

14/02/2024 Jonathan Buckley

## **Richard Joyce**

*Interviewed by Sarah Armstrong for the WiSH / Digital Works Going to the Dogs Oral History Project 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2024 at the AFC Wimbledon's Cherry Records Stadium, Plough Lane, London SW17.*

Born 1957 in Clacton on Sea. Parents were caterers

**First experience** encompasses horse races. Father took him to Alexandra horse racing and lost money and said let's go to Wembley Dogs. The St Leger with a crowd of 15,000 ... star struck by the lights, bookies, tic-tacs and Dad won his money back. After that father took him to various track on a regular basis but Wimbledon was nearest. Hooked! In 1971 he went to Wimbledon for the first time and even during the week there were about 6,000 people at an ordinary grading meeting.

If Dad was working he would sneak out telling his mother he was going 'to the church youth club'. You could get a bus for 6 pence ferrying people back and forth from the stadium. Became regular - 'cheeky chappie' - with Father in main ring and on his own he would pop under the turnstiles to the 'popular' or what the regulars would call 'the poor enclosure'. Peter, a bookie and tic-tac, said you don't want to get to keen on this because it is going to close. And you want to stop coming. See those brown packets on the floor ... that's people's pay packets.

**Some of the regular characters:** Tommy Lawrence tic-tac for Peter Knights, Skinny Pearson ran all the bookmaking and licensed tic-tacs. Arthur Nicholls, son in law was married to Arthur Nicholls daughter. There was Harry Lester, Donald James and Freddie Combes his tic-tac and clerk and it was them that taught him the art. Ginger Newman, Tommy Rank ... so many bookmakers ... Dai Morris, Jack Mitchell used to stand on a stool and his pipe stayed in his mouth for 8 races.

George Reed used to bet on the 3<sup>rd</sup> bend 'the casino because' – people were flinging money in the hod and you had no chance. Always had a bet with him because on the last race at 9.15 he could bet there and then run out and catch bus back to be home by 10 o'clock to tie in with the 'church youth club'.

**Atmosphere was colossal.** It was in the working-class blood. Lived for one track – when they closed Wandsworth in 69, lots of local people gave up racing. If it was a good dog, people would applaud it when paraded – they knew their dogs. Gloucester Peter: "When they shut Park Royal they shut down me." He used to watch dogs being unloaded from green transporters and with no ID he could identify all of them; and he would formulate what he was going to bet from that moment.

I love this game ... would you love it if you didn't have a bet. But people would stand in the bar and chat about racing; food, drink and racing. Sport enjoyed by people who knew what they were watching. Electric atmosphere. When it was only 8 races it was better and less drawn out. Local pubs after the event: Prince of Wales, Corner Pin, The Plough pubs and people would have cards and discuss the races.

He, Richard Birch and his Dad co-owned Bunghole Mac dog. Slow out of the trap ... big dog, 60lbs ... pace second and third bend was electric ... five strides three lengths ahead, had to check up to get around the third and fourth bend. Bought him for the Springbok event (fastest 48 dogs) but he got injured for that. First dog ... excitement of watching them race. He was advised: keep one dog if that is what you can afford or they will put you in the poor horse.

**Most exciting night** for owning dog was with Noir Shawnee – blue dog – from Seamus Cahill. Reared a dog, bred in Ireland and it came across and was useless. Sent it back (Bird Song after Sebastian Faulks book) and trainer offered Noir Shawnee in its place for £1500. Saw it race but not convinced and told partner Keith Billyard – don't fancy it 'dodgies'. Keith said If you and Steve not going to buy I will buy on own so they went for it. Someone had offered £4000 but the trainer was good as his word.

So, the Pied Bull pub syndicate owned it and had so much fun with it winning 48 out of 100 races; biggest claim to fame was getting through to quarter finals of Derby when there were 200 entries. He couldn't run anywhere other than Wimbledon and was retired after his 100<sup>th</sup> race having cost them nothing with all his wins.

1991 biggest success was Roving Joy. Injured its shoulder and lost muscle before she even arrived. But she recovered and was a flying machine; from trap to fourth bend and then wondered if she could keep it up. She got beat by a head and only booked to win not both ways. Dog that beat her was a 3-year-old called Bixby and the dog was never sighted again after Romford.

**Characters at Wimbledon:** Skinny Donald tic-tac ... never eaten hot food in his life 'nervous wreck' worked for Jack Dyas ... (93) living in alms houses – Jack Dyas turned around and said 'come around here' – Skinny would you mind slowing down it looks like a windmill with you throwing your arms around. Billy Cook (96). Tommy Lawrence, fishmonger Tommy the Fish come from Streatham and used to sing with the Harry Stone Band on Parkinson. Freddy Coombs ... used to pay betting tax in those days and you had to write down: taxman said 'I can't understand this book'. I got news for you, you are not supposed to'! Billy Cook is the only one still alive' - who's going to win the race'.

