had that rare commodity in greyhounds with good early pace and staying ability. I remember having her over the fields when she was about eight months old and she got a chase at a rabbit and I couldn't find her. I searched the fields around for ages, but in the end, had to head home. When I got there, she was in the feed kitchen with her head stuck in a bag of milk powder!

As there were only two pups in the litter, (all leasing agreements stipulate there must be at least four pups to a litter to give a pup to the owner of the brood bitch) the Barry family didn't get a pup this time. Instead, it was agreed we would hang onto the bitch and breed her again next time she came in season and hopefully get a bigger litter. We mated her again to a son of Yellow Band named Moneypoint Coal, but there were no resulting pups and we gave her back along with a pup from another litter we bred ourselves from another bitch to ensure the family got something back. This bitch 'Rhincrow Exile' was probably the easiest going greyhound I've ever seen, who would (unusually for a greyhound) just follow you around the yard, sit outside and never wander off. The Barry family would later come to prominence again from the 'Skipping Chick' days with Rhincrow Sean who won a very good Produce Stakes in Clonmel and other open races. They were nice people from a farming background and when I went down that day and bought the pups, as was typical of so many greyhound folks, they fed us a huge feed when the deal was done. This I remember well because we'd stopped on route to break the journey and had eaten shortly before we arrived at the Barry home; we were stuffed! The table was laid and to refuse would have caused offence, so another feed was had.

In the early '90s, the Sporting Press newspaper was the only dedicated greyhound weekly paper. As the spreadsheet of the Irish Coursing Club (ICC) it was very conservative and old fashioned, rubbish really, but we had nothing else in which to buy and sell greyhounds. It's still going today and no better in my opinion. There was the UK monthly Greyhound Star that was a magazine with plenty of colour and it was much better all-round, but of no use for buying or selling stock in Ireland. The only other paper that proved useful for advertising racing dogs, was the UK daily 'Sporting Life' which had a small greyhound supplement. It was good if you wanted to sell a young racer that had just won a night or two beforehand. The Sporting Life was later replaced by the Racing Post and it's still going today.

We saw advertised a stud dog called 'North Line' who was a son of Sandman out of Cooga Customer. He was a 1984, black and white dog who had finished second in the 1986 Produce Stakes Final and had won an Open event in HX in 29.04 (grass), which was near the track record at the time. He was a top-class dog who had been sold for ten thousand pounds as a pup in 1986. He had an even better litter brother, a dog called Lodge Prince who smashed the TR at Wimbledon in the English Derby in 28.34 for 525 and also the 550 clock at Shelbourne in 30.03. Both these records stood for many years, which shows how freakishly fast

of a dog he was. Ultimately, in 1990, Lodge Prince was considered a failure at stud as he'd covered plenty of bitches and didn't deliver anything of the calibre of himself, at least not in his early crop. He later sired Farloe Melody who won the English Derby and went to Australia to stand at stud, but overall despite some good offspring was disappointing at stud. This we knew but reckoned his brother North Line would be a good addition to our future breeding plans. Rightly or wrongly, we always believed that the same blood gave you the same chance. Many litter sisters of top-class dogs produce top dogs, so we reckoned that North Line could produce (potentially anyway) as well as his more illustrious brother.

We bought North Line, who was six at the time for a grand. He was a lovely big dog with a super temperament. We travelled down to Thurles in Tipperary to get him and this was our first introduction to Donal Cummins. Donal was a character and always looking for a way to make easy money. A small man and a fast talker, I particularly remember his distinctive and abundant black hair sprouting out of each nostril, and there were dogs everywhere you looked. He had an almost brand new expensive jeep that was destroyed inside from dogs and a horrible smell to which he seemed oblivious!

There was a shed there with two young litters and their mothers in opposite corners, totally open. I remember asking him if he wasn't concerned in case one of the pups strayed over to the wrong mother. "It'll only happen once," he said. This attitude was and is still typical of many greyhound men in Ireland, who tend to think of greyhounds as a survival of the fittest. Many breeders would let a bitch find her own whelping place, irrespective of suitability. I remember being in one such kennel and the breeder didn't even know one of his bitches had whelped! We found her and pups in the back seat of an old car in one of his fields. They were fine and thriving, but had it been winter it might have been a different story. Such attitudes are pure ignorance and still practised today by many breeders, yet how many pups die from negligence that could easily be saved with a little care and attention?

