

Opposite left: Tony Mullins and Dawn Run on the way to the start of her first chase, at Navan in November 1984.



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MULLINS MAGIC

‘REVERED’ IS NOT TOO STRONG A WORD TO DESCRIBE the esteem in which Paddy Mullins is held. In fifty years of training he was never once in trouble with the stewards and his integrity and good manners have been passed on to his children and grandchildren, who continue the family name both in training and riding.

I paid my first visit to the Mullins home back in 1985 when writing the book, *Dawn Run: The story of a champion racehorse and her remarkable owner* (published by Arthur Barker Ltd). The chapter on the Mullins family is a cameo of the time and I am reproducing it here, with pertinent updates after:

The Mullins are a remarkable family. If *Dawn Run* had an amateur breeder and amateur owner/rider, she had a true professional in her trainer. There cannot be many families which share the Mullins’ record: Paddy, his wife Maureen, and their five children have all ridden winners!

Paddy Mullins was born on 19 January, 1919, the son of William Mullins who farmed



Above: Dawn Run jumped beautifully and won easily.

land adjacent to Paddy's present home at Doninga, Gorsebridge, Co. Kilkenny.

Leaving the old Co. Wexford town of New Ross by a drawbridge over the River Nore where it is wide and flat before it joins the River Suir, one heads up a steep, narrow valley of a tributary towards Graiguenamanagh in Co. Kilkenny. The landscape soon becomes a ravine with heather and bracken on the hills and the river winding deeply below. It is rugged and wild and very rough and windy going on towards Gorsebridge where the land flattens into a fertile plain. A little corn grows but it is mostly small fields with large, unclipped hedges on top of stone-faced banks, a few sheep dotted about.

Gorsebridge itself is a fairly typical small Irish town with an unsightly stone quarry and a huge, ugly, castellated decrepit building. It is home of a big feed mill; of well-known horse and pony sales; and of Ireland's leading NH trainer, Paddy Mullins.

Doninga, his home, is a long, low white farmhouse made ever brighter in the dull grey winter months by colourful red and orange berries covering the entrance wall just off the road, barely a mile out of Gorsebridge.

A cheerful fire usually glows at one end of the long, low sitting room which is tidy and tastefully furnished, with comfortable easy chairs. Racing pictures and photographs adorn

the walls, including a very happy Maureen winning her one and only race, and some favourite paintings by the artist, Snaffles. A few racing trophies, including some Waterford Crystal, are dotted around and a set of twelve plates with pictures of all the family members winning are on a table.

Almost everywhere one goes in Ireland, Paddy's training is praised and with fifty or so horses, the biggest NH yard in Ireland, his record simply stands for itself. He knows when it is right to run a horse or not.

The main stable yard is right behind the house, with more boxes which were completed early in 1985 to one side.

'I said I wouldn't build any more,' Paddy smiles ruefully, 'but once you start turning owners away, they won't come back.'

The stables built up gradually over the years after Paddy took over the licence from his father in 1953 having been his assistant for thirteen years before that. In only fairly recent times has the stable reached the upper echelons, establishing a high reputation with many winners of big races both on the Flat and jumping.

Paddy grew up with hunting being a natural part of life and he enjoyed following the Kilkenny hounds on a variety of ponies, able to take his own line without fear of barbed wire or electric fencing. He joined the Pony Club, and tried his hand at show-jumping just

Below: Tony Mullins waves to the Paris crowd after Dawn Run had won the 1984 French Champion Hurdle at Auteuil. Two years later she was to die in the same race.



as many another kid of his day, until there was a natural progression into the local point-to-points.

He won about twenty-five and was also successful fourteen times under Rules, scoring on the Flat, over hurdles and in chases, all as an amateur.

Breeding, rearing and training all followed on, and he still derives a lot of pleasure from breeding, keeping up to half a dozen mares.

He has always had a mixed yard of jumpers and Flat horses, and he finds it particularly lucrative to sell a good filly for the Flat.

‘They are like gold dust,’ he says. ‘I’ve sold a few and it all helps.’

In his early years, Paddy could be described as a small-time trainer, and one feels there is a hidden conflict within him preferring it that way, out of the limelight, but yet having the perfectionist’s wish to keep on improving.