**How did Wimbledon differ:** tight 460 where the big stadium had sweeping tracks over 525 yards. All grass in summer and peat in the winter. More and more dog racing on less and less track and went to sand. Older folks said it added to the injuries. Unforgiving ... sound surface grass. Water and sand is hard surface.

Gracing Room club for owners, one of the best restaurants of its time. Good experience and had table for the night with people running and putting your bets on. It became a thing of its time and it became burgers. Then lost a bit of its class – Cearns family prided themselves on it being a night out. Couldn't get a table for love nor money.

Move from main enclosure to Mick the Miller stand: steak and chips and scampi. Late 90s the Diamond Room with Bistro bar and restaurant near 4<sup>th</sup> bend. Later they brought in the 6-pack: free bet, burger, pint of beers. etc – it became totally different spectators and experience.

**Role of gambling** is what made the wheels turn around. In 50-60s they were taking millions of pounds in a year. I used to go up and get money from the owners to put money on. Without gambling there would be no greyhound racing.

George and Ronnie Reed worked with them for 25 years. Son didn't have a feeling for the game. Richard had a feel for the market and who was out on the step. Keep an eye on the ring betting. Details of what the clerk does and record all the bets in the book; ticket number etc. All happening and recording three minutes before the race started.

**Tic-tac** language demonstration: dog (123456), prices, etc. Easier at the dogs because there were only 6 dogs. Haven't been done for many years. Put out of business by going forward – computers, walkie talkies. In the old days you would have eight people: the big bookies might have tic-tac in two rings showing in clerk, bag man etc. In the end operating with 2 people and an electronic board.

Memorable days at the bookies. Ronnie a bookmaker was getting married and had to deputise for him on Saturday night, still quite busy in the noughties. There were lot of unusual faces there – all backed the five dog Seven Monkeys 7-1 £500 and it started 11-10 favourite. Trying to crash away and lay off the bet with other bookies. How much did he give you to bet with, '£3,000'? Had a terrible book. Dogs went around the first bend and smash up and the 4 dog came out of the melee and stayed four dogs ahead at the finishing line. "You feel better now!" If the 5 dog had won they would not have had enough money to pay out. Jack Dyas was a fearless bookmaker. Luck always went the bookmaker's way.

Owners: Stan Newman with the Long Cross Kennels with Phil Rees. Used to breed most dogs in Ireland. She threw about 6-7 litters. Used to fall love with the dogs and go down to the kennels. For some owners they were just dogs. Welfare: in the old days the dogs were just there for their working life. In the 1960s you got the start of welfare with rehoming clubs. We would find homes for them.

**Today it is more regulated.** Anyone who says it is cruel and shouldn't be allowed. Nowadays you have to take out a bond when you buy a dog and that comes into play until it finds a home. No euthanasia of a healthy greyhound. That is causing a problem for the industry now ... we can't sell the dogs because the trainers can't take them. System works so well. In COVID there were a lot of dogs rehomed but that mean afterwards there was no real capacity.

Big times were the 50s when the soldiers came back from war with their gratuities, 60s was still good but first nail in the coffin was opening of the betting shops in the afternoon. Second nail in the coffin was betting shops in the evening – used to be 6.30. 90s were good but when Betfair came out it decimated crowds because people could stay at home. Nowadays it seems they don't want people at the track.

**Future** if Ark build stadium at Wolverhampton I will see it just being there. Greyhound racing is finished as a spectator sport but as a business it will remain for the betting markets 'canine roulette'. Whole system is collapsing; litters reducing etc. It's a shame but plenty of things have gone.

Bought my house through working at Wimbledon but it was the camaraderie and the atmosphere; three nights of the week you know where you were going to be. Semi-retired once the other half of the stadium closed. But for many it was there lives. It was a massive part of my life. Gave me a lot of opportunities. Walk on the track and someone would say something, have a laugh. Had a career in catering running alongside his job as a bookie.

**Terms:** 'out on the steps' in front of the bookmaker where the front man stood and told him the prices; 'putter onner' would put bets on for someone; 'ring betting' grandstand, outside, poor mans ring; 'showing out' showing prices to bookmaker; clerk records bets, bagman give out change and give out the winnings; tic-tac man shows bookmaker what the prices were.

How do you get foot in door to be a bookie at Wimbledon? Skinny Pearson had list of opportunities to become a bookie but you would never get in. Tightly controlled: inside and outside rings. When the funding of tracks changed it became a closed shop. Bookies could also own dogs and have them running in races they were bookmaking. One night his dog favourite was only one not to come first. All the other favourites did "carnage for the bookmakers!"

Dogs used to be trained in Burrhill near Esher. They used to load up and come to Wimbledon Stadium in two big green transporters 'canine coaches'. Arrive at stadium 2 hours before to be checked by vets and be kennelled. Open racing where any trainer could enter dog and there were contracted trainers who supplied dogs for the stadium (they came in transporters). Over years it

changed. Each stadium had its own contracted trainers and kennels. And then this changed and they had to provide selves and now they have to have air-conditioned transporters for welfare.