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## Lyn's racers retired

**S**ADLY, the time has come for me to retire from my position as trainer - of greyhounds.

Our three dogs, Crush (Sooty), Idolize (Sweep) and Affection (Soo) turned four years old in October and, although they still appear to be capable of running up to their best form, we have relied on volunteers from the racing staff to care for the dogs and take them racing since my sister Lyn's death in April, and I no longer feel that we can maintain the standards which Lyn set. As with most other things that I have done in my life, if I can't do it properly, I'd rather not do it at all and, on my last visit to Pelaw Grange on October 26, I decided that it was time to call it a day.

Deirdre and I thoroughly enjoyed our trips to watch the dogs run during the last two-and-a-half years, but we rarely had time to go and had even less time to play a significant part in their care and training at home. Lyn dedicated a huge amount of her time to the dogs and I now realise that, as with horses, training requires that level of dedication and attention to detail.

It was by most standards a pretty successful venture and I am more than happy with our overall performance but, above all, it gave Lyn tremendous satisfaction during the last three years of her life. She was immensely proud of them.

Our first runner was on May 21, 2012 when Affection took on the mighty Farloe Tango in an Open Race at Nottingham and was soundly beaten into fourth. How naive were we? There is nothing quite like starting at the top.

Winners, understandably, eluded us for the rest of that year, as we struggled in Open races around the country but then

they came thick and fast in January 2013 after we became affiliated to Pelaw Grange in County Durham. Idolize and Affection gave us a double on January 20 and Crush made it three from three individual dogs a week later.

In all they won 22 times from 117 starts with 10 wins for Idolize, 8 for Crush (two at Open race level), and 4 for Affection (two at Open race level). We, particularly Lyn, became very fond of the friendly crowd at Pelaw Grange which, if truth be told, is more Catterick than Royal Ascot but is, nonetheless, a fun place for dogs, their owners, and the local people to visit.

Our last winner was Idolize at Pelaw on September 7 but, perhaps, the most exciting moment for Deirdre and me took place one evening last July when we arrived home from racing (horses, of course) to discover that we had a runner at a televised meeting at Newcastle. We sat down to watch the dog run while eating our dinner and we were leaping up and down as Affection came from behind to win by a short head. Unfortunately, she broke a toe while playing with the other dogs in their paddock soon afterwards and, although now fully recovered, she never ran again.

She has been gifted to our friend Rachel Wheeler in Cashel, Ireland, where she will be retired to stud. Hopefully, she will be visiting Lyn's choice of stud dog, Scottish Derby winner Ballymac Eske.

Crush (Sooty) has become a pet for our vet John Martin and Lyn's favourite, wee Sweep, is still looking for a home. But, don't worry, in the meantime she will be spending much of her time with Gnasher and Doogie at Kingsley House.

## Trainer form - does it exist?

**W**HILE on the subject of retirement (see Lyn's racers retired), at least one member of the public thinks I should be retiring from horse training now as well, and handing over to my son Charlie.

A Tom Hunt (hopefully no relation to our editor, Gerry) e-mailed with regard to our recent spell without a winner and claimed that, if I was a Premiership manager, I would have been sacked long ago. Surely not? At the end of a season when we finished third (on prize-money won) in the top league and scored more goals (winners) than any other team? I don't think that happens too often, not even in football.

He claimed that my owners deserved an 'explanation'. I didn't really think so. As John Scanlon demonstrates elsewhere in this issue, we also had a higher percentage of individual winners to runners than any other trainer in Britain this season and so I hoped that most of our owners were pretty satisfied with the year and that any who weren't could see that, overall, we have done very well.

I also feel that, if it was possible to explain why we had a long run of losers, that would suggest that a cause could be identified and so, something could be done about it. If that were the case, I would have been doing it, not explaining it.

### Discussion

However, it has to be said that Tom was not alone in seeking some comment from me. There was a bit of discussion on the racing channels about our poor run of form and one owner, prompted by my presence on the Racing Post's 'Cold Trainers' list, told me that I should be using the 'Bletherings' section of our website to explain the horses' form rather than doing a light-hearted blog on the fact that the season was over and I might find some time to go cycling.

