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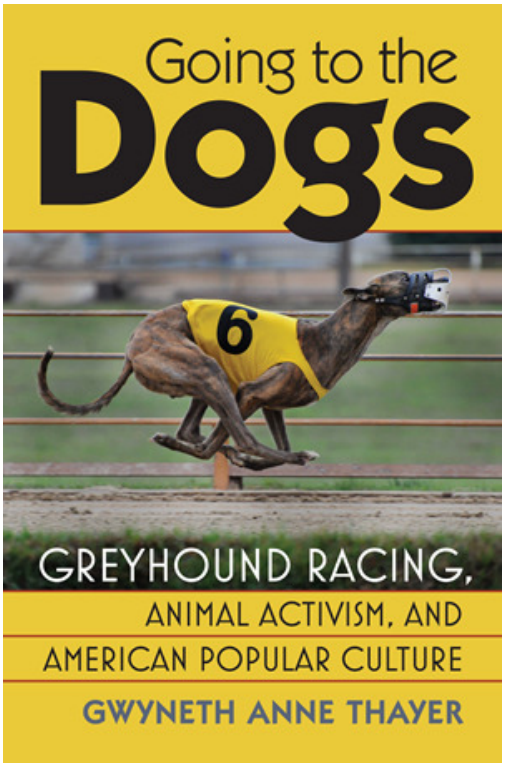
Of Dogs and Dogmen: A History of Greyhound Racing in the United States



Gwyneth Anne Thayer, *Going to the Dogs: Greyhound Racing, Animal Activism, and American Popular Culture*. Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2013. 304 pp. $34.95 (hc).

Gwyneth Anne Thayer's *Going to the Dogs* provides a welcome examination of a neglected topic: the history of greyhound racing in America. While existing accounts of the sport have tended to come from within the industry or from the literature of anti-racing activism, Thayer offers a more complex and balanced perspective. As the adopter of an ex-racing greyhound, she explains, she became curious about the industry and the men and women who worked in it, and her dissatisfaction with the information offered by the adoption community provided the impetus for her project. Determined to be "fair and honest" in her analysis of the controversial sport and its history, Thayer found

herself walking "an uncomfortable tightrope" (ix), but the reward of her efforts is a nuanced and thoroughly documented history — featuring almost 100 pages of appendices, notes, and bibliographical information as well as 36 black-and-white images — that will prove interesting and accessible to a broad readership.

Thayer frames her discussion with a scene from a 1971 episode of the ABC sitcom *The Odd Couple* that, she contends, "encapsulates the central disagreement driving the debate over dog racing" (2). Oscar acquires a racing greyhound and intends to race him for profit, while Felix objects to a use of the dog that he deems exploitative. Oscar's insistence that greyhounds are "born" to race, Thayer argues, reflects a traditional view of "the role of dogs both as predetermined and as limited to duties beneficial to humans" (2). Felix, conversely, espouses a modern view of dogs as companions possessing "something close to 'personhood'" (2). With the dramatic growth of American pet-keeping culture and animal advocacy during the historical period Thayer examines, the latter perspective eclipsed the former, making the decline of greyhound racing virtually inevitable. Along with shifting attitudes toward animals, increased competition from an expanding leisure market and an inexpungible reputation as a poor man's sport linked to crime and moral decrepitude appear, by Thayer's account, to have doomed the industry. The history of greyhound racing, then, serves as an illuminating microcosm of the dynamic entanglement of class, leisure, and humanimal relations in American popular culture.

While the last century has witnessed both the rise and fall of greyhound racing in America, Thayer documents the sport's much earlier roots. In Chapter 1, "Chasing Rabbits," she examines how greyhound racing evolved from coursing, a hunting competition dating back at least to the Roman Empire in which sight hounds chase and kill small prey (usually hares). Thayer points out that while blood sports have long been "associated with the lower class," coursing's popularity among the nobility established its image as "an elite European practice," foreshadowing the entanglement of class and humane sensibilities in debates about greyhound racing (21). As the sport became more widely popular in 18th- and 19th-century England, upper-class enthusiasts sought to differentiate their "carefully regulated contest" (24) from blood sports and from closed coursing (coursing in an enclosed space), which one commentator characterized as an "effeminate Cockney" perversion of "the ancient and noble sport" (Dalziel, qtd. in Thayer 25). By the time coursing took hold in the United States in the mid-19th century, its status as the "Sport of Queens" was no longer assured (6). American enthusiasts

underscored its aristocratic heritage, but the "mixed" and sometimes rowdy crowds at coursing competitions (29), together with the increasingly varied nature of greyhound-related activities "similar to or even advertised as coursing events" (37) and humane objections to the use of live prey, coursing came to be regarded as "an objectionable rural custom" (43).

