

PLOD ESSAY

Greyhound Racing in Wonthaggi (Part2)

The Boom Years

In May 1939, The Age reported that Wonthaggi, after eight months of industrial peace, no strikes at all, was 'assuming the aspect of a normal, progressive country centre'.¹ The exceptional recovery the town had made after the strikes of 1937 and 1938 was demonstrated by the surge in spending in the town and by a booming sporting scene, of which the Sports Paradise was the standard bearer.

Six months ago, the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club opened its track at the entrance to the town and has never looked back. With full pays each fortnight the public is attending the meetings in large numbers and the excellence of the racing is attracting strong metropolitan support. World and Australian records have been established at the track.²

Notwithstanding the three-week strike that began on July 24 over the new award which threatened the forty-hour week and the eight-hour day,³ the Wonthaggi track, continued to prosper under the leadership of Tom Gannon, despite the abnormal late winter rains of that year. By September 1939, over 150 dogs had been registered in Wonthaggi, and, as the reputation of the track as one of the best in Australia gained traction, more and more dogs were coming to Wonthaggi from the metropolitan area, regional Victoria and as far away as Sydney. Local trainers such as Jack Wain, the Taberner brothers, 'China' Williamson and his son, fourteen-year-old Jack, had champion dogs such as 'Jolly Jack', 'Little Nola',⁴ 'My Mystery' and 'Inverloch'. The quality of the track was such that in May, 'Footprints', a champion greyhound from Sale broke the Australian record over 250 yards. Advertisements for entries to the Wonthaggi races appeared in all Melbourne newspapers, and in some regional papers, as did the results of the races.⁵ Every week during 1939, a full page of the Powlett Express was dedicated to describing the previous week's races, usually held on Saturdays, and publicising the next race. News of races at other tracks was also included. Human interest stories about local identities and visitors were intertwined in the reports. The greyhounds were described almost as if they were human as they struggled to win. Melbourne newspapers, in particular The Sporting Globe, echoed the enthusiasm of the Express. By the end of its first year of existence, the Sports Paradise, as it was now called, was without doubt at the forefront of greyhound racing in Victoria.

¹ The Age, May 23, 1839

² Ibid

³ In October, a judge of the Court of Arbitration confirmed the right to a forty-hour week for miners, ruled that no contract miner be paid less than the basic wage and granted miners annual paid leave of ten days, with penalties if the worker participated in strikes or other unauthorised hold ups. These rulings resulted in much opposition from conservative and were appealed.

⁴ When talking about the dog course with Danny Carr, he still remembered Little Nola

⁵ Races were sprints along the straight track, hurdles, and circular races usually over 400 yards around the circle track.

On Saturday December 9, 1939, the first anniversary meeting was held at the Sports Paradise. As was to be expected, due to the publicity campaign that had preceded, a record number of entries were received, which led to the inclusion of an extra race.⁶

The Anniversary meeting was 'the best one held by the club'. 'Everything went off without the least trouble. The hares and racing were all that could be desired'⁷ W.G. McKenzie, MLA, declared on awarding the prize to the owner of Lady Rhythmic, the winner of the anniversary cup. He congratulated the club on the excellent manner in which the meetings were conducted, and, with a certain self-satisfaction at having been proven right in backing the enterprise, he added with perhaps a little overstatement:

'When the club turned the first sod on this once scrub covered patch, it was prophesied that it would not last long, that it would die like all other sporting bodies in Wonthaggi, but these prophesies have been confounded. The club has made excellent progress and today we have the best dogs in the state racing in the best conditions and providing weekend amusements to people from all parts of the district.

The attendance was [only] good, the Powlett Express stated. Wonthaggi weather had clearly kept some people away.

It was most unfortunate for the ladies that the cold wind blew up at 9.15. It was the coldest night experienced since the club began operation. The afternoon promised a warm night so only two braziers were lit. Usually the club has six if the weather looks like being cold. There will be more braziers alight tomorrow night and on all occasions until the weather improves.⁸

One businessman, another article in the same issue of the Powlett Express reported, was convinced that the introduction of speed coursing in Wonthaggi had something to do with the town's present prosperity. He had more customers and business now than ever before. Included among the new customers were many followers of the dogs and these people attributed their patronage to their winnings from the Sports Paradise. The observer, the article continued, had noted with appreciation beneficial social effects. Husbands and wives who had not appeared out together for years were now regular and happy attenders at the sport that pleased even the ancient Egyptians, 'for men weary of Hollywood thrillers are never too tired to go and see and back their fancied dog'⁹.

