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Posted: Mon., Nov. 5, 2007, 7:38pm PT

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S.F. Doc Fest

Wiener Takes All: A Dogumentary (Documentary -- U.S. - Canada)

By DENNIS HARVEY

An Infant Monster production. Produced by M.E. Law, Shane MacDougall. Directed by Shane MacDougall. Screenplay, M.E. Law, MacDougall.

With: Anne Richards Clark, Iris Love, Kimberly & Nick Ganiers, Troy Hirsch, Brenda & Darren Tyo, Paul Aman, Bruce & Kathy Rice, Orlando Guitierrez, Ken Osmond.

You might think dachshunds travel fastest when you throw 'em. Turns out, however, the little buggers can run like hell -- and because of this, there are human beings obsessed with owning, training and racing the oblong canines. Relatively nouveau pastime of such racing is examined in "Wiener Takes All," which feels stretched (no pun intended) at 97 minutes. But if audience response at the San Francisco Documentary Fest to Shane MacDougall's debut feature is any indication -- public demand necessitated two added screenings -- the subject's inherent absurdist appeal could spark niche theatrical release before specialized DVD and broadcast exposure.

Dachshund racing exploded in popularity after the broadcast of a 1993 Miller Lite commercial that showcased the sport as a joke. It is now very serious business, indeed, to the nationwide racetrack owners who make considerable cash off these popular events; to tubular fast-food chain Der Wienerschnitzel, which sponsors the annual Wiener Nationals in San Diego; and to various owners who expend an alarming amount of energy and focus on their competing pets.

Despite three-inch legs, these hounds reportedly can reach speeds up to 30 feet per second. They're sprinters rather than marathoners, however, with most races stretching 50 yards or less. Many dachshund enthusiasts (including Guggenheim heiress Iris Love, interviewed here) as well as animal rights activists object to the sport, however, since the breed is prone to back injuries that such exercise can easily induce.

The controversies don't stop there, though. This being athletic competition in the 21st century, naturally there are doping accusations, disputed titles and controversial decisions. But such shocking incidents aren't as easily found in the wiener-dog world as first-time director Shane MacDougall had clearly hoped. For all the subject's amusing aspects -- the mildly eccentric owners, the frequency with which dogs simply wander about sniffing each other rather than bolting out of the start-gate -- the pic digresses in order to reach a feature length, including alternative obstacle-course-type competitions, breeding issues and other areas that detract from the pic's original promise of real-life "Best in Show" fun. Halfway through, the docu starts to feel padded.

Still, curiosity-seekers might find the concept humorous enough to sustain interest. Erstwhile standup comic MacDougall does some clever packaging, from the multiple disclaimers that start the pic to the cocktail-lounge theme song at its end. Tech aspects are OK.

Camera (color, digiBeta), Joe Park, Ricardo Vargas; editor, Park; music, Law, Mike Nelson. Reviewed on DVD, San Francisco, Sept. 27, 2007. (In San Francisco Documentary Film Festival.) Running time: 97 MIN.



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See photos from the p



Day One