While this reputation had relegated coursing to a remote corner of American leisure activity by the 1920s, Owen Patrick Smith's invention of the mechanical lure in 1919 paved the way for greyhound racing — a sport that, in contrast to its predecessor, would come to be associated with "modernity, tourism, and glamour" (2). Chapter 2, "Boom or Bust," chronicles the development of modern greyhound racing, beginning with Smith's 1919 opening of a track in the gambling hub of Emeryville, California. Early track owners faced crackdowns on illegal gambling, and many operated "on the fix," bribing law enforcement in hopes of forestalling raids (47). Faced with anti-gambling sentiment and the stigma of "working-class vice," promoters sought, like their coursing predecessors, "to characterize greyhound racing as an elite 'Sport of Queens'" (49). Thayer, though, attributes its eventual success to the "grassroots appeal" of a sport whose working-class audience "helped create the sport's identity 'from the bottom up'" (49). Bolstered by the introduction of electrically illuminated night-racing in the early 1920s, the efforts of a core group of "dogmen" — an informal term for those involved in "the hands-on work of racing greyhounds" (200n12) — carved out a niche in the expanding American leisure industry. Smith and others created the International Greyhound Racing Association (INGRA) in 1926, signaling ambitions for further expansion. However, INGRA's efforts to impose "hierarchical control" on "independent and feisty dogmen" met with mixed success, prefiguring the internal tensions that would contribute to the sport's eventual decline (56).

Greyhound racing also faced challenges from external competitors — most notably the thoroughbred horse-racing industry. Chapter 3, "Horses, Hounds, and Hustlers," examines the dog-racing industry's largely unsuccessful efforts in the 1920s and 1930s to expand to states with horse-racing interests. The most devastating battles were waged in Kentucky and New York, where powerful horse-racing establishments capitalized on dog-racing's reputation as "the sport of the common man" and rumored associations with organized crime to preserve their monopoly of the pari-mutuel wagering market (72). Echoing the class-based bias of the coursing elite of 19th-century England, the chair of the New York State Racing Commission declared in 1936 that "dog racing is unsportsmanlike and detrimental to the ancient sport of horse racing" (Swope, qtd. in Thayer 79). Ironically, as Thayer points out, the horse-racing industry

found its efforts bolstered by those of anti-gambling interests and even organized crime. The legal battle in Kentucky culminated in the Supreme Court upholding an anti-greyhound-racing decision that dealt the further blow of relegating dogs to "a different classification than horses" and therefore "established a precedent by which each state would have to legalize dog-racing separately" (77). Legalization efforts in Arizona, Oregon, and Massachusetts — states without a strong horse-racing establishment — were more successful. However, opposition in California from anti-gambling forces, a growing humane movement, and a film industry wary of competition from other evening entertainment offerings signaled the broad-based resistance greyhound racing would increasingly face.

Despite these setbacks, the industry prospered in more favorable climates. In Chapter 4, "Halcyon Days and Florida Nights," Thayer describes how dog racing thrived in the Sunshine State following its 1931 legalization of pari-mutuel wagering. Throughout the 1920s, promoters, land developers, and entrepreneurs had gradually transformed the state — especially Miami — into "America's new vacationland," setting the stage for dog racing to become part of a booming tourism industry (96). Also key to its establishment was "an unusual and critical compromise" between dog- and horse-racing interests that limited direct competition by relegating dog races to the evenings (100). Despite this apparent acquiescence to a lesser status, greyhound-racing promoters sought to cultivate an elite image by linking the sport with wealth, glamour, and modernity. That these associations found expression in American art and visual culture is evidence of the industry's partial success at transforming its image. As Thayer points out, the visual pairing of "the sleek form of the greyhound…with the elegant lines of a well-dressed woman" became a popular art deco motif (110). The linking of greyhounds with female bodies persisted in the postwar era, when marketers featured dogs alongside pageant contestants and bathing beauties. Track appearances by celebrities like Frank Sinatra "added more than a hint of male swagger and naughtiness" to the sport's glamorous appeal (122). However, the disparity between this image and the reality of a largely working-class fan base, coupled with the increasingly lowbrow image of Florida tourism, left the class distinctions between dog- and horse-racing largely intact.

