

The great 1936 Umgola betting coup

“It has to win yet”

by Kevin Quinn

The yearly gathering reveals the story of Blue Star

As most of my friends and work colleagues would confirm, I love a flutter on the horses especially on a Saturday. One of the highlights of my year is the Cheltenham Festival where the best of the Irish and English national hunt horses clash for the top titles and prize money the sport can offer. Over the four days of the festival myself, along with mates



The author's father Patsy Quinn and Malachy O'Neill owner of Red Neds celebrating the bar's 100th anniversary. Patsy until recent times was a regular for over 60 years having had his first drink in Red Ned's on new year's eve 1940. He also attended the bar's 50th anniversary in 1957.

and work colleagues take up residence in Red Ned's just under the picture of the great Dawn Run. We bring along our imaginary saddles and whips and roar and cheer home our winning bets especially the Irish trained winners. The conversations over the four days would be of tips and past winners or the day the string holding up the picture of Arkle in Elliott's bookies snapped and crashed to the floor prompting one punter to remark that it was the only time Arkle fell. However, at some stage the con-

versation inevitable comes round to the great Irish trained Dawn Run's victory in the blue ribbon event of the meeting the Gold Cup. On that day in March 1986 Dawn Run became the only horse to win both the Cheltenham Champion hurdle (1984) and Gold Cup. His jockey John Joe O'Neill who had only recently defeated cancer at the time drove Dawn Run up the Cheltenham Hill to a historic victory. In Red Ned's, Dawn Run's victory

was greeted with a never to be repeated outcry of deafening roars that spurted from a bar full of emotional punters. The after shock of the uproarious celebrations permeated the bar walls and boomed across Ogle Street paralysing passersby and lifting the bar roof five inches off the wall plate. It was during one of these charged Cheltenham atmospheres that I first heard of the story of Blue Star from my dad who after his retirement would have occasionally joined the company.

An uncanny coincidence

I was recalling attending the yearly point to point meeting at Farmacaffrey in the days when you got a half day off school for the event. In one of the races that day I had backed a horse with the word blue in its name. I was almost certain that its complete name was Blue Star. The reason for recalling the story was the unusual circumstances in which the horse won. Coming up that steep hill approaching the last jump at Farmacaffrey,

the horse was a parish in front of the rest of the field but fell at the last. However, somehow the jockey managed to hold on to the reins and was able to remount and went on to win the race at the starting price of 7/2. My father on hearing the story was somewhat taken back not with the remounting of the horse but with its name. He then enthusiastically launched into telling the story of a horse named Blue Star.

The Fellows Hall connection

My great grand mother Mary McConnell was the cook in Fellows Hall in the early decades of the last century. Fellows Hall is situated on the main road between Tynan and Middletown and at that time the McClintock family resided there. During her time there my great granny became very friendly with one of the ladies of the house a Miss Isa McClintock. After my great grand mother's retirement, Isa McClintock would come and visit her in Umgola. My father could vividly recall her visits as Miss McClintock would pull up in her car outside my great granny's house in Best's Row. Within minutes of her arrival the local children would be crawling all over the vehicle as the novelty factor was too much for them to resist. My great granny and Miss McClintock would then retire to the kitchen for a chin wag over a drop of tea.

The Lonsdales

Isa McClintock's younger sister Mary Alice was married to Thomas Lonsdale of Temple Grafton Court, Warwickshire. Thomas Lonsdale was the younger brother of Lord Lonsdale from The Pavilion (Armagh College of Further



Temple Grafton Court in Warwickshire the home of Mr & Mrs Thomas Lonsdale.

Education is built on the site of The Pavilion and Lonsdale Street was named after the family). Thomas Lonsdale was a well known race horse owner and one of his horses called Coragh Hill won the 1911 November Handicap. Thomas Lonsdale died in 1931 but his wife continued the family tradition of horse racing. Among her string was Blue Star who was foaled in 1932. It is uncertain if Mrs Lonsdale bred the horse or bought it at a later stage. However, by 1936 Blue Star's racing career appeared not to be too promising, as the horse was heading for a selling handicap.

The tip

In early June of 1936, Isa McClintock arrived at Umgola for another kitchen social with my great granny. During the conversation Isa began to promote the chances of her sister's (Mrs Lonsdale) horse called Blue Star, that was down to run at Newbury on June 10th. As Isa was about to depart she said "Mary don't forget about the horse as it will not be beat". In other words Blue Star was a good thing and you could put your shirt and the rest of your kit on it. So after that visit my great granny began to evangelize the nearly certain chances of Blue Star to the neighbours and any other person who crossed her path in the days leading up to the race.