As well as the usual meetings on Saturday night two extra meetings were held during the Christmas holiday period, one on Tuesday night, Boxing Day, and one on New Years Night. Special programmes were planned for those nights including a trophy for 16 local dogs that had been unsuccessful during that year, consolation prizes for other unsuccessful dogs were also on offer. Special buses were organised to transport racegoers from Inverloch and San Remo. A gala atmosphere was planned with other entertainment on offer, including by the

⁶ Powlett Express, December 8, 1939

⁷ Race meetings where neither the hare nor the pacer were caught and mauled by the dogs were an integral part of a successful meeting.

⁸ The rainfall in November had been double the average for the month, with 16 wet days. 170 points had already fallen in the first week of December which corresponds to 43 mm. 1939 was the second wettest year on record, up to then, 1145 mm.

⁹ Powlett Express, December 8, 1939 (I suspect that the gentleman quoted was J.C. 'China' Williamson, secretary of the club and the owner of the Caledonian Hotel.)

Wonthaggi Citizens Band. Favourable weather, record entries and very good attendances resulted in good profits for the organizers and much favourable publicity for Wonthaggi. Pix, the Australia wide pictorial magazine featured Wonthaggi in its January 12 magazine. Rare photos of the Sports Paradise were published. 'The committee of the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club has been responsible for giving Wonthaggi the greatest boost since its inception',¹⁰ the Powlett Express declared. Clearly Mr Gannon or another member of the club had organized matters. Articles arguing for the establishment of a sewerage system in Wonthaggi reflected the confidence Mr Gannon and other like-minded citizens had in the Sports Paradise.

The Challenges of World War 2

As more and more local young men joined to fight in the Second World War, particularly in Greece and North Africa, life in Wonthaggi went on almost normally in the first year after the outbreak of war. There are few articles during 1940 regarding the war, but the weekly articles on the Sports Paradise and greyhound racing continued. After eight months without any strikes, the miners resumed their industrial action, and in February began a three-month strike against the full Arbitration Court's decision to enforce the 44-hour week and other measures that would worsen working conditions. Despite the loss in wages, as the Powlett Express declared, 'Night after night, the Sports Paradise is increasing in popularity'. Champion Wonthaggi dogs raced at other venues and champion dogs from all over the place came to Wonthaggi to race. Money was still being won and lost. Rumours of corruption, of unfair tactics at Wonthaggi and elsewhere were rife. The WSCC committee took action. On Saturday 15 March 1941, the Weekly Times published the following article headlined:

Stewards Vigilant at Wonthaggi.

Speed coursing stewards at Wonthaggi are pursuing their policy of vigilance, and at the initial meeting recently on the new track, Sports Paradise, a dog from Sydney was not allowed to start, the sixth to be rejected in the last two months.

The club led by Mr Gannon pushed successfully for the compulsory ear-piercing of all dogs to combat the running of ringers.¹¹

On and after June 1 only dogs carrying the ear brand of the National Coursing Association will be permitted to race at Wonthaggi.

Sports Paradise is built on an area which was formerly a Ti-tree dump and many local people were dubious when the club indicated its intention of transforming it. Over 300 trees have been planted and gardens have been laid out, and the new track is a credit to those concerned,

Fool-proof, cable-controlled handicap boxes are being installed, and particular attention has been paid to the judging angle. One official lines the finish of a race from the usual

¹⁰ Powlett Express, January, 1940

¹¹ A ringer was a dog that resembled or was made to resemble another dog. The ringer, either much better or worse than the dog entered in the race, would be substituted for him. Race results were thus falsified.

position, while another views it over a wire drawn across the track from a point high up on the judge's box.¹²

