

Racing Leopardstown Christmas Festival

# Perceval Legallois comes up trumps at last



**Brian O'Connor**  
at Leopardstown

'Nearly horse' wins Paddy Power Chase at Leopardstown in style for owner JP McManus

Champion owner JP McManus landed a 10th Paddy Power Chase as Perceval Legallois finally banished his reputation for being a nearly horse in yesterday's €200,000 feature at Leopardstown.

The Gavin Cromwell-trained 17-2 shot went clear from the last to ultimately win in style under jockey Mark Walsh. Midnight Our Fred was a seven-length runner-up, while

Pinkerton and topweight Nick Rockett filled the frame in one of the most coveted handicaps of the year.

Teasing out big handicaps is famously one of McManus's great racing pleasures, and Perceval Legallois had long been identified as having one of them in him. He started a well-supported favourite for the Galway Plate during the summer, only to make no show behind Pinkerton. He was also favourite for September's Kerry National but couldn't land a blow against his stable companion Flooring Porter.

**Festive gift**  
Having also fallen at the last in a Leopardstown Chase, Cromwell feared his chance to land a big race might have gone. But as things went wrong for Walsh during the early stages of the race, events ultimately conspired in his favour.

Enjoying his first win in the race, Walsh explained that the favoured outside line became congested and he wound up further back in the 27-strong pack than ideal. The pay-off was that the horse relaxed and started

creeping his way through. After the last, that patience paid off.

"This horse has threatened to win a big one for a long time. He kept going up in the handicap and I thought his chance was gone, to be honest," admitted Cromwell.

**Teasing out big handicaps is famously one of JP McManus's great racing pleasures**

"Mark gave him a great ride, he took his time and stayed wide for the better ground. They went a right good gallop, he took his time, and everything fell right for him," added Cromwell who also landed Limerick's Grade Two feature with McManus's Bioluminescence.

Day two of the Christmas festival has become synonymous with the big-race sponsor and parts of the programme resembled a festive gift to them.

The giant Jeannot Lapin landed a monster 150-1 SP in a Beginners' Chase on his first racecourse start, while a

frustrating St Stephen's Day turned into festival delight for jockey JJ Slevin when landing Grade One success on the 28-1 outsider Solness.

Having returned recently from a significant foot injury, Slevin was forced to watch from Leopardstown as his regular mount Banbridge secured King George glory under Paul Townend at Kempton.

Although limping significantly out of the saddle, Slevin's capacity was unaffected as he proved on Solness in the €125,000 Rewards Club Chase.

**Red-hot form**  
Joseph O'Brien's red-hot form was underlined by Banbridge's success, but even in that context forking out a €12,500 supplementary fee to allow Solness to take on Gaelic Warrior et al looked a plucky move beforehand.

However, Solness's appreciation for good ground led to Slevin identifying the benefit of a wide route before anyone else and a field of proven Grade One performers were unable to keep tabs on him.

"Ground is important to him,

and I spoke to JJ before and he felt he'd go wide and find the strip of ground he'd find. He jumped fantastic and he looked to be going very smooth all through the race," said O'Brien.

"I'm delighted for JJ. To get a Grade One here this week is very special. He had a tough day yesterday, getting a couple of falls after being just back from injury. He gave him the most fantastic ride."

For the second day in a row, Sam Ewing picked right from a Gordon Elliott Grade One selection poser as the 7-4 favourite Romeo Coolio beat his stable companion Bleu De Vassy in the Future Champions Novice Hurdle.

Doubts about Romeo Coolio's resolution, raised after defeat in the Royal Bond, were binned as he kicked from the front and made light of an awkward jump at the last.

"He had a little blip the last day," said Elliott. "Looking at that, I'd say just a fast gallop is what he needs. He looked good there today. We said after the last day we were going to go on and keep it simple. I'd imagine



■ **Winning owners Neil and Con Sands celebrate claiming the Paddy's Rewards Club Steeplechase with Solness at Leopardstown yesterday.** PHOTOGRAPH: MORGAN TREACY/INPHO

that he will probably go for the supreme novices."

On top of Ewing winning the St Stephen's Day feature on Croke Park, it leaves Elliott on 99 career Grade One wins. He and Ewing also combined to win the opener with Wendrock.

Elliott's old rival Willie Mullins endured a day-two festival blank at Leopardstown, while his star novice Ballyburn was outpointed comprehensively by Sir Gino in their Kempton clash. Strutter at Limerick was his sole success of the day.

Co Limerick trainer Colm Ryan upset the big boys in the bumper, with his 18-1 shot Karate King proving too strong for American Jukebox in the closing stages.

A crowd of 17,735 attended the second day of action.

