

14/02/2024 Jonathan Buckley

Dave Lawrence Interview Summary

Interviewed by Rozanne Gomes for the WiSH / Digital Works Going to the Dogs Oral History Project 22nd January 2024 at the AFC Wimbledon's Cherry Records Stadium, Plough Lane, London SW17.

Born 1958 in Walton on Thames. Mum worked in youth service and Dad production editor for the News of the World

Start: Younger brother went racing and took him along. Few months later went halves on buying a dog with brother – Wonderful Kirk debut 1985 at Wimbledon. Hooked and has owned at least 3 dogs every year since. That first time was at Slough. Bit daunting going to Wimbledon at first, but once got used to it became home from home.

No family involvement. First trip was working for BBC and went with work colleagues to White City – enjoyed but nothing special. Never knew would spend thousand and thousands of pounds over the years chasing glory. Brother got him in and parents were supportive. Kennels in Hersham near Walton on Thames home and used to take the dogs out and take home.

Atmosphere: Varied. Big night with 4,000 people real buzz; afternoon few people less exciting. Lot of big nights with big prizes especially when Wimbledon got the Derby. Two sided unique – cheap and posh side. As owner, tended to stay on posh side. Silver service in the restaurant. Buzzy place to be.

Trials to qualify. First dog was bitch and had to wait 6 months for her to race. Interesting, place quite empty. Coffee bar with fantastic bacon buns. See lots of fellow owners. Only 10 minutes to get to stadium. So used to come and see trials. Real mixture of people – well to do and man in the street. Met so many people would not have met without greyhounds. Celebrities would turn up. Snooker and football players.

Look of the stadium changed. 1984 two sides with big grandstand with tiered seating over time you had your own row. Used to have glass window viewing area where you could watch dogs being prepared for race. Walk out on the main grandstand and say hello. Lost that when the kennels closed. Main stand lady made jacket potatoes with beans and cheese – slowly disappeared. Side seating and restaurant, GRA board room. Working-man based sport mostly men but changed over time. More and more Hen Parties and became more a social activity into the 90s.

Typical night: 10-14 races starting 7.30-10.45. Turnstiles at front to find row. Races every 15 minutes, bookies out, have a race, if dog won would go out for the presentation. Time flew by. Getting organised which bookie had best odds. Tote windows or runners in restaurant. Staff easy, well run and organised.

Memorable nights: Lot of the main competitions – Grand National hurdles, Laurels, Oaks (bitches), St Leger, Springbok for novice hurdlers. Once a month a major final. Extra special ... every Derby since 1985-98 with crowds from 5,000 to 15,000, standing on the first bend. Crowds dropped over the years especially when the big stand had to be closed. Felt like football match. Extra bookmakers. From 1998, Derby spent in a car park producing for Sky.

Characters: early days the racing manager was a former major from the Army and you had a lot of ex-soldiers. Trainers and owners very wary of going up to him. The Postman because brilliant tipster and took bookmakers to the cleaners ' I am the Postman because I always deliver'; Tony Morris gentleman bookmaker well turned out and very polite paid out with a smile; Del Nash and son Ricky

and spoke to him before meeting and 'what is the best price' and he could be forewarned and lay off the bet with other bookmakers; Tote window back where we sat and always tried to bet with her – superstition. Suit maker who was owner and punter and would invite you to come out to buy a suit in the car park.

Stadium: Template for greyhound stadiums was oval. Wimbledon was a bigger one with both sides which made extra buzz. Others one sided. Had such a history. Only track that was bigger was Wembley. Felt more important, better races. Not a lot of success in first 15 years ... only when stepped up investment started to win races.

Kept coming back: races came all four nights a week. Friends meant that you would go for a night out. Few beers and then back in a curry house in Wimbledon. Bagging races in afternoon so could be 5 times a week. Used to live in Weighbridge so moved to Wimbledon to be closer to the track.

Gambling: You can't have one without the other. Double edged sword ... all the major races sponsored by the bookmakers so they can call the shots. Not a huge gambler, tend to be on own dogs. 1985 win with brother on Derby Pagan Swallow 250-1 trained by Philip Rees his trainer. For a while betting £50-£100 ... pitting your wits against a bookmaker.

Started going with brother who went with next door neighbour from Texas. Six months later bought another greyhound. Dogs were moved to Slough because not good enough. Arthur Hitch at Slough has Tico which won Derby. Slough got closed and they went back to Wimbledon with Hitch; dogs kept at Langley. Weekend walk the dogs and tea and biscuits in the kitchen with the trainer.

Preparing dogs for racing. Cook food, clean teeth, take for run ... all dogs very different. Trainer gets to know the dogs – early start breakfast, paddock to do business, food at lunch (small race feed), most trainers have vans with cages to transport to take to track. Arrive 2 hours before for vet check and paddock steward for ear marks etc and paddocks to wait for race. Quite lazy dogs. Typical race day: half hour before first race, drink, restaurant, watch racing and go home.

Buy the dog and then it gets looked after by trainer. Trainer in Ireland, Newcastle, South Coast. £10pd kennel bill and they look after them you have to pay for vet bills and travel. Only time to see dogs is after race or on Sunday morning. Every owner is different: one dog fuss and food others too many. Get connection with dogs. Used to be permit training – 3 dogs in a kennel or keep in the house. That is rare. Greyhound Board did away with that because they needed to be checked easily and now less dogs required.