The word spreads

By the day of the race the tip had spread to Mullanstown, Milford, Ballycrummy, The Navan, Navan Street, Callan Street, Irish Street and to many more townlands and streets. In Umgola everybody had

been gathering up any spare money which in the 1930's was practically non-existent. However, by the 10th most people had scraped up or borrowed a few shillings. The day before the race the bookie's runner had been organised to place the bets with the bookie's agent in Ogle Street (see a brief history of betting). That morning a communal whip round bought the paper to find out which race Blue Star had been entered in at Newbury. The Newbury fields were promptly scanned to find out the time of the race. There, stuck among nineteen other runners in the 3.10 Berks Selling Handicap was Blue Star.

A steady stream of first time punters

As the bookie's agent arrived in Ogle Street that morning to open the shop he was met by a group of unfamiliar faces. He enquired from this strange cross-section of the populace the reason for the reception committee. He was promptly informed by the crowd of respectable citizens who were more than willing to endure and suffer the stigma of queuing outside an illegal bookie's shop for all to

witness, that they were there to place money on a horse called Blue Star (see a brief history of betting). As the agent entered the shop he was somewhat carried along with the wave of punters eager to place their bets. The first punters to approach the counter were severely grilled as to the reason behind the popularity of Blue Star. By the time the first batch got into double figures the source of the tip was revealed. The agent then halted proceedings and suspended taking bets on Blue Star. He then phoned the main bookie who resided in a betting shop in Dobbin Street to get the nod to continue to accept bets on Blue Star. The reply was to cover any small money bets on Blue Star and that he was to be contacted in the event any large wagers.

A Lady from the Navan

Through out the morning and in to early afternoon the pennies, sixpences and shillings continued to be slapped on to Blue Star. Just shortly after lunch a lady from the Navan entered the premises. She enquired as to where she could place a bet and was promptly directed to the counter. At the counter she declared that

she wanted to place two shillings on Blue Star. As the bookie was writing out the docket the lady asked when would she return to collect the money. The Bookie casually looked up from writing out the docket and said with a hint of contempt, "Madam the horse has to win yet". The lady then calmly placed the docket into her purse whilst responding with a blunt, "It will" before haughtily exiting the premises leaving an unnerved clerk. The race was due off at



This building (demolished Nov 1997) was the site of the bookie's shop where many of the winning bets were laid.

3.10pm, so shortly before the off all the third duplicate docket for the 3.10 at Newbury were placed in a bookie's sack and taken to the main bookie in Dobbin Street to be checked (see a *Brief history of betting* p33 below).

The result

The clock on the bookie's wall was the main focus of the few punters who stayed inside the office in the minutes leading up to the off, the majority hung around outside. As the minute hand moved closer to ten past the tension and apprehension was something similar to the clock scenes in the later to be made 1952 western *High Noon*. The silence was finally ended with the phone ringing from the main bookie in Dobbin Street with the result. The bookie's agent lifted the ear piece but his expressionless face provided no clue as to the pending result. Within a few seconds he reconnected the ear piece to the phone and bellowed out "Blue Star at 100/6" (16/1) whilst bracing himself for the inevitable onslaught crashing against the counter. The punters inside erupted instantaneously into loud roars of celebrations triggering



The Navan Bar, where the Umgola ladies purchased their draft Guinness and mineral water for their celebrations. This photo was taken before the area was redeveloped in the late 1960's

a similar response from the punters outside. Among the scenes of pure joy

the bookie's runner who had placed the bets for the Umgola punters bolted from Ogle Street, breathlessly spreading the good news along the half-doors in Navan Street on his way to Umgola. When he got to the top of Umgola Hill he was spotted by the large crowd that had gathered at Best's Row waiting his arrival regardless of the result. As soon as he was in view of the crowd he stopped and stretched his arms out and raised them in to the air a number of times indicating that the bet was up. This automatically ignited scenes of jubilation among the waiting crowd. Within minutes of his signalling, the runner was surrounded by elated ladies wanting to know how much they had won. The men stayed on the periphery having already calculated their winnings in terms of bottles and halfuns forward to a rare chance of a few drinks that didn't impact on the family income in those hard times.



Best's Row in Umgola, (2007). Where the tip emerged from a kitchen social and where the Umgola ladies celebrated Blue Star's victory.

