



Submitted photo: A pack of Dachshunds break from the starting line during last year's wiener dog races in Vergas. Short as their legs may be, these wily wieners top out at about 10 mph – almost fast enough to be illegal in some school zones.

Local “sausage dog” to defend reign as top brat

By Brett Blocker
Editor

Of all the underrepresented racing events glossed over by the execs of major sports networks, perhaps most deserving of a recurring primetime slot is the sport of wiener dog racing.

Save for Canterbury Park's “Don't Lay an Egg Dash” ostrich races, or its “Camelbury” camel races (yes, those are indeed real events) one would be hard pressed to find a competition as universally hilarious as the “Dachshund Dash.”

Come August 10, however, approximately 1,000 spectators will descend upon the small city of Vergas, Minnesota (pop. 300) as the town transforms its baseball diamond into a canine speedway for its annual Looney Daze wiener dog races.

There, approximately 50 tiny racehounds and their human “pit crews” will pit themselves against one another along a 30-yard runway in a 10-second sprint.

Among them, will be reigning champions Sue and Ashley Swanson and their Miniature Dachshund, Teegan. Fresh from a third place finish last weekend at Canterbury, the trio aim to defend their title after sweeping the Looney Daze race last year in their first-ever run.

In a sport where athletes' attention spans are as short as their legs, brains are as important as brawn: simply staying on track – literally and figuratively – is a tall order. However, the Swansons are confident their wiener is up for the challenge. Whether or not he crosses the finish line, however, is another matter.

“I'm not entirely sure what to expect,” Ashley said of her upcoming competition during an interview at the Swanson farmstead earlier this week (all the while struggling to maintain control of a dog overcome with the urge to chase a wandering farm cat.) “You never know who you're facing, and with Dachshunds, you never know how they're going to act the day of the race. But I'd say he's up for the challenge. He seems to enjoy it so much, and he loves to run and show off.”

During their first victory in Vergas last year, Ashley recalls Teegan sprinting a full eight feet before turning back around to greet Sue at the starting gate. Despite the setback, and after just a bit of minor encouragement and redirection, the 18-month-old pup managed to reverse course and bypass his competition to steal the show.

Still, like most racedogs of the sport, maintaining focus remains the key determining factor separating the veterans from the puppies.

Although Teegan succeeded in scoring third last weekend in Canterbury, he may

have been able to advance to the finals had the desire to meet and greet with fellow racers not proven so overpowering.

“There were 72 dogs in the initial heats, so I'd say he did very well,” Ashley said. “But Teegan placed third in his heat, so he will not advance to the finals.”



He got distracted and tried to have more fun with the other dogs than compete, but overall, he did very well down there.”

Of course, Teegan is not the only dog to struggle with the canine equivalent of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. In an average race of ten wieners, Ashley estimates only two will cross the finish line without stopping to play with, fight, or sniff the competition.

Owners must work hard to keep their dogs focused on the task at hand.

Traditionally bred for hunting small animals and rodents, Dachshunds are overpowered with a desire to chase prey. In order to keep their racehounds heads in the game, owners work to tap into their dogs' hunting instincts in the moments leading up to the race.

Toys, treats and other miscellaneous items of encouragement all find a place in the pit crews' race bag.

“Teegan loves squeaky toys and remote controlled cars,” said Ashley, adding that one rev of the wheels is all he needs to get “psyched up” for a run. On the announcer's cue of “go!,” the sidelines erupt into a cacophony of squeaks, cheers, barks and yips.

It may not be the most organized sport, but it's one that never fails to draw a crowd.

“I'd say it's probably the biggest single event of Looney Daze,” race organizer Digger Anderson said. To accommodate the swell of spectators, bleachers are borrowed from the nearby school in Frazee.

For the uninitiated, Anderson describes the scene as follows:

“The track is about 100 feet long, all fenced in with two-foot-high fencing so the wieners can't get away. Anywhere

from 5-8 wieners line up to race in a straight line with one human on either end of the track. I say “ready, set, go!,” and they are supposed to sprint down the track, but sometimes it turns into a social affair.”

Ofentimes, the “brat-wursts,” “low-riders,” “sausage dogs,” or simply “wieners” go the wrong direction, run to an owner with a

desirable toy or treat, or “hockey check” their closest competitor.

But as any seasoned competitor can attest, the sport is



Photos by Brett Blocker: Miniature Dachshund Teegan and owners Sue and Ashley Swanson (left and right, respectively) pose with their first place trophy earned during the trio's first ever race in Vergas last year. On August 10, the trio will return to the city to defend their title.

seldom about the final results.

“It's absolute belly laughs for people of all ages to see these wiener dogs race – or try to race,” Anderson said. “We have entries every year that keep coming back from far,

far away. The furthest we have this year is from Las Vegas.”

Unfortunately, as his own dog has been prescribed a steroid-based medication, Anderson will not be competing this year, though he will continue

to announce. “We don't test for performance-enhancing drugs prior to the race, but we do check the fire hydrants afterwards,” he jokes.

Long ago, Spicer had a golf course



Dick Gratz, left, and Bill Gratz, right, on Green Lake Golf Course in 1916

By Bruce Strand
Sports reporter

In this newspaper's article on Little Crow Country Club's 50th anniversary last week, it was stated that the area had no golf club before 1969. Not so, an alert reader informed us.

The Green Lake Country Club existed in Spicer from about 1918 to the late 1930s, between present Highway 23 and the Kandiyohi road.

The clubhouse, located next to the beach, was completed in 1917 and the course opened soon after with nine holes at first, later expanded to 18. The course closed in the late 1930s due to the opening of Willmar's golf course, and the effects of the Depression.

This information came from a book called “History of Spicer on Green Lake.”