The only drawback for a man of his nature to the success that the latter brings is the accompanying attentions of the Press.



‘I hate publicity,’ he says, his chin almost on his chest, his hands grasped tightly round his locked knees. ‘They all talk through their pockets!’

Paddy is a non-betting man, and his is a non-gambling stable.

‘I’ve no time for the Press at all,’ he suddenly becomes animated. ‘I never back my own horses, and only very occasionally have a few pounds on others for interest.’

His reason is simple: ‘Because it’s nearly impossible to win.’

Nevertheless, his aversion to publicity is unfortunate, because his is a very public profession. ‘What the Press

Left: Paddy and Maureen Mullins at home shortly before his retirement in 2005, aged eighty-seven.



Above: Maureen Mullins in the paddock of their local track, Gowran Park in 2007, with some of her grandchildren, l-r Emmet, David and Patrick.

says does worry me a bit,' he says, looking up from under the lock of silvery grey hair falling across one eye. Certainly Paddy is a very sensitive man.

Only when he shows someone the horses in his yard does he unwind a little and start to relax as he is with the animals he loves, none more so than *Dawn Run* who has a box on her own, almost facing the back door of the house. It is very big and light and airy and filled with deep straw.

There are about fifteen lads in the yard, in addition to all four of the Mullins' sons. Of the four, only Tony is professional, because he is the only one who can do a low weight. It was Tony's good fortune, Paddy believes, that William was heavier, because he is probably just as good a jockey, and particularly capable over fences. William point-to-pointed for many years and is an excellent judge of pace.

William is the eldest son, and also the only one to have spent any length of time away from home, having stayed for a valuable period in Australia as assistant trainer to Neville Beg. Now he is assistant trainer to his father.

He went on to make his first ride at the NH Festival at Cheltenham a winning one on *Hazy Dawn* in 1982, and two years later he did it again, winning the four-mile NH Chase on *Macs Friendly*. In the year in between he won the Liverpool Foxhunters on *Áth Cliath*

(the Irish word for ‘Dublin’) as part of the first ever all-Irish combination of horse, owner, trainer and rider to win it.

George is the second son and although another thoroughly capable amateur rider, the farm is his main interest, running both the home farm, where all the training takes place, and Paddy’s other farm three miles away. He rides out once every day, then gets on with the farm work while the other brothers ride out at least another two lots. George’s riding career may seem a little overshadowed by his brothers, yet he has ridden getting on for twenty winners himself.

Tom is the youngest, and he has the enviable record of being unbeaten on *Dawn Run*. It was he who rode her in her remaining two flat races after Mrs Hill was forced to quit.

The Mullins daughter, Sandra, the eldest of the children, is married to Dublin businessman Peter McCarthy, and she still visits the family home most weekends. It was in 1982 that she had about five rides on the Flat, winning the Rose of Tralee ladies’ race and finishing third in a one-off invitation charity race, the Ceville Lodge Stakes, for trainers’

wives and daughters at local Gowran Park.

This was the race won by her mother Maureen on her only ride on a professional racecourse and she did it in style, too, storming clear on *Razzo Forte* to win by six lengths. It need not have been such a surprise because as Miss Doran before she was married, Maureen was an able point-to-point rider.

Third son Tony’s career almost ended the day it began. In 1979, at the age of seventeen, he had his first ride in a point-to-point on a horse called *Creidim*. It was the local Kilkenny Hunt meeting, held on the inside of Gowran Park racecourse. Tony, who by all



Left: Willie Mullins

Opposite right: Tom Mullins

accounts had been a bit of a devil-may-care in the Pony Club, was helpless in what happened, for the horse died in mid-air and landed heavily on top of his slim young rider. Tony's leg was so badly broken that he was unable to ride again for over a year.

Yet by 1982 he was leading claiming rider (the equivalent of an apprentice on the Flat), and in 1983, his first as a senior jockey, he finished third in the jockeys' table to Frank Berry. One year later he tied for the title, having at one time been five winners clear of Frank Berry. The mishap on Tony's debut only made him more determined than ever and, as I write, he has yet to have another really serious injury.

