

A man ahead of his time

Leo Powell meets Jonathan Irwin, who will be remembered for his crusading efforts on behalf of thousands of children and families

JONATHAN Irwin. Remember him? Ah yes, the guy who started Goffs in Kill, who came up with the Cartier Million and who ran the Phoenix Park.

Those achievements on their own would, you imagine, guarantee you a degree of everlasting glory and recognition. Well, Jonathan is not a man to dwell on the past, though he is always a man worth listening to. These were just some of the projects that Jonathan was associated with during his 35 years in the racing and bloodstock world. There were others – the *Irish Horseman's Journal*, the Irish Stallion Incentive Scheme, the list goes on.

He has been somewhat removed from the centre stage in recent years, though that hasn't meant retirement or some gardening. Jonathan's life has been a rollercoaster, both privately and professionally, but his lust for life has meant that even in the face of tragedy, his mind has been working to see some good in it.

Few tragedies are greater for a parent than to lose a child. Sadly, Jonathan has experienced that tragedy more than once, losing three sons in six years. In the case of Jack, born to him and his wife Mary-Ann on February 29th, 1996, the catastrophe spurred Jonathan on to what will ultimately stand to him as a truly worthwhile memorial.

The Jack & Jill Children's Foundation was formed in memory of his son and to try to make sure that other families who found themselves abandoned by the state in terms of support and services would not feel alone, as Jonathan and Mary-Ann did 14 and a half years ago. Jack & Jill looks after 322 children, aged up to four years.

Jack was born a healthy boy, but within two days his and his parent's lives changed forever. "No one knows exactly what happened that day in the nursery at the hospital," Jonathan recounts.

"Perhaps Jack actually choked and died, but was resuscitated. From then on he could not swallow and was also deaf and blind." He died on December 13th, 1997.

The couple were determined to take Jack home and six weeks after his birth they sought the advice of medical experts about the way to deal with having a totally dependent child at home. They were to find little or no state help forthcoming.

Horribly, Jonathan and Mary-Ann were told by one consultant "that the only solution would be to bring Jack back after a few weeks and have him admitted to a children's hospital". "We were basically told to abandon him, that having him at home would wreck our marriage – thankfully it didn't – and ruin the other siblings' lives."

Nowadays, Jonathan runs the Jack & Jill Children's Foundation full-time from an office in Johnstown, not far from Goffs. The organisation has helped some 1,300 children to date, raised €30 million since it was founded and needs €3 million a year to do the vital work it carries out.

"The HSE provides €500,000 a year and we have to raise the rest. Our mobile telephone recycling efforts bring in €1 million, and the rest is raised through various good efforts by many people."

Now Jonathan is combining his lifetime passion for racing with his even stronger passion for the welfare of these unfortunate children. Tomorrow at the Curragh he is staging a fund-raising lunch for about 90 people in the Curragh Rooms. The day is being sponsored by O'Briens Wines, and in an unusual twist he has enlisted the services of Eddie Hobbs as the guest tipster. Racegoers will also be able to learn more about the work of the Foundation and have an opportunity to help. Racegoers may also assist in a practical way by downloading a voucher from the website www.jack-andjill.ie, and if this is presented at the turnstiles the charity will get a €5 donation.

The work being done by Jonathan for Jack & Jill is a perfect example of a man 'thinking outside the box', though Jonathan hates clichés. Being inventive and different were characteristics of the former Goffs and Phoe-



Jonathan Irwin and his daughter Lily

nix Park supremo during his time with those entities.

At Goffs, the building of which was completed in nine months and is described as "possibly the ultimate highlight of my time in bloodstock", he brought new ways and ideas to what was a pretty staid way of selling. He even did this at a time when the industry was on the floor.

He linked sales with racing through the establishment of the Cartier Million, another peak of his career. "The brand association was so good, the build up to the event was so exciting and the day was so glamorous. That is one thing about racing that it should try not to lose, making a day at the races glamorous."

Jonathan brought that same notion to racing at the Phoenix Park, introducing entertainment to go along with the serious business of racing. He is especially praiseworthy of Vincent O'Brien, who supported him hugely.

"In the last year of racing at the Phoenix Park we made a profit of £150,000 and had brought the attendances up to an average of 5,700, which was very good at that time. I am especially proud today to see many of the races we established still being run, while Vincent had great foresight to come up with the Champion Stakes, one of the best races in the world today. It was unheard of at the time to have a race run as a Group 1 from the start. The support at the time too of Brigadier Waller was immense."

Unquestionably, Jonathan was a man ahead of his time, which no doubt led to frustration at times, and he was also sometimes the victim of circumstance and timing. It is not the closure of the Phoenix Park that he ventured to have been his biggest disappointment of his equine days.

He leaves me for a minute and returns with a 32-page document titled *The Vincent O'Brien Racecourse and Training Centre*. "That is my

biggest disappointment. The failure to get this up and running." Admitting that the time is not right just now, Jonathan fears that the lands at Abbotstown – often referred to as the Bertie Bowl – could be used in the future for something else. He is still convinced the proposal has great merit.

In the early part of the decade, the development was estimated to cost €36 million and would have been funded to the tune of 45% by Arena

Leisure, whose largest shareholder is Trevor Hemmings. The all-weather racetrack and training centre enjoyed the endorsement at the time of such luminaries as Demi O'Byrne, John Oxx, Edmond Mahony, Aidan O'Brien, Jim Bolger, Dermot Weld, Harry Herbert and John Gosden.

Jonathan's zest for life is unquenchable and many will be bemused to think of him these days following the exploits of his 10-year-old daughter Molly as she enthu-

siastically embraces the world of shows and show jumping. Phonsie at 16 has just completed his transition year at Clongowes Wood College, fitting in a short sojourn at a sister Jesuit college in Australia earlier this year.

Jonathan's own show-business background made him an ideal man for the big occasion, and some of those genes have obviously passed on to daughter Lily – after whom the family-started and run business Lily O'Brien's chocolates was named – who is due to start work on the new *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, having been 'talent spotted' in London. Coincidentally, Jonathan's colourfully named son Pirate, whom many will remember from his days as a spotter at Goffs, is due to get married this week.

The life of Jonathan Irwin is lived with a deep passion for what he does, an ability to think laterally and the man possesses a charm that brings people along with him. While the world of racing and breeding might never erect a monument to him, he made – and could still make – a huge contribution. He will, however, be long remembered for his crusading efforts on behalf of thousands of children and their families. That is something that should make him proud.



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JACK & JILL CHILDREN'S FOUNDATION

The Jack & Jill Children's Foundation provides direct funding to families of children with brain damage who suffer severe intellectual and physical developmental de-

lay, enabling them to purchase home respite care.

Jack & Jill needs to raise over €3 million per year to provide these services. The Jack & Jill Children's

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