

## Going to the Dogs, An Oral History of Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium

INTERVIEWEE: Jonathan Hobbs

DATE OF BIRTH: 1956

PARENTS' OCCUPATIONS: father in PR for the BBC; mother secretary at ATV

Interview Location: AFC Wimbledon Stadium, London, 22 January 2024

Interviewer: Ingrid Holtz; Summariser: Sarah Armstrong

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Jonathan is a journalist, specialising in greyhound racing and greyhound owner himself, following in family footsteps.

Jonathan's dad was an owner and he has childhood memories of being at Wimbledon and Catford dog tracks, picking up the tote tickets off the ground with his friend. Sunday walking of the greyhounds with his dad, making sure not to give the dog anything. They would follow their greyhound trainer, Paddy Gilligan, round to various London racetracks wherever their dogs were entered for races. Greyhounds are very affectionate animals, family oriented.

Wimbledon Stadium was a cauldron, full of atmosphere, crowds cheering, the roar on Derby nights, the drama of the lights. High end food in the restaurant. Speedway nights also fast and furious. An inexpensive night out attracting a mix of people, families and older, serious betting men. The Derby brought in the best greyhounds from UK and Ireland to compete. Wimbledon was bigger and better appointed than other stadia in its heyday (still rocking in the 2000s). Older punters would have said olden days were better, when greyhounds were the only option of the leisure pound and betting.

Gambling is very linked to greyhounds but not the only reason for going to the races. An owner feels the thrill of the race. Welfare has improved and syndicates make ownership more accessible. Prize money varies between promoters and racetracks. Owners in it for enjoyment, maybe 1 win in 4 races a month will cover the kennel bills. A recent Derby prize was £175,000 and greyhounds can cost £000s.

Changes – punters crossed London attending races at different tracks through the day. Fewer crowds now as so many other opportunities, and rise of betting shops, but it's still a fantastic night out. Wimbledon stadium went through updates but latterly the investment was lacking. Sporting media has positive coverage of greyhound racing but space is dominated by football. Land values overtook tracks, but the passionate campaign to save Wimbledon was successful in raising the profile of greyhound racing.

Wimbledon meant dressing up for a night out and seeing the superstars – the best greyhounds. Characters at Wimbledon – bookies like Tony Morris and John Humphries; Harry Findlay, punter, battling the bookies. Vinnie Jones brought Keith Richards, Ronnie Wood, Jimmy White and Ronnie O'Sullivan to see Smoking Bullet run. Royal visitors – Philip, Edward, Diana.

As a journalist, working on the Racing Post and TV, likes the horses too, but chooses the greyhounds. It doesn't feel like working as he loves it so much.