

Dogs in Review Interviews Mel Downing

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It is an honor and a privilege to have the opportunity to interview the great icons of our sport and preserve their stories for posterity. For the Dogs in Review's October issue we present an interview with the incomparable Melbourne T. L. Downing. "I've enjoyed every minute in dogs," Downing says quietly, in an interview with Jan Manhood that appeared in the March 1997 issue of the AKC Gazette. Mr. Downing shared the same sentiment with me, 10 years later. Although no longer judging, Downing is still immersed in the world of purebred dogs. Our thanks to him for sharing some of his illustrious history and insights with us in the following interview.

SL: Mr. Downing, you were born into the dog world, the son of the great dog man Frank Downing. Will you share a little of your family history?

MD: Frank Downing was born Nov. 1, 1884, into a large family of six boys and four girls. He was the ninth arrival, with one younger brother. His father was a huge man, six feet tall, weighing 265 pounds. His mother was a very small woman, less than five feet tall and about 100 pounds. Frank inherited his father's strong upper body but had short legs. He was 5 feet 9 inches tall and weighed 185 pounds. Frank was very athletic, and became a gymnast and an outstanding soccer forward. He was a starting forward in the Kings Cup Matches for England. He graduated from a grammar school that took in students starting at 3 years of age. He also graduated from the London Polytechnic Institute night school, majoring in architectural engineering.

In those days most families felt that every boy should have a trade. Frank, whose father was a foreman bricklayer, started as a bricklayer apprentice. During his apprenticeship Frank made a close friend of a fellow apprentice. When he and his friend completed their apprenticeships his friend came to America and found a job as a bricklayer working for a New York firm that was constructing buildings at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. His friend encouraged Frank to come to America. He said the foreman where he was employed would guarantee Frank a job.

Frank's mother did not want him to leave England, but Frank finally decided to join his friend in Annapolis and promised his mother he would visit her at least once a year as long as she lived. Frank kept that promise, without fail, even though his mother lived to be 94.

During his two years in Annapolis, Frank advanced from bricklayer to the man in charge of the entire operation. The great Baltimore fire occurred in 1904, just as the Naval Academy work was completed. Frank and his friend formed a partnership and obtained the contract for the masonry work on the famous Hippodrome Theater. The contract contained a bonus and penalty clause. Frank and his partner worked the project 24 hours a day and received a substantial bonus. With the money earned they formed an official partnership that lasted until 1913, when Frank bought out his partner and opened Frank Downing, Inc. Frank's company became the largest masonry construction business in Maryland, with 250 employees. I later inherited this business with my brother, who was a Baptist minister. I bought my brother out later, in 1962, as he was not interested in the work, and turned the business into a general contracting firm. It operated until 1985 and still exists today, but its only function now is supplying health insurance to former employees.

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