

## **PLOD ESSAY JULY 2025**

### **Greyhound Racing in Wonthaggi (Part3)**

#### **The Demise of the ‘Dog Course’**

##### **From Sports Paradise to Colliery Park**

Following the end of the war and the resumption of night racing there was a boom in the number of greyhound racing clubs being established, especially in the metropolitan area. Country clubs suffered, including Wonthaggi. In an effort to deal with this problem, more buses were organized from Melbourne to Wonthaggi to transport dogs, trainers, owners and spectators. There was a bus from Traralgon via Leongatha and Inverloch. A town bus served Wonthaggi's spectators and punters. Notwithstanding all these efforts, the quality of the racing was not what it used to be, and patronage dropped.<sup>1</sup> The big bookmakers preferred the metropolitan tracks to the regional ones. Pressure was put on the Cain Labor government to reform greyhound racing in Victoria. Mr W.G. McKenzie MLA, at the time, Minister for Agriculture, an active patron and defender of the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club, was heavily involved in the process. As the proposed Dog Racing Bill was being discussed at the 1947 annual meeting of the National Coursing Association, Mr Gannon, supported by Mr McKenzie, argued that metropolitan and Geelong clubs should be prevented from holding meetings on Thursdays and Fridays. ‘Country coursing was wilting under fierce city opposition. Wonthaggi meetings had been sadly depleted by clash meetings nearer to Melbourne,’<sup>2</sup> Mr Gannon declared. The motion was ruled out of order. Little was done at the meeting to deal with the problem. The Wonthaggi coursing club changed from Friday racing to Saturday and then back again in its attempts to deal with the decline.

Four months after the appeal for help at the NCA annual meeting, the Powlett Express, an article penned most probably by Mr Gannon himself announces that the Dog Racing Bill he had fought for would soon be passed, since the Country Party had finally agreed to support the it.<sup>3</sup> When passed, the bill would give the government more control over greyhound racing and the proposed law would limit metropolitan meetings to 52 a year, plus a few charity meetings. The writer of the article predicted that bigger and better programs would be held in the country, bigger prize money would attract owners, punters and bookmakers to Wonthaggi and other country centres. He foresaw that the ‘dog bill’ would come into operation in January 1948. The writer of the article was also looking forward to the introduction of the mechanical lure to abolish the current, often cruel and sometimes barbaric system [of the live hare and the pacer dog].<sup>4</sup>

Mr Gannon would not live to see the proposed reforms enacted. On the front page of the same edition of the Powlett Express, an obituary written by his son Tom was published. On

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<sup>1</sup> The population of Wonthaggi dropped from over 7,000 in 1942 to 4,280 in 1949; that of the Shire of Bass from 4,650 in 1942 to 3,829 in 1949, according to the Victorian Municipal Directory.

<sup>2</sup> The Age, February 19, 1947

<sup>3</sup> Mr Gannon was to a great extent responsible for the introduction of compulsory ear-marking of greyhounds, which was an attempt to stop ‘ringers’, the substitution of one dog for another.

<sup>4</sup> In November 1947, the Cain Labor government was heavily defeated. W.G. McKenzie, a proponent of the Dog Bill, was also defeated. The Wonthaggi community no longer had a member in parliament who championed Wonthaggi causes. The Dog Racing Bill was only passed in 1955.

Wednesday, June 25, his beloved father had suddenly passed away. Mr Gannon, in his early fifties, died after a night at the fights at the Union Theatre, where he watched one of the sports he loved with his son Tom and his friends Syd and Mack. According to the article:

You couldn't have wished for anything better than the feast for fight fans which was provided on Wednesday night. Indeed, every bout was worth watching.<sup>5</sup>

Mr Gannon must have been a very happy man just before his death. The Dog Racing Bill news promised that his beloved dog course would once again have the chance to become the sports paradise he had envisaged. The fighting which he watched ringside was exciting. He loved a bet. He recommended that his friends back 'Red' and Jack McRae, which they did. Both McRaes fought valiantly against strong fighters and won. He must have been a very excited and satisfied man as he walked the short distance home down the back lane. He collapsed and died just as he was getting into bed.