Donal Cummins tried to sell us everything he had. My ears pricked up when he showed us a brindled bitch called Greenpark Betty, who was a litter sister to Greenpark Fox who had been the best sprinter in Ireland for many years, but more importantly was making huge waves on the stud scene and was siring fast dogs over all distances, which belied the common view that sprinters only produced short distance runners. Betty was heading for four years of age and had raced in minor open class (and won) in England herself, but had never had a litter. My Da knew very little about bloodlines. All he was interested in was whether a dog could run or not, although he liked the idea of us breeding our own dogs. I used to spend hours reading any greyhound publications I could and trying to analyse the different bloodlines.

Everyone in greyhounds today is familiar with and uses the Greyhound Data website, which is brilliant for researching any bloodline. In the early

1990s, there was no internet for the masses and everyone's knowledge of a pedigree would have been limited to usually two generations, excepting the very rare occasions when a breeder would have his own dam line going back generations. Today people can analyse pedigrees as far back as they want and find out the results of littermates, see racing videos and access all manner of statistics through this single website. It certainly enables breeders to be better informed, but does it make it any easier to breed good greyhounds? I know plenty that would say statistics don't win races.

I told my Da we had to have that bitch and she changed hands for six hundred. If I could have seen the future that day I would have left her there, but more about that later. We gave him eighteen hundred that day and also obtained a six-month-old sapling dog pup by Balalika who was at stud there. Balalika had broken the track record at Clonmel over 525 in 28.68 and had been a hot favourite to win a couple of major competitions but seemed unlucky in finals. He was an early paced son of Moral Support, a remarkable sire who had probably the best strike rate of any, on a pup per pup ratio, but was a poor server and would refuse many of the bitches that came to him. He was always in the top twenty sire listings from very few runners, which is the true test of a good sire. Balalika, his son had a good initial start to his stud career with some very fast pups and his stud fee rocketed to seven hundred and fifty pounds, which was amongst the highest in the country. Sadly, for him, few of the early crop won major competitions and the dog fell out of favour with breeders and his stud fee went down again. Some of his pups were on the small side, but despite some very good smaller dogs, greyhound people like to see big dogs. It's a bit like a farmer buying a calf; he'll never buy the smallest one. We had mostly very good luck with the Balalika sired pups we had, as you'll hear in the pages to come.

The fawn and white pup we bought was a 1990 whelp out of a bitch called Glebe girl and we named him Steve's Champ (I had a younger brother called Steve). Strangely, his pedigree or this litter to his dam doesn't show on Greyhound Data, but we ended up selling him for two and a half thousand pounds when he won a 600 at Mullingar in 33.92 (grass), which was a very good run as at the time 34 secs was rarely broken (TR 33.61). We would later break this track record with a different dog, but more about that in a while. Champ was a nervous dog and didn't like strangers, which is a rarity in greyhounds although nervousness does show up sometimes. He was only back in our kennels a couple of days and we let him loose with some other pups, thinking by this stage it was safe to do so. We couldn't get him to come back to us. He would come to within about five feet and stay there. If we took a step towards him, back he would go and come to within five feet of us, again and again. Not sure which of us came up with the idea, but eventually my youngest brother who was about five at the time was put in the field with a lead. As is often the case with nervous dogs, he went straight to the child and allowed him to lead him. Dogs almost always seem to know that children are no threat

to them and I've never come across a greyhound that wasn't reliable with children, despite breed books stating the contrary. There's a common ignorance with people who don't have experience with greyhounds to assume that because they wear muzzles when racing that they're somehow vicious or unreliable with people, rather than the real reason being that when the hare stops and goes into the escape, dogs will often fight with each other when unsighted.

