



When Did We Stop Going To The Dogs?

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JAMIE J argues that, while attendances have fallen, the betting industry has thrived on greyhound racing

Despite traditionally being regarded as a relatively inexpensive form of working-class entertainment, attendances at greyhound racing in Britain have been suffering at an almost steady decline for the last 50 years.

From a peak of 34 million paying spectators in 1946 they now hover around the 2m mark.

There will be many among us who will not mourn this apparent drop in popularity.

This is a “sport” that is largely driven by the need to make profit, where the dogs are often regarded as mere commodities, literally running for their lives, and deemed surplus to requirements if not successful.

Evidence of the abuse and doping of racing dogs, race-fixing and the disappearance of thousands of dogs at the end of their careers has become more widely available.

To a nation of supposed animal-lovers this should perhaps resonate and further lessen the appeal of a night at the dogs.

It might even challenge the devoted fan’s happy memories of dogs made famous by BBC’s Sportsnight televised races.

It wasn’t that long ago that Mick The Miller, Scurrough Champ and Ballyregan Bob, who completed an incredible 32 consecutive wins, were household names.

But while the attendance figures might suggest an industry in terminal decline, any reports of its demise are somewhat exaggerated.

An eye-watering £2.5 billion is still gambled on the over 70,000 races held each year, it supports an estimated 7,000 jobs and Towcester Racecourse bucked the recent trend in dog-track closures by opening a £1.8m purpose-built greyhound circuit at the end of 2014.

The tracks and paying customers have been disappearing but greyhound racing has never been more popular as a gambling product. BBC’s Panorama suggested that the bookies’ annual profits from greyhound racing touched £237m in 2013. The government also gains about £55m in taxation each year.

For the bookmakers it’s a highly efficient industry — the bigger companies even own and operate greyhound tracks but without their financial backing it wouldn’t exist.

It was all very different in the early days of greyhound racing though.

Britain’s first purpose-built track had opened at Belle Vue, Manchester in 1926 and within weeks it claimed to be attracting average crowds of 11,000.

London’s White City and at least 16 other stadiums had begun racing a year later and 4.5m spectators had reportedly attended tracks by the end of 1927.

Its popularity continued up until the war years and a peak was reached for attendances, along with many other sports, in the years after 1945.

In the late 1940s there were 77 licenced dog tracks in Britain with at least 15 in London. Today there are 35 recognised venues dotted across the country, nine of them unlicenced.

Following Walthamstow's closure in 2008, Wimbledon is the sole track in the capital but there are even plans for it to cease operations and become the new home of AFC Wimbledon.

By the late 1990s, as evidence of massive overbreeding of dogs for racing and the most notorious examples of greyhound abuse had begun to surface, the welfare of these racing dogs made headlines well away from the back pages.

In the most infamous cases, thousands of former racing greyhounds were found buried in makeshift graves at Seaham in 2006 and in May 2008 the Sunday Times exposed Britain's largest greyhound breeder selling puppies, which would not chase or had proved too slow, to Liverpool University for research and dissection.

The rosy picture of dogs enjoying their competitive racing lives before being rehomed at the end of their careers was becoming ever-more tarnished.

While recognising that some owners, including greyhound racing enthusiast MP Ian Lavery, do keep their dogs as family pets or pass them on to reputable rehoming organisations at the end of their careers, the welfare provision for many dogs remains inadequate and firmly under the spotlight.

Approximately 8,000 racing dogs are "retired" due to injury each year before they reach the age of four.

Although the Greyhound Board of Great Britain does not release its own figures to account for their ultimate destiny, the Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare estimates that a minimum of 4,700 dogs "disappear without trace" from the system annually and animal welfare charities openly admit that they cannot cater for all of the retired dogs.

Greyhound Action has estimated that each of Britain's major greyhound stadiums are responsible, on average, for the slaughter of over 500 dogs each year.

While it continues to operate under such primitive, largely self-regulated and opaque conditions without any recognisable drastic improvement in welfare provision, greyhound racing and its bookmaker paymasters will continue to face prolonged opposition from organisations concerned with animal welfare.

Like smoking in cinemas or semi-naked women in so-called newspapers, greyhound racing is looking ever more like a relic from a bygone age and undeserving of our patronage.