## Interview Tadhg Kennelly

# 'I didn't want to go out or meet anybody. David helped me to get out of that hole'



**Gordon Manning**

Former Kerry GAA star Tadhg Kennelly founded WNOW with his friend David Eccles to tackle loneliness among men

This is the road that Tadhg Kennelly is now on. Just before 6am on Christmas Eve morning it took him to Maroubra Beach in Sydney's eastern suburbs. David Eccles was waiting. This is where it all started. It was just the two of them back then, dozens more tagged along this week.

There was no grandiose masterplan. It all just sort of happened.

At first, it was simply two friends trying to help each other out – Kennelly found himself in a low and unfamiliar place after losing his job as an assistant coach with Sydney Swans in May 2020. Eccles, originally from Tyrone, made it his business to check in with the Kerry man.

From this act of friendship, a movement was born. These days, some Wednesday mornings there can be in the region of 300-400 men turning up at Maroubra Beach for the WNOW Sunrise Club.

It has grown to 46 different locations, or chapters as they are known; 35 in Australia, three in New Zealand, three in the United States, three in Ireland, one in Canada, and one in England. In total roughly 3,500 men attend.

Just 12 months ago there were six chapters – all in Australia.

"It's kind of insane," says Kennelly, an All-Ireland winner with the Kerry senior footballers in 2009. "I never once thought I'd be involved in the mental health space but I've found a place here where I know I can make a difference."

WNOW, a volunteer-led charity co-founded by Kennelly and Eccles, stands for When No One is Watching – a message on trying to encourage men to live without worrying about getting judged by others.

The spark for it all was lit in the darkness.

In 2020, during the Covid pandemic, Kennelly was let go by the Swans – the AFL club he joined as an 18-year-old in late 1999, won an AFL Premiership with in 2005, and with whom he had returned to work as a coach in 2017. He didn't know how to react or what to do, so he struck for solitude. Purgatory. For weeks after, Kennelly didn't want to leave the house.

"When I lost my job with the Swans I was in a pretty bad place, it wasn't a good time. I didn't want to go out, didn't want to meet anybody, but David helped me get out of that hole," recalls Kennelly.

Not that he was immediately receptive, though.

"I kept calling him, but he kept bumping me off. 'I'm busy, I'm this and that.' I knew he wasn't because I hadn't seen him around," says Eccles.

"Eventually, after six weeks, I literally went over and knocked on his door."

They fell into a routine of going to the beach, doing a small bit of exercise and chatting. It was simple, but it worked – for both of them.

Just a few months earlier, at the end of December 2019, Eccles had been gripped by an unexpected heaviness. He was head



■ **David Eccles and Tadhg Kennelly: 'We all have problems, we all have issues, but the more you can drop your body armour and be real about it the better you are going to be in the long term.'** Below: Kennelly pictured in 2011 during his time at Sydney Swans. PHOTOGRAPH: CAMERON SPENCER/GETTY IMAGES

it and I'm healing myself by just talking about it," he says.

"I used to always get emotional because I used to always bottle it up as that's the way I was brought up to deal with things – don't talk about anything that is going on in your life. This macho piece on a sports field where you were told: 'Don't show any weakness whatsoever because it is going to give an opposition an 'in' on you.'

"That's the way I lived my life, as if I was bulletproof, and that's one of the things we say in WNOW: 'Drop your body armour, drop the bullshit, just be yourself.' We all have problems, we all have issues, but the more you can drop your body armour and be real about it, the better you are going to be in the long term."

In late 2022 WNOW won the New South Wales Mental Health Commissioner's community champion award. It brought with it the first bit of media attention and soon men were getting in touch looking to set up chapters.

None of this was planned. But it has become too important for Kennelly and Eccles not to strap themselves in for the ride now.

"I wanted to help one man originally," says Eccles. "Tadhg now wants to help a million men."

**Bigger problem**  
The first WNOW Irish chapter started in Kildare in April 2024, there are now others in Longford and Bundoran. The Longford chapter is run by former county footballer and AFL player Mickey Quinn.

Kennelly was back in Ireland just before Christmas for a family wedding and used the trip as an opportunity to look into the possibility of setting up a chapter in Ballybunion.

"I understand it can be more difficult in smaller county towns, I think there is a feeling people don't want to share because everybody will know their business," adds Kennelly. "We have an awful fear of other people's opinions, which can be a problem in smaller areas, but the bigger problem is people not talking and then taking their [own] lives."

In October 2022, after two years out of AFL, Kennelly was appointed head coach of the Academy at Greater Western Sydney Giants. He is also director of sport at St Catherine's High School.

