

## **Going to the Dogs Oral History Project – WiSH/Digital Works**

**Simon Harris – born 1959 in Birmingham.**

**He was Racing Manger at Wimbledon Stadium from 1993 – 2003.**

Interviewed at Wimbledon Stadium on Monday, 22 January, 2024.

### **Early Experience**

- Simon’s father was a greyhound trainer from the early days of the sport. He used to go to the kennels and races with his father. At 18 he got a job in the racing office at Hall Green Stadium in Birmingham. He worked his way up and got the job as Racing Manager at Wimbledon Stadium, which was a big promotion.

### **Wimbledon Stadium**

- Wimbledon had a “cauldron effect” with stands on two sides, which meant bigger crowds and a better atmosphere than Hall Green. There would be 11,000 people at Derby finals.
- The outside of the stadium looked grim, but it was the inside that was important. Racing was seen as “poor man’s horse racing”, because it was cheap and open to the public. It was a white, working-class sport at first, but later on there was a more mixed crowd from “a vicar to a bank robber”. Lots of characters with nicknames.
- Greyhound racing is about the sport, the betting and entertainment. It was a night out by itself or could be part of a night out in London.
- Charity race days would bring people who wouldn’t normally consider going to greyhound racing.
- There would be a major competition every month, but the Derby was the main one with huge prizes and crowds and the Derby took place over 5 weeks.
- A lot of staff and regulars had family links to the industry. It was like a family.
- Some famous people came to Wimbledon – the Rolling Stones, MPs (some of whom owned dogs). The Duke of Edinburgh’s dog won the Derby in 1968 and Prince Edward and Princess Diana also came to races.

## **Role of The Racing Manager**

- The Racing Manager decides which dogs run in which races, decides on grades, officiates the races within the rules of the sport. He needs to create a clean run race. He also had to make sure the dogs were checked by vets and he dealt with the weighing, security measures and preparation of the track.
- Early on in the sport there was doping of dogs, but it is now a very clean sport. The Racing Manager has a lot of responsibility because a lot of money is at stake.
- The hours were long – from 11am to 11pm. He found the job enjoyable, but the hours made it difficult to have a social life.
- There were bad nights when the weather was bad or there were mechanical problems. Greyhounds raced all through the year (unlike horses). Sand tracks were brought in, because they were easier to maintain in the winter.

## **Welfare**

- Welfare was a priority for his father. Dogs only raced a few days a month but need looking after every day. Society generally has become more concerned with animal welfare (e.g. circuses, fox hunting).
- More money has gone into the welfare of greyhounds and many more are now re-homed when they have finished racing. They make fantastic pets.

## **Reasons for Decline**

- Online betting means that people don't need to leave the house to gamble.
- Greyhound racing always struggled to get younger audiences. He did promotions and packages to bring in younger people, but that often alienated the older regulars.
- There were new restrictions on crowd numbers due to safety concerns.
- Some racing is done in the daytime and without a crowd just for gambling, which takes away the entertainment aspect of the stadium.
- The owners of the stadiums were motivated by profit rather than love of the sport so stadiums were sold to developers and new stadiums weren't built to replace them.

- Wimbledon Stadium was making a good profit when he left, but not as quickly as just selling the land.
- There were plans to have both a greyhound track and a football stadium, but Merton Council only keen on bringing the football back to Plough Lane.
- Asbestos was found in the main stand, which reduced the capacity.

### **The Future**

- He tries to be positive, but he doesn't think it will get better. There are many more dogs and races now than in the 1920s. It will carry on because of the money in gambling, but it will be about all-day gambling rather than a night's entertainment for people.