At the bottom of the page, next to the obituary written by his son Tom, was the following notice headlined 'NO DOGS', 'The directors of the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club have decided to cancel tonight's meeting in view of the sudden death of the President (T.J. Gannon). Entries stand for next Friday's meeting.'<sup>6</sup> One wonders whether Mr Gannon would have been in accord with the cancellation of the meeting. There is no news of the funeral or of the many expressions of appreciation of the immense contribution 'Old Tom' had made to the Wonthaggi community for over two decades. The family, or Tom himself, most probably did not want any fuss being made of him. 'Young' Tom, 22 years old, had to take over. At the Friday, July 7, coursing meeting, a minute's silence was observed, after a short but moving address by John Mc Vicars, the club's commentator, longtime friend, and comrade in arms. Tom had been the main driving force behind the establishment of the Sports Paradise,<sup>7</sup> the president of the WSCC since the beginning. His wide knowledge of the sport, his connections, his expertise as a journalist, his love of the sport, his decency and his determination to face and overcome any difficulties that came in the way of the club would be sorely missed.

For the next six months racing continued every Friday night, with a few cancellations along the way. In early January 1948, at a meeting of directors of the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club, 'pleasure was expressed at the way in which the affairs of the club have been managed by Veronica [sister] and Tom Gannon for the last six months. Insufficient time to attend to the publication of the Powlett Express and the affairs of the Speed Coursing Club caused them to sever their connection with the administration side of greyhound racing at Wonthaggi.'<sup>8</sup> Jack 'China' Williamson, the secretary, took over the affairs temporarily while a permanent solution was found. Racing continued with some cancellations until September and then everything stopped.

In the November 19, 1948, edition of the Powlett Express, on the front page, in bold, the following appeared:

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<sup>5</sup> Powlett Express, June 27, 1947

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> See Part 1

<sup>8</sup> Powlett Express, January 9, 1948.

### **Coursing sold – racing again**

**The WSCC Pty. Ltd. has after ten years use of it sold the “Sports Paradise”. Shareholders at the time of sale were: Mrs V.T. Gannon, Messrs H. R. Banks, D.J. Hade, J.A. Williamson and J. Winslett. With Mr Jack McKenna, secretary of the powerful Sandown Park Speed Coursing Club, the sale was effected. Mr McKenna, who has had a lifetime association with coursing, intends to renovate the place and conduct the first meeting in two months in December.**

### **Colliery Park’s New Promising Lease of Life**

True to their words the new owners set out to repair and improve the course and restore it to its former glory. The grass was cut, the ground was cleared and rotary hoed, the buildings whitewashed and painted, stands similar to those at Sandown Park were built. Plans were made to build a big new grandstand to replace the big shelter shed where bookmakers laid their bets. Sand was spread on the tracks, in the run-off yard, and in the kennel and marshalling areas. All the electrical equipment was checked, repaired and improved. Local craftsmen were employed to carry out the work. Jim Bentick, a local trainer and breeder, who lived nearby, was appointed caretaker. The works took longer than anticipated. At the end of January, the first meeting on the restored Sports Paradise, now called Colliery Park, was held. The 48 meetings held in its first year of operation were deemed highly successful from all points of view. Greyhound racing was once again booming in Wonthaggi. The Saturday meetings were well-attended; the races were professionally run with hardly any incidents. The Boxing Day and New Years Day meetings had the carnival atmosphere of old. Trainers walking dogs were to be seen all over the town at any time of the day. Dogs bred in Wonthaggi were sold for high prices.