The Japanese advances during 1940 brought the war nearer and nearer to Australia. A massive increase in the production of coal for the war effort was demanded by both the state and the federal governments. The demands of miners for an increase in wages under the threat of strike action received little sympathy from the public. However, miners were offered a 10% increase in December. Judge Drake Brockman in the Arbitration Court refused to sign off on the order while miners were threatening to strike. 'It is a criminal folly on the part of anybody in an essential industry at this moment to stop production,' he declared,¹³ The miners remained defiant and refused to return to work after the holidays until certain holiday claims were met by the management. On 20th January, they returned to work, The situation did not settle. In early September, Wonthaggi miners struck again over the dismissal of a clipper. The strike lasted a week. 1,200 mine employees returned to work after an investigation into the dismissal revealed that the lad had been given many chances to demonstrate that he could do the work and failed. A compromise was reached. Management agreed to find alternative work for the young man. That was the last strike for some years. The 'No strike in war time' policy was also adopted by the Wonthaggi miners, who would collaborate fully in the fight against the enemy, by maximising the extraction of coal. Retired miners returned to work to help out.

By the end of 1941, the threat of invasion was real and imminent¹⁴. Precautions against possible Japanese bombing raids were being taken. On December 12, 1941, a government decree enforcing blackout restrictions was issued. There was to be no racing under lights. A special permit was necessary to hold day meetings. The fear that this was the end of greyhound racing for the time being was widespread. The Wonthaggi Coursing Club reacted. On December 16, Wonthaggi was given the assurance by the Prime Minister, Mr Curtin, who had been contacted by J. McVicars, secretary of the Miners Union, that the federal government did not intend to discontinue racing in Wonthaggi. However, it was a state matter, he pointed out. Mr McVicars immediately wrote to Mr Bailey, the Chief Secretary, emphasising how important entertainment, especially greyhound racing was for the morale of miners, He then repeated what he had told the Prime Minister: the miners had agreed to forego annual leave and to make other sacrifices to ensure maximum production of coal, and in return they wanted permission for greyhound racing at Wonthaggi every Saturday. At the same time, when the miners, and the owners and trainers, learned of the government's ban on the transport of greyhounds by railways, they sprang into action. Stop work meetings, petitions were planned, even strikes. However, these were not necessary. Coal was too important for the war effort. The coal miners' support had to be assured. On Friday December 19, Mr McKenzie, MLA, was able to inform the Wonthaggi community that although there would be no races the next day, races would resume the Saturday after and there would also be races on Boxing Day and New Years Day, since, although not yet official, Wonthaggi had been given permission to hold daytime racing. The transport restrictions would also be lifted.

In February 1944, the Sporting Globe reported that, with the exception of Wonthaggi, speed meetings in regional areas were in decline. Because of the war effort these clubs were finding

¹² Weekly Times, March 15, 1941

¹³ The Telegraph (Brisbane), December 31, 1940,

¹⁴ In February 1942, the Japanese began their bombing raids over Darwin and other parts of Northern Australia.

it very difficult to attract enough dogs for races. This was not the case in Wonthaggi. In fact, to overcome the problem of handicapping dogs from outside Wonthaggi, young unknown dogs in particular, the local club 'adopted a domestic rule compelling all dogs to compete at least once on the circle track at the Sports Paradise before being allowed on a mark in a trophy race. This domestic rule was 'severely criticised by outside owners and trainers but it will remain in Wonthaggi under the present management.''¹⁵ The Wonthaggi club was clearly not afraid of dissuading potential clients.

'In spite of consistent attacks from inside and outside, speed coursing continues to fascinate all sports who have any love for a dog. Generally speaking, the sport is at its lowest ebb in the State today. Many clubs have gone out of existence since the war started. Wonthaggi with the co-operation of local owners and trainers has carried on.'¹⁶

The club was extremely confident that with the end of the war and the resumption of night racing it would reach further heights. There were more dogs in Wonthaggi than ever before and the reputation of the racing facilities in Wonthaggi continued to be a drawcard to outside owners and trainers.

The Resumption of Night Racing

As the war in the Pacific was coming to an end after the dropping of the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, work to prepare the Sports Paradise for night racing began. All the electric light system was overhauled and more up-to-date equipment installed. The whole area cleaned up for the occasion.