Dog Welfare: Have had 150 dogs in the sport ... 4-5 have had to be put to sleep. Early days injuries would have been put to sleep. Greyhound Board and track now will pay for treatment. Now very well looked after. Lots of checks. Back in 60-80s easier to euthanise the dog. Arrived at track and dog got injured and put him to sleep but trainer didn't tell him. Very upset. He would have recovered and they fell out for a bit. So important because lots of people out there looking to have it banned.

People's attitudes have changed a lot since 50-60s. Greyhounds love to race, very healthy breed and go back thousands of years. Anti-greyhound using facts and figures from donkey's years ago! Fitness spin of young dog broke a hock. Hove paid for operation and he is fine. He won't race again and he will be found a home. Seamus Cahill trainer's wife finds homes. Lot of greyhounds finished at 4 and live to 14 so vital they are rehomed.

Syndicates: Dogs got more and more expensive idea came in because you could only have so many names. The Champagne Club with the Bubbly dogs. May have 200 people involved. Won the St Leger

and there were hundreds on the track. Today a dog may cost £25,000. Aero Syndicate. Good thing. Get pictures and updates all the time. Get the same in horse racing.

Changes: Crowds just whittled away to almost nothing. Times changed and racing all hours of the day whereas before people turned up for evening meeting at 7.30-11 after work. Now even the evening meetings are too short 6 (too early) to 9.30. In the heyday at White City you would get 70,000-80,000. Then in the 1980s it was probably around 9,000 10,000 but later in noughties was around 3,000.

Now lots of things rivalling going to the dogs and media and streaming. Pre-betting shops days you had to go to race. Only go now if I have a dog in a big final. COVID also people changed lifestyle. Used to go four times a week and now 10 times a year.

Media: Positive with Sky – shop window with best racing from the best tracks. It was a big production and reports from all over with analysis, replay and graphics – 1999-2012. Very popular £40K per show. Sky stopped – Go Barking Mad, William Hill TV, Racing Post Greyhound TV – took over but smaller production budgets. Owners would move their dogs to be on TV.

Now SIS and Ark in media rights battle with different tracks – messing up things but prize money improved - signed up to different organisations; GTV lost tracks. There is nowhere else to see greyhound racing on TV except on Sky 427 Greyhound TV. Love-hate relationship; used to show Derby on BBC and the Television Trophy. Now you can watch race somewhere but no dedicated shows.

Campaign: GLC and Boris Johnson was Mayor. Very positive but no political will to save it. GRA had already given Galliard Homes to develop property. Not personally involved. Sadiq Kahn changed his mind.

Future: Lost Henlow in Bedfordshire last night. Land value is going to be a big issue. Still be racing in 10 years' time. Perry Bar likely to close and no major cities with them. Wolverhampton development. About 20 tracks now and maybe 16 in the future. Never back on mainstream media. Hope Greyhound TV continues and the Greyhound Derby is covered properly. Fingers crossed – see best dogs going head to head!

Special: Friends and dogs winning race. Don't get the same going to other tracks. Hove is a superb track but you will never replace the togetherness at Wimbledon. Everyone loved coming to Wimbledon. Derby was still an exciting night who came from all over to attend. All had regular spot and get there early and reserve it.

Mean to you: Main hobby and activity but came to it late; 27-year old. Love people, dogs and nothing like watching a big race. Planning for next race. Stats man. Few years ago, reached 1,000 winners and now 1,200.

Sky: Proudest day the 1999 Derby coverage – 3-hour show - having been asked to set up greyhound coverage having been doing horse racing. Extended the deal and had 36 programmes a year with a lot of them coming from Wimbledon – 7.30-10 - with final at 9.45. Covered all the majors. Lots of magazine coverage of trainers and all the other stakeholders, and all the effects, etc. William Hill took the Derby to another level with £250,000 winner's prize in 2015. Currently at £175,000. Some of the coverage covered on Sky Sports News. Pushed awareness to bigger audience. Jeff Stelling started there. Vinnie Jones, Keith Richard, Mick Jagger, Jimmy White, Ronnie O'Sullivan etc came along and got the sport into tabloids.

Ireland: Government pay into the industry because listed as a tourist attraction. Never happened in the UK; it enabled them to develop their tracks. On the tourist agenda! Shelbourne Park in Dublin lots of tourist and great facility. Where most greyhounds are bred – most dogs bred in Ireland (goes into the treasury). Money – all UK tracks stretched for every pound. Lots got old and tired. More of a way of life in Ireland ... people will be rearing pups.

Dodgy Practices: Drug use has been a problem over the years. Now quite stringent testing. There is always some new drug to catch up on. There was a trainer that was disqualified at Wimbledon.

Tote v Bookmaker: Tote is pool betting. If you wanted trap 6, put pound on, then if others people put bet on then it would be a favourite. Price will be changing all time so don't know odds until it starts. With a bookmaker you can buy when you like the price and that is the price you get. Arab lady in the restaurant and she would put a lot of money on – e.g. £500 – which would completely destroy the odds on the Tote.

Used to back dogs to win with bookie and then put some Forecasts or Reverse Forecasts bets on Tote to cover loss. All different combinations with Tote but most of bookies it was to win. John Henwood would offer bet without the favourite; it was a good bet. Tony Morris and Del Nash were the others. Had to be wary with the Tote. Serious bet with the bookmaker.