### **The Futile Struggle to Survive**

Colliery Park, however, did not prove to be the financial success the management hoped for when they purchased the course. Local patronage decreased as the population of the town fell to around 4,500 people, with perhaps another 1,000 in the North Wonthaggi area. Investment in the town was minimal as the spectre of the closing of the mine hovered over the community’s head. The seven-weeklong general coal strike, which began on June 27, 1949, and ended on August 15, led to economic hardship all over Australia. Since Wonthaggi miners already enjoyed most of the working conditions other miners were striking for, Wonthaggi lost the sympathy of the general public it had gained during and immediately after the Second World War. Although greyhound racing continued during the strike as part of the unions’ policy to maintain the morale of the striking miners, night racing stopped for at least the last three weeks when electricity production at the State coal mine powerhouse was halted. The Premier Holloway’s threat to close the mine and transfer workers to the Latrobe Valley sounded much more serious than in the past. Since good jobs were available elsewhere, many families moved away.

Even though the state was converting its transport system to diesel, electric and oil-burning systems, coal was still very much needed and in short supply in the state. To some extent, the miners leaving the town were replaced by the second wave of mostly Italian migrants. However, they were not interested in the dogs; they worked hard to buy homes and bring their families to Wonthaggi. In these conditions, the new management did not continue investing in the dog course, which slowly deteriorated. From 1952 on, other courses, including those in the metropolitan area began organizing races on Saturdays, which seriously affected Wonthaggi; it

had had a monopoly of prime-time Saturday night racing. As well as the preceding threats to the dog course, the owner of the park anticipated that, with the passing of the long-proposed Dog Racing Bill, presumably in the near future, huge investments would be needed to adapt it for mechanical hare racing. Mr Cooper, the owner of Colliery Park was not prepared to make this investment. In July 1953, after four and a half years of losses, especially during the winter months, Mr Cooper decided to discontinue conducting meetings at the Wonthaggi course and to concentrate on renovating and developing Sandown. Soon after, Colliery Park was put up for sale.

### **The Changing Face of the Old Sports Paradise**

Since Colliery Park was on crown land, the selling price of the course was set at £1,000 pounds.<sup>9</sup> The newly formed Wonthaggi branch of the Victorian Owners, Trainers and Breeders Association<sup>10</sup> showed some interest but, unable to raise the finance, soon abandoned the idea. As well as the £1,000 purchase price, at least another £500 would be required to make the necessary improvements to render the course's infrastructure race worthy. No other interest was shown. In May 1954, Mr McKenna announced that the coursing buildings and infrastructure, some of which had been vandalised in the meantime, would be auctioned. The auction, conducted by C.T. Akers in March 1955, was well attended, especially by local farmers. To the satisfaction of Mr McKenna, £ 600 was made. The licence was sold to Warragul for an undisclosed price. The Club relinquished its lease of the grounds. In a very short time, the buildings and most of the infrastructure were removed. The starting boxes of the straight, however, remained until after the 1956 Olympics, the objects of games for some North Wonthaggi children.

The closure of the Wonthaggi Greyhound Course did not result in any public outcry from the Wonthaggi Borough Council or from any other public institution. It was accepted with resignation, another sign of the depressed state Wonthaggi was in at the time. The opponents of gambling and the supporters of animal rights must have been pleased. However, Wonthaggi lost an important industry at a time when it needed all the industries it could attract and hold onto<sup>11</sup> to stop the departure of so many of its citizens. Although the dog course had very few permanent employees, especially at its prime, many local businesses benefited from its existence. Important also to Wonthaggi was the almost weekly publicity it received all over Victoria, especially in the Melbourne metropolitan area, as meetings were advertised, results published and commented on by newspapers such as the very popular Sporting Globe. The dog course, the breeding and training of dogs, the racing also brought joy, meaning and connection to many Wonthaggians.

Plans to build houses on the ten-acre crown land site were abandoned, as was the proposal by the Wonthaggi Rotary Club to develop the area as a park and playground. The 300 17-year-old trees along McKenzie Street would form the basis of a beautiful park, the proponents argued. It would be a beauty spot at the entrance of the town. For the next few years, however, the area

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<sup>9</sup> This is the amount that my father paid for our house on a double block opposite the dog course. According to Measuring Worth Australia, the relative income value corresponds to \$ 177,000 in 2025.