With its persistent working-class associations and failure to cultivate a nationwide fan base, the dog-racing industry was ill prepared to face an onslaught of anti-racing activism beginning in the 1970s. In Chapter 5, "Doggone Mad," Thayer demonstrates

how media exposés and animal advocacy turned the tide of public sentiment against greyhound racing. Of particular concern was the large-scale euthanasia of surplus and unprofitable dogs. Here, the ideological rift exemplified by *The Odd Couple* became starkly apparent, with the "agricultural mindset" of typical dogmen (130) clashing with a more "modern sensibility" that regards dogs as quasi-persons (131). Many in the industry regarded killing as a regrettable but unavoidable part of business, breeding resentment among shelter operators who felt "forced into the system of disposal" (136). In one of several striking parallels to the anti-dogfighting movement (which Thayer does not discuss), some animal protectionists espoused misgivings about the dogs themselves, echoing long-established perceptions of racing greyhounds as "vicious" menaces (137). Still, greyhound adoption organizations emerged in the 1980s, some in tense cooperation with an industry seeking to repair its eviscerated public image. Thayer notes the "social cachet" that now accompanies greyhound "rescue," demonstrating the anti-racing movement's success (139). Criticizing "pro-racing and anti-racing factions" alike for "oversimplif[ying]" the opposition (162-163), she nevertheless questions why greyhound racing has been targeted for elimination by a movement that appears unwilling to wage a similar campaign against the "statistically more dangerous" sport of horse racing, pointing in her tentative answer to the class distinctions discussed in previous chapters (144).

While anti-racing activism was arguably the greatest challenge the industry faced in the late-20th century, it was not the only one. Chapter 6, "The Fall," outlines several other forces that contributed to greyhound racing's decline. Confronted with humane objections and increased competition from televised sports, NASCAR, state lotteries, and casinos, industry leaders sought to cultivate a broader fan base and control media characterizations of the sport. Their efforts included new track openings, publications, and a Greyhound Hall of Fame in Abilene, Kansas. Thayer observes that the industry's earlier failure to generate publicity via television broadcasting — in part due to resistance from track operators reluctant to lose on-site gambling revenues (122-123) — left the sport "very regionalized," as one NBC sports executive remarked in 1982 (Watson, qtd. in Thayer 168). While some dogs achieved "tremendous popularity" among dog-racing fans, none "ever achieved the level of name recognition" of a Seabiscuit or Secretariat (169-170). Discord within the industry exacerbated its public-image woes. A shift to corporate track ownership and dogmen's decreased leverage in negotiations over booking contracts, gambling purses, and simulcasting agreements left many feeling "marginalized" by track operators and "stung" by an unsympathetic public (182). Recent years have even seen track operators and anti-racing activists allied against "racinos" (facilities combining a casino with a greyhound track), the closure of

which would mean the loss of "coveted bookings" for struggling dogmen (187). The "eventual demise" of greyhound racing, Thayer concludes, "is a predictable reality that both pro- and anti-racing forces generally agree upon" (188).

Thayer's well-researched and even-handed history makes an important contribution to the scholarship on animals in entertainment — an achievement all the more admirable given the controversial nature of her subject and her personal connection to greyhound adoption. Perhaps because she endeavors so studiously to remain objective, however, the dogs themselves feel strangely absent from her account, and the result is a decidedly human-centered history of greyhound racing. For example, when Thayer discusses the early cross-country transport of racing dogs, she focuses on the challenges faced by dogmen rather than the conditions endured by their dogs, which one would assume were far from ideal (61-63). Readers seeking more insight into the lives of racing dogs will thus have to look elsewhere – a shame given that most available information on this topic comes from the pro- and anti-racing camps. Additionally, Thayer's efforts to appear unbiased mean that her claims are sometimes qualified to an unnecessary and even frustrating degree, as when she suggests that "[t]he campaign to abolish greyhound racing *sometimes even appeared* to harbor a class-based bias" (143, emphasis added). The ample evidence she provides in support of this claim eliminates the need for such careful hedging, and I found myself wanting her to state her conclusions more definitively given her extensive research and obvious fair-mindedness. Nevertheless, *Going to the Dogs* is a valuable resource for readers interested in American history, popular culture, and animal advocacy.