

King Of The Ring

Greyhound Star Editor Floyd Amphlett learns a little more about one of the giants of on-course betting, Tony Morris - 48 years laying the odds and loving every minute

The crowds are cheering, the big silver trophy sits on your restaurant table. You've done it! You've won the English Derby.

Now for the moment of ecstasy, relieving Tony Morris of a megawedge. He, of course, breaks down in tears, begging for mercy. Ruined, in one bet.

Time for the wake-up call. While big odds, the first part of the fantasy is at least feasible.

The part involving Britain's biggest on-course greyhound bookmaker just ain't going to happen.

The odds are, the said Mr Morris will have your cash counted and waiting, together with a handshake and polite word of congratulation. Then it's chalk up for the next.

For most of us, Tony Morris is an institution that we've been unwillingly subsidising for years.

But meeting the man away from his joint, is an illuminating experience.

For a start, TM is not an easy man to interview.

Restraint

A lifetime in the bookmaking business has taught him a great deal about quiet courtesy, self-restraint and keeping his own counsel.

The only son of Ike Morris, who set-up the family bookmaking business in 1930, Tony grew up trying to remain one step ahead of an army of punters who would gladly have emptied his satchel.

Already ring-wise, Morris junior chalked up his first prices at Crayford at the ripe old age of 13.

"My father suffered with ill health" says Tony. "I started off helping out and gradually did more and more. I found absolutely loved it."

Over the years, the Morris joint has been seen at such tracks as Catford, Crayford, Charlton, Hackney, Harringay, Maidstone, Rochester, Romford, West Ham, Wembley Wimbledon and White City.

Surprisingly, Tony's particular favourite was Charlton. And the reasoning says much about Tony Morris the bookmaker.

Nerve

It is a story of a young upstart bookie who started off with the worst pitch and through quick wits, a steady nerve and a practised skill in his art, saw him eventually take over as the number one layer.

You see - Tony Morris is a bookmaker down to his chalk encrusted fingernails.

To this day, he probably takes more money on the Greyhound Derby than all the other betting outfits combined.

He also heads the betting ring at Wimbledon. But don't ask him to comment on either statement!

Yet - by his own admission, he is not a judge of greyhound talent.

His open race tissue (the early odds guide) is compiled by Alan Isherwood. And on graded form at Wimbledon, he follows the lead of fellow layer Dell Nash.

Shrewdest

"Dell Nash is one of the shrewdest judges I've come across over the years" confides TM.

"And Steve Allen who represents me at Romford, is one of the best tissue-cum-bookmaker representatives in the game."

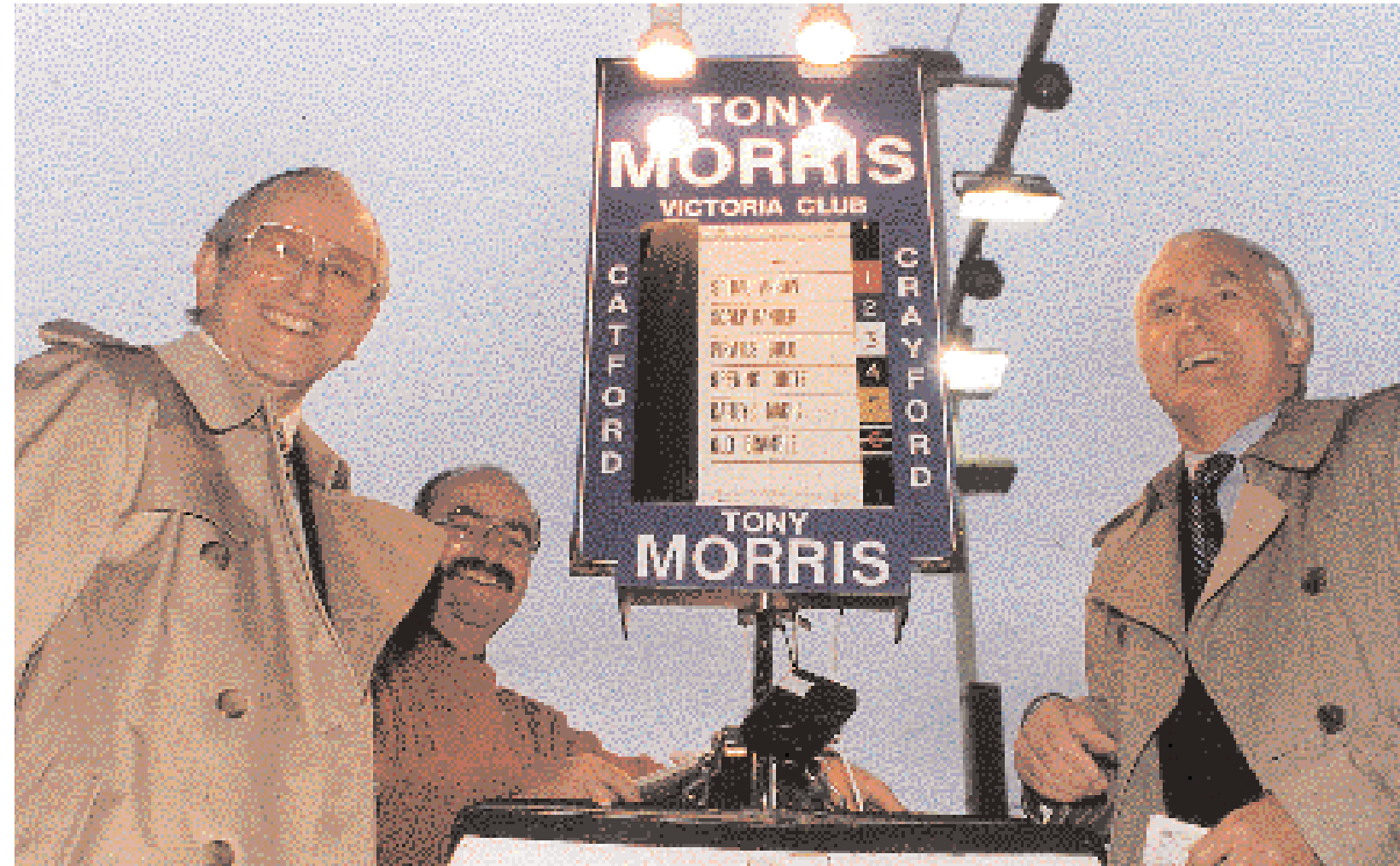
But there's a heck of a lot more to it, than simply deciding which are the 7-4 favourites and which are the 10-1 shots.

