

THE HEART OF RACING

Norman Lee

Position: Trainer

Norman Lee speaks to John O'Riordan about his ambitions for the future as a trainer

IN my teens, I rode in a handful of point-to-points and worked at home with my father Christy, who trained point-to-pointers on the Quackerstown point-to-point track, which is owned by my cousin, Gerard Lee.

At 20 years old, I decided to go and learn a trade, working as a carpenter for 12 years, while still riding out at home.

In 2008, I bought a small farm and over the next few years I set up a decent yard of 20 stables, with a walker, arena and five-furlong all-weather sand gallop.

Four years ago I decided to focus full-time on developing the yard. At first we were mainly breaking and pre-training but after a while we got tempted to

point-to-point a few horses.

Our very first runner was a four-year-old called The Taxi Driver, owned by a very good friend of mine John Neylon. He was beaten just half a length by a decent horse, Portrait King, and was subsequently placed in all three runs for us, before being sold on. Later that year we got our first winner - a cousin of mine sent us a five-year-old horse called Survival who won for us at Inchydoney. We have trained a good few point-to-point winners since then, and I really love going off to the point-to-points on Sundays, meeting all the familiar faces.

We race most of our horses at point-to-points first as it's a great way of educating young horses. Ciaran Fennessy rides most of our horses between the flags and he is a very decent pilot.

In 2012, I was granted a restricted licence and we started to run a few on the track. Two very good riders, Shane Shortall and Adrian Heskin, ride a lot for us, giving me great feedback, so we know where we are with the horses.

We have a very nice bunch of horses

to go on with this winter and a good few of them will be out as soon as the ground changes. The last few months have been very good to us and we have improved a lot of things in the yard, with five track winners and numerous placings from six summer horses.

Supreme Vic was our first track winner back in April. We were hoarse for a week after she won by a neck under Shane Shortall!

She won again for us at Limerick in July and 24 hours later we had another winner for the same owner, as Bashful Beauty won a maiden hurdle at Wexford.

The two horses are improving all of the time - Supreme Vic went on to finish a close second in the big mares' handicap hurdle at the Galway Festival and Bashful Beauty was third in a Grade C handicap hurdle at Listowel last month.

I think that there are plenty more races to be won with both if they stay lucky for us. Survival has won two summer chases and everyone in the yard is very fond of him, he has now won four

times and hopefully can win again.

I genuinely believe that a trainer is only as good as the owners that back you and I am very lucky to have a great bunch of loyal owners who have been with us from the start.

I am always on the lookout for new horses and owners, so hopefully our recent success will help us in that respect.

I have a great assistant in Yvonne Gleeson, who works very hard with me. We ride out at least 14 horses between us and I also have good lads mucking out and helping around the yard.

Yvonne turns out the horses very well on race days and that's nice for the owners, who invest a lot of money. We are very precise about the health and nutrition side of training, only feeding the very best hay. All the horses are turned out for an hour each day, as it keeps their heads right and they eat very well once they get a pick of grass.

We have a great support team, with farrier Davy Prendergast and physio Susan Elliott, playing important roles. We take our horses away to gallop at O'Neill's in Kilnacrandy, Quinn and we use Jim Culloty's public gallops in Buttevant or the Curragh to polish things off.

Our goal is to keep training winners and improve our methods all of the time and we have plenty of horses which we are excited about. Someday it would be brilliant to be saddling one of our own at Prestbury Park, going out there with a live chance.

Who knows, that day might not be too far away and in the meantime, we will keep working hard, as I believe you only get back what you put in.

Norman Lee was in conversation with John O'Riordan

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Conor takes control

Claire Barry meets new Limerick manager Conor O'Neill and hears his plans for the future

CONOR O'NEILL, the newly appointed general manager of Limerick racecourse has a pragmatic approach to the job as he faces into his first ever Munster National on Sunday week.

With a background in event management and the bookmaking industry the 25-year-old equine business graduate is only too aware of the need to get more people through the turnstiles at Greenmount Park and get people back into the habit of going racing.

He said: "I've only been here since July but appreciate the Munster National is synonymous with Limerick. This is a new track and I want to integrate it more into the local community because it's their amenity and they should be proud of it."

"This job is obviously challenging but also exciting because the potential is there and I'm fortunate to have the support of a commercially orientated board of directors who have the drive and ambition to succeed."

With Justin Carthy and Punchestown's general manager/CEO Dick O'Sullivan as his mentors, Conor has picked up some valuable practical experience along the way and has a refreshing outlook.

His aim is to put the atmosphere back into Limerick racecourse and offer value for money, thereby encouraging people to spend the money they have in



Conor O'Neill - "challenging but exciting"

their pockets once they are inside the gates.

He started working for Justin Carthy when he was just 14 or 15 years old, standing alongside the Chronicle Bookmakers founder in the betting ring and getting to know the business.

With gentle persuasion from Justin and his parents Conor then embarked on the equine business course at NUI Maynooth, taking a year out to work at Punchestown racecourse under Dick O'Sullivan's wing.

He said: "Then I went back to college to finish my degree but was still tipping

away with Justin in the betting ring. When I left college I went full-time with Dick (O'Sullivan) at Punchestown, looking after the events side and Oxegen and the Festival.

"Dick is a legend, a great man to get a deal done and it was great experience for me to get. I've yet to see students day at Limerick but after Oxegen nothing will phase me!"

Conor spent four years at Punchestown, moving back to Justin Carthy full-time in January 2013 as the bookmaker's on-course representative at a time when Justin was in the process of

selling his Chronicle chain to Lad-brokers.

He admits: "I didn't want to go to college - I just wanted to go racing but everyone kept advising me to go and the first summer I was lucky enough to get a placement in the finance department of HRI with Margaret Davern. All that time Justin never came out of the equation so I do have 10 years experience within the industry."

Conor, a keen GAA follower from Ballyknockan in Co Wicklow, took over at Limerick's helm in July. He explained: "I was always at the Curragh with Justin before when the Munster National was on and at Leopardstown at Christmas and my first time seeing Limerick was the John Thomas McNamara and Jonjo Bright fund-raising day last October."

"I was blown away by the day so when I was offered the job here it just seemed the right step for me to take. It was an easy decision and I haven't looked back to be honest. Limerick is so accessible and the facilities here are state of the art but while racing is the core it's my job to maximise the business in its entirety and raise the profile of Limerick racecourse."

Conor has already come up with a winner for next Sunday in the racecourse's Munster Madness package where for €19 you receive admission, a free race card, free €5 bet and also a free pint or glass of wine.

More importantly that package is available on the day. As Conor remarked: "Why complicate things by insisting that people book on-line?"

Add in a new shopping village, Keane's best-dressed lady competition and music after racing and the racecourse is guaranteed to be hopping!

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