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Forget Barbaro: Racing Dachshunds Compete as Owners Wave Treats

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By Nadja Brandt

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May 9 (Bloomberg) -- The racers sniff, scratch and howl in the starting gates. At the signal, Hot Rod, Wam and Bruiser dash toward their cheering owners who jump, scream and wave toys and treats at the finish line.

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It's a hot Sunday afternoon at Old World Village in Huntington Beach, California, where a makeshift track is getting a pounding from the 3-inch legs of racing dachshunds. At the starting gate, a handler places a special to send off his dog on the best possible footing. On the sidelines, a contestant is being cooled down with a cold compress on his forehead.

The sport of dachshund racing can be traced to a Miller Lite beer commercial in 1994 that facetiously offered "Wiener Dog Drag Racing" as an extreme sport, playing on the ad's paradoxical tag line: "great taste, less filling." Now some 40 dachshund races are held in the U.S. each year and for the participants and their human handlers, these events are as exciting as watching Barbaro cross the finish line at the Kentucky Derby.

"These races didn't exist before the commercial," says Terry Baker, 55, art director of the Miller Brewing Co. campaign. "We were really surprised how two months later they started to pop up."

The course lengths vary between 25 yards and 50 yards, and some have barriers between lanes. The monthly competitions at Old World Village draw about 200 spectators on average and as many as 1,000 during October Fest.

Wiener Nationals

Each July the fast-food chain Wienerschnitzel sponsors one of the Kentucky Derbies of dachshund racing -- Wienerschnitzel Wiener Nationals at Los Alamitos, California -- a competition with a total of 64 contestants. Other popular U.S. dachshund races include the annual Wiener Dog Race in Buda, Texas, in April and a December race in San Diego as part of the annual Holiday Bowl.

The Wiener Nationals' dachshund races, which are run between conventional horse races at Los Alamitos, have been the track's No. 1 event in terms of attendance since they began 11 years ago, according to racecourse spokesman Orlando Gutierrez. Last year, the Nationals drew more than 10,500 people.

"You ask racetrack owners across the country and the wiener-dog races are, if not their top event, at least among the top three attended events," says Shane MacDougall, director of a movie in production about dachshunds called "Wiener Takes All: A Documentary."

Some Sniff

It's not all thrills. Once the starter signals and the gate lifts, some dachshunds do no more than a leisurely lope along the track. Some sniff the ground. One promising contestant ran three-quarters of the course before jumping the divider and landing on top of the competing dog.

Yet some take their racing seriously. With ears flopping and tongues dangling, they seem to fly like thoroughbreds toward the finish line, where they are greeted with open arms by their proud owners.

That's the kind of wiener dog Baron was. Owned by Ron Rowland, 58, a small-business owner in Placentia, California, 32-pound Baron has been a national champion and has appeared twice on "The Tonight Show." The 13-year-old shorthair dachshund retired after a four-year racing career.

Wienerschnitzel decided a decade ago that it needed a signature event to help increase brand awareness and so it started to sponsor 12 different races across the country. The events have produced local television coverage "that definitely builds awareness for the store and that eventually translates into sales," says Tom Amberger, president of marketing at Galardi Group Inc., the parent company of Wienerschnitzel.

"Why a Dachshund?"

Dachshunds have many famous fans. New York socialite and archaeologist Iris Love owns 52 dachshunds, she boards at her Vermont estate. Each year during the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show in New York, she throws a bash in honor of dachshunds at Tavern on the Green. Love, 72, fell for the breed after her mother adopted a dachshund named Baron Heinrich Schultz von Kraut.

"I thought, 'A dachshund? Of all the breeds in the world, why a dachshund?'" Love says. "When I came home, Baron Heinrich greeted me and it took 20 minutes to hopelessly fall in love with him."

Love has orchestrated the 550-guest bash for the past 20 years, each year choosing a country theme and dressing the attending dogs in native costumes. Last year it was Mexico; this February it was China.

Kissinger, Cronkite

Among the buffet items at these events, Love has served chopped liver molded like a dachshund and bone-shaped gingerbread cookies to guests including Henry Kissinger, Lily Tomlin, Joan Rivers, Barbara Walters, Walter Cronkite and Diane Sawyer.

Pablo Picasso became an accidental lover of the breed when war photographer and friend David Douglas Duncan introduced the artist to a dachshund called Lump in the 1950s. The newly published "Lump: The Dog Who Inspired Picasso" (Thames & Hudson, 100 pages, 12.95 pounds), is a compilation of photographs documenting his friendship with the artist.

Unlike greyhound racing, where betting is heavy and training practices have drawn fire, the wiener meets at friendly events. The Los Alamitos Wiener Nationals serves as a fund-raiser for the Seal Beach Animal Shelter. Racers are chosen from a pool of creative entries, including poems, short stories and films, a process adopted to discourage betting.

In Old World Village, a small town with a German flair, the races were started by Inge McKellop, 50, who owns two dachshunds and the Coffee Mill coffee-bean shop. On this hot Sunday, Bruno, Baby Luv and Ziggy are the top dogs, leaving their owners strategizing over better lures and training methods before they line up again for the next race.

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