I, as I have said, don't think it can be explained and so didn't think it was worth attempting to do so, but clearly there are a number of people out there who think that speculation on such matters is interesting, so here goes.

First and foremost, when our horses win fewer races over a period of time than we would normally expect, we have to decide whether, as a group, they are running below form or not. That is easier said than done.

Horse racing's statistical guru, James Willoughby, doesn't think that our run of losers was statistically significant and he, generally, doesn't believe in 'trainer form'. He is particularly dismissive of the Racing Post's 'Cold Trainers' list, which takes no account of whether individual horses have

run well or not, and thinks that any attempt at analysing trainer form is better based on the 'Running To Form' tables which assess the percentage of horses running to within 5lb of their best Racing Post rating.

Of course, ratings, in themselves, are largely subjective, but it is interesting nonetheless to consider that, throughout the period when I was at, or close to, the top of the 'Cold Trainers' list, I was never considered to be 'Out Of Form' by the Racing Post.

However, I don't entirely agree with James Willoughby and I do think that it is more than coincidence that training yards appear to go through periods when a large percentage of their runners are running close to their best and other times when the opposite is true. Having said that, I am unable to offer anything approaching a conclusive explanation for the peaks and troughs and I am hugely respectful of James Willoughby's view. I thought Maths was my best subject at school but, when he starts talking statistics, it is a foreign language to me.

What is certain though, is that, when a yard appears to be out of form, many people, whether attached to the yard or

simply racing enthusiasts, look for someone or something to blame. It is a time when owners, especially if they have not personally been having a good run, might be more likely to be critical of a trainer's approach or procedures. I am very conscious of this and, whenever our yard is in a trough, or might be perceived to be in a trough, I impress upon our team that we must batten down the hatches and ensure that we maintain our highest standards. If owners feel that standards have slipped it could result in the loss of horses before there is an opportunity for them to peak again and a trough can become a landslide.

### I am unable to offer a conclusive explanation for the peaks and troughs

Most people seem to think that poor performance is most likely to be the result of infectious disease and many in racing have come to call this phenomenon 'the virus'. I never did believe in this and have said from the outset of my career that the chances of all horses in the yard being 'sick' at the same time would be slim. What's more, as our team grew, and horses were based on three different sites, the chances of there being an infectious agent which was, presumably, spread by people and could have an equal effect on Warwick House and Kingsley Park farm - a mile apart - but avoid the neighbouring yards of George Moore, Philip Kirby and Karl Burke, was inconceivable and still is.

**I**HAVE thought that an infectious challenge by some agent, bacterial or viral, to which the horses had immunity, could result in their immune systems 'working overtime' and that this might go some way to explaining poor performance. But this would also require that infectious agent to jump between yards and, apparently, be more attached to one trainer than another.

Many of you will have heard me say

that it was a major breakthrough for us when, in 1995, we were able to keep our two-year-olds in a completely separate yard from our older horses. It is accepted that, in their first year in training, a horse's immune system is not fully 'mature' - it simply hasn't encountered, or developed immunity to, many of the pathogens that it will meet when mixed with a large population of horses from different backgrounds. They are like young kids at primary school with permanently snotty noses and they provide an ideal breeding ground for bacteria and viruses. Older horses stabled next to these youngsters might find themselves continually fighting off infection and their immune system 'working overtime' as described above.

This could go some way to explaining our recent situation as we certainly have

more yearlings on the premises than ever before and they started to arrive at the begin-

ning of October, just when the winners dried up. But there are no yearlings in the Kingsley House yard and there are more runners from that yard than any other.

It brings me back to the question of whether the yard, as a whole, was out of form and how many individuals were actually running below expectations. The answer, despite a run of 112 losers, is probably, not many. In that time there were only three beaten favourites and two of those were right at the beginning of the period.

Oregon Gift took me off the 'Cold Trainers' list last month and attention will now be focused elsewhere but don't expect a sudden rush of winners. Our all-weather team is very small in comparison to recent years and our team of older (three and up) horses, overall, for 2015 will be our smallest in nearly 20 years.

The emphasis next year will be on two-year-olds but, as usual, they will be predominantly from middle-distance families. I don't think we will be in a position to churn out the numbers that we have become used to but I'll keep you posted on that over the winter as we finalise the make-up of our team.