

YOU PAYS YOUR MONEY

By Linda Skerritt

The Southend Bowls Club opposite the Customs & Excise Training Division where I work is like a siren luring the elite higher grades to its bar. The regulation "Members Only" cuts out the "rabble" and it is an ideal place to entertain visitors, be they from other government departments, far off countries, the private sector or just bigwigs from other parts of C.& E.

My present job leads me to accompany my boss on occasional excursions to this pleasant establishment, where retired folk in white attire spend many an hour over a glass of beer, relating stories of days gone by. As I am signed in, I often gaze out of the window and absentmindedly wish that our garden looked something like the perfectly smooth and lush-coloured green that stretches far below the balcony outside. However, those of us who own dogs have to make sacrifices.

It was on one such recent occasion, whilst entertaining a consultant (who wore a duffle coat covered with dog hairs, which heartened me to realise that the conversation could be turned to more profitable subjects) that I watched someone on a far higher pay scale than I feed money into one of the Club's two fruit machines. The 10ps. disappeared one after the other, then the 50ps. as the machine obligingly coughed out more change. Knowing that this was his regular haunt, and that part of the job description for anyone working with him was to learn how to play the machines, I idly calculated roughly how much he would spend in a week. I was not impressed.

A few days later I was there again, watching as his fingers nimbly "nudged" and "held" (I was learning the jargon) wondering whether it really was a profitable pastime. I was somewhat

horrified when I suddenly found myself being propelled towards the machines, being encouraged to "have a go". Professing innocence (and poverty) I pushed various buttons as others provided the money - and gradually became mesmerised by the whirling plums, oranges, cherries and other assorted fruit.

Now you may be wondering what all this has got to do with dogs - but it suddenly dawned on me that being hooked on fruit machines wasn't really much different from rushing up and down motorways spending vast amounts of money at Championship Dog Shows - the former probably being far safer! We read of alcoholism, of gambling and one other vice that escapes me for the moment ah yes! but have we ever stopped to consider that showing dogs is, in itself, an addiction and, at £7 an entry, an expensive one at that?

Whatever the motives behind showing - be they to gain a reputation, to qualify for Crufts, or merely for the satisfaction of doing well - the aim is to win. We gamble on another's opinion of our dog on the day. Our good humour deserts us when we find ourselves down the line (or not there at all!), we are elated when we are chosen. To put it in a nutshell, we are miffed or chuffed!

It all starts when we dabble our toes in local shows. A win proves fatal. Success has gone to our heads and we are hooked. Is it any wonder that non-aficionados view us as being eccentric to say the least? From humble beginnings, 4 legs turn into 8 turn into We aspire to Championship shows and are on the road to financial ruin. Watching people arrive at shows with 4 or more dogs in tow, a quick calculation gives an idea of the amount of money involved. Add petrol and all the other incidentals and it is easy to see that ours is not a cheap hobby; but it is one in which we are spurred on to greater things. If we win, we're sure we can carry on for ever, if we lose - the judge doesn't know anything about the breed anyway (!) we cool down afterwards - and try again.

Which brings me back to where I came in. As I passed the fruit machine on the way out of the bar, my boss said "Come on - one more go", the machine swallowed his money, I pushed the button - and out poured £7.50 in 10ps.

Let's face it - we're all addicted!