Champ was a small dog, about sixty-four pounds weight (29 KG) and although some details are sketchy in my mind, I remember he showed remarkable improvement in schooling. A lot of pups will improve a second at best from initial schooling to starting racing, but he improved a second and a half before his first race. To the horse racing fraternity, such time means nothing, nor does it mean anything to anyone outside of greyhound racing, but as anyone involved in it knows, half a second is the difference between a good dog and a great one. Anyway, Champ won six from ten races, culminating with the 33.92, 600 win at Mullingar. Gerry Leech, the control steward at Mullingar track at the time bought the dog for English connections. Strangely, I saw he was down to run in another 600 at Mullingar the following week and rang the track to say he was sold and gone to England. I was told he was back (I never found out the mechanics of what happened) and was now being trained by local trainer Francie Murray. But he never topped what he'd done for us and I feel the dog must have got injured shortly afterwards as he seemed to disappear from the scene. I don't think he won another race come to think of it. Within a couple of months, I saw another interesting advertisement in the Sporting Press. I remember the rather understated ad as if it was yesterday.

Brood bitch for sale. Game Ball x Raymond's Pride. Bitch proven.

I realised from the breeding that this bitch was a litter sister to Make History, the already mentioned 1988 Derby winner. I immediately phoned the Kilkenny number and did a deal over the phone, agreeing to buy the bitch for five hundred and fifty pounds. She was being sold by her breeder Raymond Dowling, an elderly man who told me the dam Raymond's Pride had won many top races at Shelbourne Park over 575 yards and had produced open class in every litter. He had a half-sister for sale too by Brilliant Chimes X Raymond's Pride and tried to sell me her as well, but I didn't bite. Raymond's Pride had another son at stud, Love-a-Sailor by Shamrock Sailor.

Interestingly, the bitch I bought (Racefield Kate) had a litter of pups also for sale by Kyle Jack and he tried to sell me some of these too. One of these pups (Centreback) later won the Midland Puppy Derby in Mullingar over 550 and ran second to the great Lisglass Lass in the Irish Laurels final at Cork. I could have bought him that day for three hundred and fifty pounds!

Centreback was probably the fastest dog that Kate produced, although the rest of the litter all won races, there was nothing else in the litter close to Centreback's ability (his sire 'Kyle Jack' was a good winner of the

Irish Derby and proved to be a decent sire for all distances with early pace). He was only sixty-three pounds in weight and suffered from track leg, but he had superb early and back straight pace. A '**track leg**' is a soft tissue swelling on the inside of the tibia caused when the outside of the elbow hits the inside of the back leg when galloping or racing. He would always run with a smear of Vaseline on the afflicted area that enabled the limbs to slide off each other. As far as I'm aware, none of Racefield Kate's other pups had this condition.

Racefield Kate had the first litter to Carters Lad and these all won races but were pretty ordinary and her owner probably thought she wasn't going to produce top class, hence the decision to sell her. She was nothing much to look at, compared with her derby winning brother who looked like a champion should look. She had no race form either apart from a couple of trials on her card. He told me she had problem toes and was always breaking down, but she been decent enough (they always tell you that, rightly or wrongly!). Her feet were poor looking, but as far as I was concerned the same blood flowed through her as what produced her double classic winning brother. She was about sixty pounds in weight and quite low to the ground, not leggy like her brother.

Not long after this, I spotted another ad that seemed too tempting to pass up. Two five-month-old bitch saplings by Balalika x Ese Whisper. Ese Whisper had been a finalist in the English Oaks and her brother had run well in the English Derby. The two bitches were on the small side but looked keen and we duly picked them up. The couple we bought the pups from needed a lot of paint for their house as it turned out, which we supplied, so this cut their price by a couple of hundred. The two bitches weighed fifty-one pounds and fifty-four pounds, pretty small for racing, where fifty-eight to sixty is about the average racing weight for bitches.

The smaller of the two was a black & white bitch and was the fastest, but she had a kink or a fault to her that made sure she never realised her potential. She was quite nervy and highly strung and if she got the slightest bump, she seemed to go to pieces and wouldn't go past another dog. She was fine if she got out in front, but the minute another dog got close to her, it unsettled her and her chance was gone. I've mixed feelings about why this was. On one hand, I feel if she was genuinely chasing hard, she wouldn't have been expecting a thump or bump and it wouldn't have been a problem, but the other dogs in the kennel would bully her if they got the chance, so she was soft, to say the least. She could run though and had serious early pace. We entered her in a 325-yard twelve dog sprint sweepstake at Mullingar, where there were two heats and the first three from each heat made up the final six. She won her heat in nineteen seconds, which was decent for a debut race, but she was capable of about 18.70, which was open class. In the final, she didn't break well and never showed due to her quirkiness. She went to England shortly after to a graded kennel, where they run every week for appearance money. I can't remember what we got for her, but it was probably a bit more than what she cost us.