The celebrations

My father who was fourteen at the time was sent with four quart tins into Paddy O'Neill's Bar known as The Navan Bar which was situated at the bottom of Primrose Hill/Navan Street to be filled with draught Guinness and for a bottle of mineral water to make Guinness shandies for the women. As for the men, they hurriedly made their way to Ogle Street to collect their bets just in case the bookie had to make an unplanned visit to the bank or to the mattress and suspend paying out to the next day. On my dad's return the ladies of Umgola gathered in that famous venue my great granny's kitchen and celebrated Blue Star's victory with mugs of Guinness shandies until the sun came down over Leeman's Hill.

Blue Star victory

Blue Star's victory was in the Berks Selling Handicap at Newbury on Wednesday 10 June 1936. Blue Star was returned at odds of 100/6 and won by a length and a half in a field of 20. At the subsequent auction he was bought in for 730 guineas, a substantial sum at the time. He was ridden on the day by Kenny Robertson, trained by Philip Bell and owned by Mrs T Lonsdale. The type of race that Blue Star won was a selling plate. A horse which is entered in a selling plate is not expected to win in any higher grade but maybe expected to do well against moderate opposition. The dropping in grade of a horse with seemingly modest form is the reason why selling plates are so notorious for pulling off betting coups. The winner of a selling plate is put up for auction afterwards as had happened in the case of Blue Star. Other horses in the race may be claimed for a fixed sum. The winning stable at the subsequent auction bought back its own horse a term known as "bought in". The considerable amount that they paid suggests the connections knew that Blue Star was no cart puller. A fact that was soon confirmed as Blue Star went on to win another three races but at much shorter odds.

A brief history of betting

Professional bookmakers began to make their appearance in the late eighteenth century. In 1845, the Gaming Act made wagering contracts unenforceable in law, thus preventing bookmakers from recovering forfeited stakes in cases where the betting had been conducted on credit terms. As a result, bookmakers insisted on receiving cash in advance and there followed a rapid growth in betting houses to meet the demand for cash betting. This was regarded as an unwelcome development and a betting act was passed to suppress betting houses. The effect of the 1853 Act was simply that bookmakers operated on the streets. Consequently a further Act of 1906 made betting in the streets and other public places unlawful.

The 1960 Betting and Gaming Acts

It was not until the 1960 Betting and Gaming Act that off course cash betting was made legal. Before May 1st 1961 betting could be conducted lawfully on-course and credit betting was only lawful off-course provided the bets were placed by post or telephone. However, anyone who wanted to place an off-course bet had to demonstrate that they had enough credit to set up an account with a book maker. The 1960 Act swept away the 1853 Law and made it legal for a bookmaker to run a cash betting office provided both he and his office was licensed. The Government of the day hoped that legalising betting shops would take gambling off the streets and put an end to the practice of bookmakers sending runners to collect from punters.

The front room Bookie

Armagh had a few illegal cash bookies as all the off-course credit bookies were large firms mostly based on the mainland. The illegal bookie that suffered the Blue Star coup was based in a betting office in Dobbin Street. His sub-agent was based just where David Elliott's old betting shop was located. Sadly, this building along with the other period buildings that once stood on that side of Ogle Street have since been demolished. The book maker's agent rented a front room from the residents of the property. The roll of the agent was to take and settle bets from cash punters on behalf of the main bookie. Just minutes before the off of every race all the third duplicate dockets were placed in a sack and brought to the main bookie in Dobbin Street to prevent a bet being placed after the off and to check their validity. The original docket was kept by the punter the second copy by the sub-agent to settle bets. When the main bookie was satisfied that nothing was amiss he would then phone Exchange Telegraph on the mainland the company that provided the result service. The main bookie would then pass on the result to the agent.

The legal twilight zone

All cash book makers were illegal so obviously it was up to the police to enforce the law. In Armagh the police would raid the betting shops around twice a year. A farcical procedure was then enacted. The sergeant from Irish Street barracks would establish with assistance from the bookie the occupation status of the people detained in the raid. Depending on the sergeant's discretion all unemployed persons would have their name taken along with a caution but employed persons names would be taken to be prosecuted at a later date. The reason behind this bizarre ritual was strangely benevolent as an unemployed person would lose a day's unemployment benefit if they were prosecuted. Usually three employed punters would be prosecuted along with the bookie. On the day of the hearing the bookie or the punters would not attend as the bookie would send his solicitor to represent all. On each occasion the bookie would be fined thirty shillings and the punters 2/6d. The bookie would cover all costs and fines.