

The Dachshund Dash

In America, Wiener dog racing is like an Olympic sport - with sausage dogs from all over the country congregating for the prestigious title of top dog

The powerful dogs wait impatiently behind the gates, eager to be released. Excitement peaks from the crowd lining the track as they clamber to catch a glimpse of the finalists. For the nervous owners, a year's hopes and dreams all rest on the next few seconds. The gates fly open, and out hurtle the eight ankle-high Dachshunds, accelerating at a feverish pace. Ears flapping wildly and legs a blur, the hounds bound down the 70 feet of track. It's neck and neck in a pulsating finish. Silence descends as everyone waits in awe, wondering who will tower victorious...

Around 500 of the world's fastest Dachshunds are flown thousands of miles to compete in the annual Wiener Dog Race. Now in its eighth year, the event attracts hoards of people who flood into the tiny American town of Buda, Texas, with their mini-mutts in tow, hoping to watch their pet rub shoulders with the cream of the crop. It's the event of the year for some.

But this acclaimed international event has not always been such a celebrated spectacle. Organiser Jim Fletcher proudly announces that the competition has come a long way from its once meagre beginnings. "The first year we had just a dozen dogs racing with no marked track to run on. We didn't even have traps to start them from. The next year we decided to build the traps as more dogs were racing and also because a dog panicked at the starter's pistol the first year and bit a steward."

The formerly hour-long show soon evolved into a whole weekend of events, including a parade featuring hundreds of Dachshunds in fancy dress strutting down the town's main street, music from local up-and-comer Britney McArthur, pony rides and a bake-off (cooking contest).

But it's the Wieners ('sausage dogs') that people have come to see. Many arrive late after spending hours dressing their pets in elaborate outfits in a bid to show them off. Everywhere you look you can see champions of old all hungry to stand on that podium once again as top dog.

But it's not just the dog's pride at stake. The winner is awarded a cheque for around £250 in prize money, together with their name inscribed on the impressive cup next to a long list of champions. And because of this, some






Feature and photos by Mike Wood





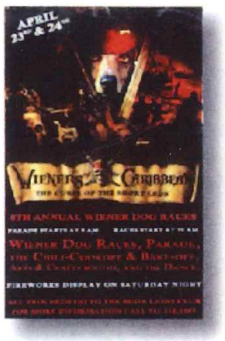
owners take training very seriously and dedicate many hours to coaching their pet in how to become a winner.

Heather Hodnett, owner of one-time champ Mo, runs the ideal pup workout in her own back garden. "When we were beaten into fourth place the first year, we decided to go into training. My husband, Mike, built a single trap in the garden with a lever to lift the gate. When I give him the sign from across the garden, he lifts the gate and I time the run on my stopwatch. Mo loves it so much that we can spend whole afternoons out there practising. Her personal best is 3.3 seconds."

Owner of three-time winner Copper, Brian Shocklee believes his four-legged friend needs no elaborate encouragement to win. Their beloved ball is all that they need. "Waving that ball at Copper from the finish line is like showing a red rag to a bull. He doesn't even know the crowd is there, all he sees is the ball. At about six feet from the finish, I throw the ball behind me for the final sprint. He's going so fast crossing the finish, it's hard to stop him. I have to stoop down and pluck him from the floor before he runs off."

Another of the favourites, Simba, is always a contender for the cup, even at a worldly nine years of age. Owner David Houston hopes his old-age pet can use years of race experience to win the top spot. "He's not like all the others. While they are jumping up and down before the race, using up their energy, Simba quietly composes himself. These younger dogs may be lively, but do they really have the experience they need to win? No."

However, it's not all about the winners. Even the most carefree canines leave feeling special, as speed is not the only crowd-pleaser. As the pistol fires on the scores of preliminary rounds, many of the dogs waddle out into the blazing sunshine, gazing mystified at the amused crowd. Forgetting everything their owner taught them, they wander towards the nearest treat - and consequently out of the race. It may be a conscious decision for some contenders to forgo the spoils of victory for a friendly pat on the head and nibble of someone's hot dog. "One whiff of food and he will be through that crowd like a hot knife through butter," said one young contestant.



Heather Frankovis brings two-year old Pippin every year and said she would hate to miss the Wieners in action. "They may be small, but, when they get going, it's staggering to watch. They are so fast. I would like to see one up against a Greyhound one day. Although I guess it would have to be a sprint distance, as I don't think they would have the legs."

Even after seeing dozens of races, everyone herds to the track-side for the final race. Watching as they make their way across the field, you can see that the day's events appeal to anyone able to drag themselves out of their chair, although the site does have excellent disabled facilities. A freight train trundles noisily alongside the field, forcing the referee to delay proceedings for the crowd to wave at the driver.

Finally, when everyone is ready, the dogs are placed into position. The last eight owners kneel at the gate, waving lucky doggie treats and toys to get their pets' attention. When suitably transfixed, they back up, shouting frantically and praying that their dogs' minds won't wander. The gates go up, the dogs scurry out, and it's all over in seconds.

It's Copper who reigns supreme. ■