The bookmaker's skill lies in enticing the punter to try his luck while keeping the weight of money in the layer's favour.

To be played well, it requires a quick brain, lots of nerve, a decent cash reserve and an insight into human behaviour.

In some cases, dogs will need to be lengthened in price to tempt the punter.

In other cases, the price won't be altered even



There to be shot at: Tony Morris (left), clerk Bill Casey and John Humphreys (right)

though the dog hasn't been backed.

If the punter thinks the dog's not fancied, he won't back it either.

TM describes the skill as "each race is like a jigsaw puzzle."

"You have to work out which dogs will be backed and why."

Tony Morris plays the game with the efficiency of a great white among a school of mackerel. But it is no business for the faint hearted.

So what would be the biggest bet that he had laid on a single race?

Punter

"I once laid £100,000 to £10,000 to a Kuwaiti punter at White City" recalls matter-of-factly.

"But it has been many years since I've been a real bookmaker. These days, the spread of money isn't there. It makes it very difficult to be a true bookmaker in most races."

Apparently, the size of the Morris liability on any race is unimportant provided that there is nothing untoward.

Of course, sometimes even the best get it wrong. The would be "several occasions" when the Morris satchel has returned home more than £50,000 lighter than whence it arrived.

There are also other occasions, admittedly quite rare, when unusual betting patterns suggest something smells bad about the race.

Tony laid his first ante post bet on the Greyhound Derby in 1964, a final he still remembers.

"Everything else in the final was a loser for us except Hack Up Chieftain. But he won and we made it pay."

Ten years later, the Morris joint was set-up at White City and the start of a great decade.

"Our Derby ante post bet was regularly into six

figures" he confides.

"The year Indian Joe won, 1980, seemed to attract great interest, and was probably the biggest of the lot."

Improved

"Things slowed up considerably when the race switched to Wimbledon."

"But things have improved a good deal since, albeit business is slightly down this year."

"Overall, the Derby has been very good to us and we've made money."

"But despite what people might think, we don't always win."

"Last year's winner Some Picture cost us £18,000. Farloe Melody was another big loser."

And what was the biggest liability he's ever had on a greyhound in the Derby?

He replies: "A couple of years ago, I laid a dog called Tullyallen to lose half a million pounds having already laid it to lose £50,000."

Affect

"But there have been many dogs laid to six figures."

But the one thing least likely to affect the Morris betting odds are the comments of the trainers.

Certain handlers are famous for having lame and off-colour dogs make remarkable recoveries.

And Tony recalls a Derby winner of some years ago. "He looked a good thing throughout the event."

"Then going into the final the kennel put around all sorts of stories that there was something the matter with the dog."

"Come the morning of the race they got 9-2 about him, all because of the rumours. But he won like a good thing anyway."

The names Morris/Humphreys are synonymous with greyhound bookmaking in the south east.

"John Humphreys is more than just a business partner, he's also a close friend" says TM.

Humphreys runs pitches at Catford and Crayford and also has six betting shops in his own right.

There are also eight shops in partnership under the I Morris (Kent) banner and the remaining pitches are also in partnership.

Their representative Steve Allen stands at Romford and Wembley and when there is a clash of fixtures, the tin helmet is passed on to Bill Cook.

Crayford has always held a particular fondness for TM and his beloved pitch is in the safe hands of Chris Ralph.

"A very shrewd man on the racecourse side of things too" confides TM.

In addition there is a chain of 15 betting shops to keep tabs on.

Limo

With almost 50 years as a layer, Tony concedes that it has been many years since he needed to work.

Indeed, the recent quip from Linda Mullins in the *Racing Post* about Tony struggling to find the cash to put petrol in his limo after a losing night, was met with a smile. "What limo?" he asks.

Then the penny dropped. To under-

stand what makes Tony Morris tick, you have to recognise his motivation.

He is not about making money. He is about bookmaking.

The sheer bloody enjoyment of climbing onto that wooden box and taking on all comers in a game of wits. It just so happens that he's very good at it.

This is the man who flew home from holidays in France and America on a Friday night, to stand at White City on a Saturday and then fly back again.

This is a man whose shops lost £80,000 following a particularly successful day for the punters at Doncaster meeting in the late 1970s.

To cheer himself up, Tony headed off to bet at Crayford on a wet Wednesday night.

Variety

He still works seven days a week starting at 8.00am and also bets three nights per week at Wimbledon ("I've always had a very good working relationship with the GRA") he says.

But despite the long days and late nights, he loves it.

"Bookmaking is my life" he says. "From when I was a small boy in London, I only knew two types of night out, greyhound racing and the variety houses."

"If I wasn't racing, we'd see all the top acts at theatres all over London."

"It's the same today, and I wouldn't change a thing."