Her sister Whispering Grass, as she was named, was a fawn bitch and was a real good looker for her fifty-four pounds weight. She was racy, game-looking and turned out a decent bitch. She won first time out at Mullingar over 325 and won again the same week in 29.60 over 525 in Navan by a distance! (It was obviously a very poor pup's race) and she was only fifteen months old. She won a good few races, but only stayed about 470 yards fully. She developed great early pace and overcame poor trapping in her early races. She was an inside runner, who if housed anywhere other than trap, one would immediately move inwards to the left and rail so tight she almost touched the rails. As there was no seeding in Ireland at this time, this was a big disadvantage and she did find trouble at times in races that she could've easily won. She did though win close to 50% of her races, so genuine was she in her desire to win. Her best win was a 29.90 at Mullingar in a decent Saturday night race, where she overcame a trap six draw and blasted out of the traps so quickly she got across to the inside rail without colliding with any of the other dogs. 29.90 for 525 might sound slow today, but Mullingar at this time was grass and it was the slowest surface in Ireland and had the tightest bends in the country. It suited a certain type of dog, usually not too big. If you could break thirty seconds over 525 at Mullingar you had a decent dog. To put it in perspective as far as class goes, the top open events over 525 at Mullingar at this time would rarely be won in better than 29.50 and these would be the top dogs in the country. Whispering Grass was just a couple of lengths off being in this company but was a joy to train and take racing as she was rarely without a chance. She developed a wrist injury that curtailed her a bit after her first dozen or so races and coming in season twice a year didn't help her accumulate that many starts. I leased her out to an acquaintance that frequented Navan track as he had won a service in a raffle to a dog called Glencorbry Celt. He was a rangy black son of Brilliant Chimes that finished runner up in one of the last Irish Derbies ran over 525 yards, before they changed it to 550 and was a well-proven sire of decent progeny, if not spectacular. He was handled at stud by his trainer Jerry Melia, who seemed a nice man along with being very knowledgeable. He told us that the dog suffered from something in his chest, similar to asthma, that the dog always ran better when the going was soft and the weather wet. His superb 29.08 Derby semi-final win was by far the fastest on the rain-sodden grass of Shelbourne Park (1984). Interestingly, he only ever sired blue or black offspring, so strong was his genetic colour imprinting. I travelled with the bitch and saw the mating, but unfortunately, she didn't conceive. We tried mating her sometime later to Strange Dilly, but she missed again and we didn't try to breed her again. With hindsight, I regret not persevering a bit harder to get her in pup, but I had plenty on my plate at this time and there was also the possibility she might have thrown small pups, not being the biggest herself.

The period between 1990 and 1994 was largely a magical time for us and our kennel. To begin with, our burgeoning paint business partly

subsidised our initial outlay and purchasing of pups and brood bitches. Once we had our few acres and kennel facilities, it made a huge difference to us being able to prioritise our time. In 1990, I was eighteen. We had two retail outlets that had to be staffed and stocked six days a week, as well as a small greyhound kennel. Usually, we'd spend two hours working the dogs in the morning and another two in the afternoon or early evening. The shop work and greyhound work were divided equally between us. My brother Steven who was eight years my junior helped out a bit as well with feeding and paddocking.

The success we had from our investment if you want to call it that, was amazing. We didn't win any classics, but all of the pups we bought and most of the early home-breeds won first time out. At one time our winning percentage of pups winning their first race was around 70%, which if you're experienced in greyhounds, you know seldom happens. It was vital that we got some degree of early success or there would have been a lot fewer dogs bought. Any money we won or got from selling dogs was refunnelled into the operation. We were gearing up to be in a position where we would have pups coming thick and fast in the next couple of years, and winning and selling on was necessary as we didn't have the time to concentrate on very many race dogs.