Since Wonthaggi produced its own electricity, it was given permission to hold night meetings some time before other clubs. In November 1945, racing under lights was resumed, not on Saturday nights, but on Friday nights. The traditional Boxing Day and New Years Day meetings were held and deemed a success. However, all was not well. From February to May 1946, no races were held at the Sports Paradise due to a disagreement over prizes, entry fees, handicapping and other rules between the management and the owners and trainers. By May, the impasse had been resolved and on Friday May 10, racing resumed. Support from local and metropolitan owners and trainers was assured. There was a large attendance and everything functioned perfectly, with the exception of the amplifying system that was too loud at the beginning and at the end of the meeting, but hardly audible during the racing itself, despite the desperate efforts of two experts who had been valiantly trying to solve the problem.

**Meet
Your friends
At the Sports Paradise**

Every Saturday night. Country people, locals and visitors from neighbouring towns exchange views with one another.

During the holidays the Sports Paradise was a great meeting place for all sports.

From the Powlett Express, Friday January 5th 1940

¹⁵ Powlett Express, February 4, 1944

¹⁶ Powlett Express, August 17, 1945

WEEK-END WONTHAGGI'S PLAYTIME



"It's Back To The Face on Monday but we'll forget it to-day." A typical Wonthaggi miner and companion have a mug of ale.



Relaxation on sunny beach at Cape Patterson, five miles from Wonthaggi. Week-end sunshine is golden to men who spend much of daylight life underground.



At Cape Patterson there is a well-established life-saving club, which is in its second season. Majority of members are miners. All team members qualified.



The Young People of Wonthaggi "swing it" with an enthusiastic skill worthy of a big city. The band is conducted by a woman. Two members are miners.



It May Produce A Caruso. In the meantime it's great fun. Every Saturday afternoon impromptu singing contests are held in the bar of the co-operative Club.



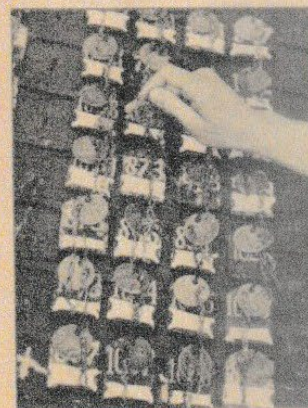
Wonthaggi's Bookmakers are kept busy at dog races. Pram in foreground belongs to mother who is backing her canine fancy.



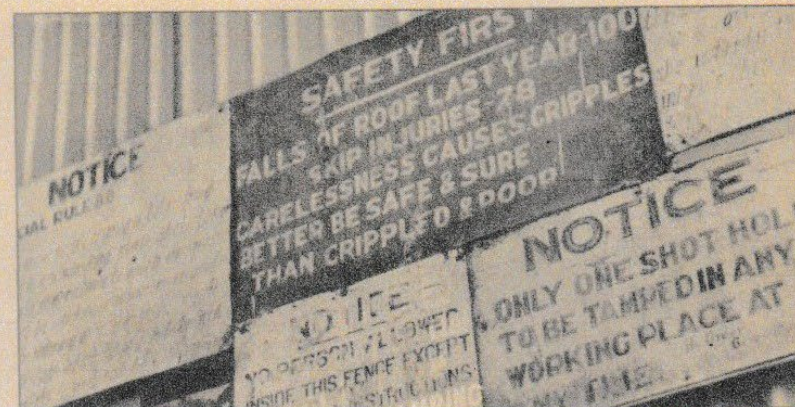
Father And Son own and train greyhounds. Dog racing was introduced to Wonthaggi about twelve months ago. To-day there are approximately 750 dogs training.



Dog Racing is conducted every Saturday night on an up-to-date track about a mile outside the town. Nightly attendance is about 800. Note braziers.



Another Week Begins . . . and back to work. Every man who goes below has a numbered identification disc. Replaced at end of shift.



When Safety First Means Something

An intimate Acquaintance with danger and death is apt to develop a contempt for both. These safety notices are not requests but blunt warnings. It is a knowledge of the danger of mining that produces the unobtrusive heroes to be found in every mining community. Wonthaggi has honor list of men who have thus faced death.

From Pix, January 13, 1940.

Note in the Wonthaggi's Bookmakers picture a sign that not only men went to the dogs. In the comment to the middle picture titled "Father and Son", note the number of dogs in training: 750. In the next picture to the right (Dog Racing), men, women and children huddle around one of the 6 braziers in the Sports Paradise.