<sup>10</sup> The president of the Wonthaggi Branch of the OTBA was Fred Booth, the vice-presidents J. Wilson Snr, C. Haines. The rest of the committee had also all been heavily involved in the local greyhound scene.

<sup>11</sup> Wonthaggi bred greyhounds attracted high prices when put up for sale. In 1944, Powlett Lad was sold for £175, which corresponds to \$72,920.00 in 2025, according to Relative Worth Australia, income value. In 1948 Chris Haines and Jim Mosele sold Sarafand for £500 (\$171,260.00, source, as above)

laid bare, and returned to scrub. It was used a couple of times by visiting circuses. In 1958, as part of the decentralization program, the Wonthaggi Cotton Mills was granted land to erect their factory at the southern end of the old dog course. In time, other factories were built on the site. In 1970 a modern motel/hotel with a restaurant and a drive-in bottle shop was built at the northern end, with squash courts at the back. For many years the motel/hotel was the centre of the music scene in Wonthaggi. Famous bands came to play there. Concerts, wedding banquets and parties were held in the spacious dining room. Squash became a very popular sport in the town. At the northeastern end a caravan park was formed, a place where many who could not afford better accommodation made their home, and visitors could stay short term.

### **The Lingering Legacy of the ‘Dog Course’**

For some years in the 1950s and 1960s, one could regularly see trainers of greyhounds walking their dogs around the streets of Wonthaggi. What is now sometimes called the ‘Fat Track’ down McKenzie Street, along White Road and then back into town via the South Dudley Road was a favourite route. A sand training track with kennels was built on Davidson’s farm on Cape Paterson Road.<sup>12</sup> Wonthaggi greyhounds continued to race at Sandown, Bendigo, Warragul, Sale, and from 1974 at Cranbourne and other tracks around the state. Fred Booth, Chris Haines and other ‘dog men’ regularly made the sometimes long and difficult trips to race their dogs. While most owners, trainers and breeders gradually ‘gave the game away’, Fred Booth moved on to Cranbourne and became a legend of the sport.

Born on June 22, 1914, Fred Booth, the son of a miner, was given his first greyhound when he was five years old. It was back in the coursing days when the miners and their greyhounds would board the train at Wonthaggi to race at Dalyston. He even had a couple of greyhounds while operating the Astor Cafe in Wonthaggi during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Booth became a greyhound industry jack-of-all-trades, and a champion for the sport’s ‘battlers’. “He held a bookmaker’s licence for more than 50 years, that was his living,” said his son Les, of Cranbourne. “I was ‘on the bag’ and he would often tell me, ‘I’m keeping you in a job’. “But all he really wanted to do was help the greyhound man. He didn’t care what it cost him.”<sup>13</sup>

Fred was a foundation member of the Cranbourne Greyhound Racing Club. He served as a committee member and as president for eight years. Fred, ‘the doyen of stud masters for more than 50 years’<sup>14</sup> died in 1996, aged 82, and was posthumously inducted into the Greyhound Hall of Fame.

As you enter the town now and go round the roundabout, the imposing Bunnings Warehouse and car park dominate. The makings of a park in the triangle of land just before Bunnings, foreseen as a playground when the Sports Paradise was established in 1938, is a most welcome improvement, as are the recently planted trees on the eastern side of the road. Even if you

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<sup>12</sup> Terry Haines remembers the track being built. A 200 yard or so straight track was levelled in one of Les Davidson’s paddocks, double fenced and then sand, mined from a nearby sand hill, was spread on the track to form a suitable racing surface. State of the art starting boxes were installed. A makeshift mechanical hare system was also improvised. Chris Haines and friends trained their dogs there. Many winners were trained on this track.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.grv.org.au/racing-hall-of-fame/pioneers/fred-booth/>