Besides Tony and his amateur brothers, the yard has Peter Kavanagh as second jockey and several of the lads have 'boys' licences.

The rides seem to be sorted out amicably between the brothers with no arch-rivalry, probably because Paddy holds the reins and they all respect his judgement.

For a mother, to have a racing son can be a nerve-wracking experience; to have all four riding regularly might be a nightmare. Maureen is very much a part of the business set-up, as well as looking after the home and family. She is a most able and efficient secretary, one of the things that keeps her busiest is the almost constant ringing of the telephone.

Paddy says, 'When the boys were growing up, I never dreamt that they would all ride. But they don't want to do anything else and so we have to live with it, although people think we're daft!'

The sons have all had strictly equal opportunities, and the horses have certainly turned out well for them. To maintain a degree of independence, all four indulge in a little buying and selling in their own right. 'The horses have been good to us,' Paddy says warmly. 'I wouldn't wish for any other life.'





Above: Tony Mullins

Tony Mullins led for some way on *Dudie*. He trained *Nicholas Silver* earlier in the same season that he won, and he had formerly trained *Andy Pandy* who set up a long lead before falling in the big race.

‘Either I haven’t had the right horses or the owner hasn’t wanted it,’ he says without a tinge of regret. This is a man who has a soft spot for his charges.

‘I let the horse tell me what it is capable of. My aim is to do the best I can with them.’

Most of the galloping is done in the fields around Doninga and, as with most Irish trainers, much of the schooling is done either on the Curragh or after racing on courses. Indeed, some racecourses occasionally stage an all-schooling day, split into sessions over different distances.

And so it was on 31 July 1982, with the ground hard and Mrs Hill having failed in her bid to have her licence renewed, that eighteen-year-old Tom Mullins teamed up with *Dawn Run* for her final bumpers at Galway.’



Nearly a quarter of a century has slipped by since that piece was penned. Whereas in the mid-80s Paddy had the country’s biggest stable with fifty horses, several now top one hundred, including Paddy’s son Willie Mullins, with his all-conquering team of talent,

primarily in NH. Other, mostly Flat stables, also house a hundred or so, like John Oxx, Dermot Weld, Aidan O'Brien, and Jim Bolger and the chiefly NH/mixed yards of Noel Meade and Jessie Harrington.

In the intervening years since *Dawn Run*, one of the biggest highlights in Paddy's career, and certainly the most warmly welcomed, was his training in 2003 of a Classic winner, the Irish Oaks.

On 13 July that year *Vintage Tipple* lined up on the Curragh against ten rivals; her starting price was 12-1, for all that Frankie Dettori was in the saddle. Paddy's was a non-betting stable and, in spite of her long price, connections were hopeful; she had won both her starts as a two-year-old for new owner, Pat O'Donovan; he had paid only 16,000 guineas for the filly bred by Sir Edmund Loder of historic Eyrefield Lodge on the Curragh.

Vintage Tipple, by *Entrepreneur*, had finished second on her outing prior to the Irish Oaks but in this, the most important day of her life, she put 1½ lengths between herself and her nearest pursuer, *L'Anresse*.

The scenes that followed were more like an Irish winner at the Cheltenham NH Festival than the staid and smart Classic Flat scene; both codes were united in greeting Paddy, aged eighty-four, and his heroine.

Interestingly, Paddy rates his 1973 Newmarket Champion Stakes winner, *Hurry Harriet*, the best he ever trained, better than either *Dawn Run* or *Vintage Tipple*. 'She had the class,' he says quietly, and describes how impressive she was on the gallops with Sandra in the saddle.

Among Paddy's outstanding qualities were his patience and his empathy with horses. There was a time, many years ago, when a 'rogue' horse gripped him on his shoulder in the stable. Instead of pulling back or shouting, or struggling to free himself, Paddy didn't react, he just stood there talking to the horse who still had its teeth embedded on his shoulder (luckily he was wearing thick jackets); he remained like this for about two hours until eventually the horse gave up and let go of him.

Paddy was an expert at finding the psychological key to his horses; his children could occasionally be found running safely between the legs of 'dodgy' ones, and sometimes the clue was to give a particular horse a different lad; personalities count with horses as with people, and given the right carer a horse's racecourse performances would improve.