

Dog eat dog

Photos



courtesy photo by Kevin Nibur

Noodles and Buddy collide in the infamous 2004 Weiner nationals.

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Newburyport —

It's a sport, perhaps, but only if using the most gracious of definitions. More accurately, it's an inexplicably popular activity that lies - probably exposed, considering the modesty of its so-called athletes - at the twisted pop-culture metaphorical confluence of Wide World of Sports, Oprah and theater of the absurd.

Weiner-dog racing.

Even the name sounds ridiculous. True, you can call these hot dogs "athletes" and point out that their three-inch-long legs can propel them to speeds of up to 30-feet-per-second, as filmmaker Shane MacDougall does in "Weiner Takes All: A Dogumentary" (someone will burn in hell for that pun), which will be screened at this year's Newburyport Documentary Film Festival - a speed that

translates to about a three-minute mile.

That is, if these bizarre-looking animals could actually run that far, in a straight line, undistracted. Which, apparently, they can't, as the film makes clear. Even in the big races — and make no mistake about it, when you have some 15,000 spectators watching, like the one at the Los Alamitos track, it is a big race, no matter how absurd the spectacle - many of these animals never leave the starting gate.

Others, looking lost or confused or scared, circle around and hide behind the gate. Some start running, then seem to lose interest and stop. Others are so into it (or having so much fun - it's hard to tell which) that they start biting each other's butts.

There are few, if any, rules in the event. And the competitors who make it to, or within striking distance of, the finish line encounter a line of over-excited owners with twisted, contorted faces, who seem to be way more excited than the animals. And it is apparently just as frightening to the dogs as it should be to mental health professionals. Many stop running as soon as they get a whiff of this phalanx, with the owners grabbing them and pulling them in - again, the lack of clearly, consistently articulated rules comes into play, making for a frustrated field of pseudo-stage mothers, who make John and Patricia Ramsey look like reasonable people.

At several crucial points in the documentary, this laissez-faire attitude toward the rules has resulted in turmoil and charges that the fix was in: In two consecutive competitions, Noodles, the odds-on favorite to win the national

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championship, had the title taken away from him after besting the field because the gates supposedly did not open properly, leading to a second running and the ascendancy of Pretzel as top dog – “polarizing the entire racing community,” according to the 84-minute documentary and inadvertently leading to a rivalry that “sports” commentators breathlessly, absurdly compare to the Ali-Frasier battles.

After years of training, these were stinging defeats for Team Noodles. Not that the training matters in competitive weiner-dog racing: “As soon as you open the gates, they have no idea what’s going on,” says Larry Feldman, a judge at Los Alamitos, which holds one of – yikes! - 75 major weiner-dog races in the country.

All of this was a revelation to Shane MacDougall. “I was certainly shocked. I had no idea such a world existed. Every day on the set I learned something new,” says the filmmaker, who will begin work on two new documentaries after festival season ends in Newburyport: “A*holes,” which will attempt to answer the age-old question, “Are they made or born that way?” and, in an – um - related subject, an investigation into what MacDougall calls “the bowel industry.” There’s a lot of money being made on the pre-Depends-clad yuppie bottoms.

Barking up the right tree

No, he doesn’t have a dog, weiner or otherwise. He’s on the road too much.

“It wouldn’t be fair to the dog,” says MacDougall, who calls himself a “dog person without a dog.” The filmmaker has had what he calls “a varied life” and “bounced around” a bit. He’s been a professional “sneaker,” a hacker hired by private companies to find flaws in their security systems,” and a New York firefighter — one of the first teams on the site of the Twin Towers on Sept. 11. His squad set up the main triage unit. An injury on the job ended that career. He’s also been a stand-up comedian and television writer, mostly up in the Great White North, where he is probably best known - um, or infamous - for challenging Queen Elizabeth to a kickboxing match, a bit that resulted in a barrage of death threats from normally placid Canadians.

He is also known for The Dark Show, which in the late 1990s was Canada’s longest running independent comedy show. He was looking for something different. Writing for kids’ television was out. (“It’s fun, but not exactly satisfying,” says MacDougall. “The story arches are exactly compelling; the thoughts aren’t deep. It wasn’t where I wanted to be.”

He was thinking documentary but not heavy: hoping to tap into a cute, adorable topic - something, anything lighter than non-stop depressing fair you usually find at film festivals: orphans with AIDS, Sept. 11, breast cancer.

“I wanted something quirky but commercially appealing.” He came to the weiner-dog project - eventually - after seeing a “news” report about the 2005 national championships on television.

“In a moment of clarity,” he says, “I latched onto it. It just took off from there.” Well, eventually.

He started working on the film a year later, after losing a gig that he was “a shoe-in” to walk home with. His wife gave him a shove in the right direction.

The film goes beyond the bizarre world of competitive weiner-dog races to places stranger and even more obsessive - the world of competitive show dogs - and includes an interview with Westminster judge Anne Rogers Clark, who absolutely, positively does not want to talk about double-dapples. No one does.

It also looks back into the history of the dachshund, to a time when the dogs raced ... underground. It also examines the dark times, just after World War I, when the German breed became the Freedom Fries of its time: People started calling the breed Liberty Dogs. And it only got worse after World War II. But by the 1970s, the weiner dog had bounced back, thanks, in part, to an advertising campaign for Miller, the dachshund of the beer world, which came up with a commercial that, with a rap of a bottle of beer on the television set, drag racing and dog shows - and, in some respects, launched the entire sport.

And then, of course, there are the people who make it all happen: the obsessed, people who live for - and through - their dogs, who treat these animals like little people, then spoil them rotten. And while MacDougall admits that the “sport” is loaded with people like this, he does not judge.

“For a lot of these people, their dogs are their kids,” he says. “Their world revolves around them. You find that obsession in every endeavor.”

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