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

stopped and looked carefully you would see no sign of the Sports Paradise envisioned by Mr Gannon and his associates. The 'dog course' is now a distant and fading memory for the few 'oldies' who remember going there to sell *Heralds*<sup>15</sup> and to have a hot milk coffee, or, as Terry Haines remembers, to do errands for his brother Chris, as well as for the above-mentioned Fred Booth. Ron Gilmour also remembers walking dogs to the starting boxes for his uncle Fred Booth as a boy. Lino Cuman remembers climbing over the fence with the Moresco boys just to see the dogs racing.

Perhaps it's time for some sort of monument to be erected on the small park opposite Bunnings to acknowledge the existence of the Sports Paradise, which brought joy and excitement to many thousands of people while it existed.

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## More than just a dog course

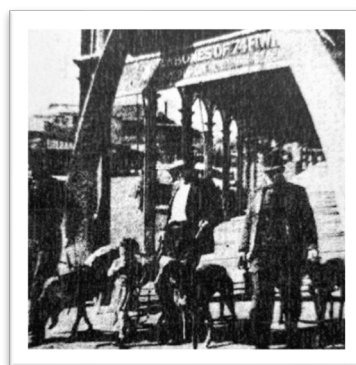
### "JOE" DAVIDSON REMEMBERED

You could have heard a pin drop when, after making very nice remarks about speed coursing fan, Joe Davidson, who died during the holidays, commentator Jack McVicars called for a minute's silence that those present might meditate upon the qualities of a man who is respectfully referred to as "old Joe." Actually, "Joe" was but 56 when he passed away. So had did "Joe" suffer from rheumatics that he could straighten neither of his legs. Still he managed to putt along. When greyhound racing came to Wonthaggi about ten years ago, "Joe" got a new lease on life. He took a keen interest in the game, was a regular attendant, owned and bred dogs, the training of which was attended to by his son, Les. The best dog "Joe" owned was Grey Ribbon. There has never been in Wonthaggi a faster dog for fifty yards than Grey Ribbon. No matter what his opposition, Grey Ribbon could always lead them early in a graded race. I've seen him five yards behind, and in front gone fifty yards! Grey Ribbon was only a little dog but he brought "Joe" a ton of happiness. "Joe" was doubly proud of "Timmy" because he was the best of a Grey Friar-Nora Toilette litter which produced Gravi Pilot (which beat Loyal Native the week before Loyal Native won the Melbourne Cup), White Pilot (with which Geoff Jongebloed brought off three betting coups at Wonthaggi), Nancy Toilette (winner of a couple, and dam of Roy Glen) and Nora's Image, a slow beginner which won half a dozen races. On "Joe's" property, out along the Cape Paterson road a hoola was put in. A paddock fence was removeable, and for quite a while "Joe's" hoola was a popular Sunday afternoon outing with Wonthaggi coursing men. Blessed with a happy nature, which seems to be a possession of most of those less fortunate persons who are crippled or incapacitated, "Joe" is indeed missed by his coursing pals. T.J.G.

Powlett Express, January 16, 1948



Father's Lad, owned by W. Taberner, trained by J. Rowe Winner, Hurdle and Flat Races all over Victoria.



NLA Trove, The Herald, 25 October 1946

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Box: Box 13, Sandown Park, Springvale

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sheon Facilities and Kiosk, Modern Kennel and Parade  
ounds, World's Fastest Camera Finish, Roomy Car Parks.  
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Powlett Express, 19 March 1953

**AUCTION SALE**

A/c. Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club

**MONDAY, MARCH 21, 1955, 11 a.m. sharp**

**ON THE COURSE**

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For full particulars and inspection, apply—  
**C. T. Akers, Auctioneer ('phone 37)**

Powlett Express, March 1955

<sup>15</sup> The Herald was an evening broadsheet newspaper published in Melbourne, Australia, from 3 January 1840 to 5 October 1990.