He returns to Ireland with his family every summer, and on each occasion the hope is that his trip coincides with Kerry playing in the All-Ireland final. It wasn't to be in 2024, but he doesn't think they'll be far away in 2025. In Kerry, they never think otherwise.

In September he watched with pride as Tyrone's Conor McKenna, a player he recruited, won an AFL Premiership.

"I used to have a great line," he smiles. "That I was the only person in the world with an All-Ireland medal and an AFL Premiership medallion, but now there's two of us, and that doesn't quite have the same ring so I have to leave that line behind me."

But another road now stretches out in front of Tadhg Kennelly. And despite all that he has achieved in sport, this might just be the most important one that he will ever travel.

If you have been affected by anything in this article, you can contact the Samaritans at freephone 116123 or Pieta House at 1800 247247, or text 'Help' to 51444

of Enterprise Ireland in Australia at the time and was on the boards of several influential bodies, including the Lansdowne Club. He was still playing sport and his wife was pregnant with their second child. At surface level, his life looked dandy. But something wasn't right.

"There was this little dark cloud growing inside me from when I moved over here in 2008, but I never knew it was there until it dragged me to rock bottom at the end of 2019," says Eccles.

"I was like 'What's going on, what's this darkness, what's causing me to feel like this?' The answer was loneliness. It sounds crazy because my phone never stopped and I could have told you the teams 100 fellas I knew supported or what beer they drank, but it didn't go much deeper than that, I was only skimming the surface with those relationships.

"But once you named it, it seemed you could solve it then – you just needed to become a better mate."

**Small acorns**  
Five months after the Omagh man's flashbulb moment, Kennelly was cut by the Swans.

"On TV once, Tadhg described me as the knight in shining armour for saving him, that made me cringe and still does because he didn't realise he was literally saving my life by allowing me to be a mate," says Eccles.

"Taking him out to the beach and helping him in his darkest moment, that was also helping me. We didn't know it but we were healing each other."

From small acorns, great oaks grow.

"After meeting up and talking for about four or five weeks, we both knew there must be other men feeling like this," remembers Kennelly.

"So we agreed to invite one person each

along the following week. The next week we asked them to invite a mate, it grew organically from there. It's a very big piece of our lives now and a lot of men's lives."

The Sunrise Club sees most of the chapters meet at 6am on Wednesday mornings – the majority took place on Tuesday this week because of Christmas Day.

The template is 30 minutes of body weight exercises; 60 press-ups divided up among the group to remember the 60 men lost to suicide every 60 minutes around the world; then form a circle of trust where men can share without judgment; ending with a swim (where possible) and a coffee.

"I think the mental health space has been invaded with a lot of gimmicks. There is a simplicity in what we are trying to do," adds Kennelly.

"The majority of the group are in the

30-65 age bracket, and that's where the highest suicide rate is.

"Men that age tend to have very busy lives but if something suddenly happens with their marriage or their job, and they lose that social connection, they could find themselves very isolated, very quickly."

"In Sydney, loneliness is a huge thing. It's a very lonely city and that's what's leading to depression which then is leading to suicide. We're just trying to get on the front foot of it all, trying to connect men by just coming down together and saying, 'How are you doing?' Getting guys to check in on each other, be better mates.

"My wife could come home after meeting a friend for 25 minutes and she'd know her full story. I could spend five hours in the pub with a mate but when I'd come home Nicole might ask me how he is and I'd say, 'Don't know, we took the piss out of

each other and talked about sport.'

"Don't get me wrong, there's a place for that, but what we have created is a different environment where there is something set up for men to come and share, do a small bit of exercise, have a chat, have a coffee. You'd be surprised how good you feel after it. We find the formula works."

Kennelly has taken difficult calls in the middle of the night from men who needed to talk at that very moment, and as WNOW has grown the various chapter leads have needed to be upskilled in handling such situations.

"They are dealing with some heavy conversations, often with somebody that is not in a great place," adds Kennelly.

"The majority of the men are not necessarily in a bad place, they are just looking to build some social connections.

"It's not like we are a bunch of guys sitting in a circle of doom and gloom. The idea is to get there before men get to that situation, and before they get lonely."

**Isolation epidemic**  
US surgeon general Dr Vivek Murthy last year declared a loneliness and social isolation epidemic in the United States, saying "the overall mortality impact of loneliness and isolation are on par with smoking daily, and they're even greater than the mortality impact we see with obesity".

If this movement has helped many men and their families, it has also benefited Kennelly, helping him to properly process the passing of his father. Tim Kennelly died suddenly in December 2005, aged 51, when Tadhg was 24.

"It has taken until the last four years for me to be able to talk about it without crying because I've actually started talking about it to people. It's helping me deal with

