

London greyhound racing goes to the dogs



Greyhounds compete on the track during an evening of greyhound racing at Wimbledon Stadium in south London. — AFP photos

Once a hugely popular working man's sport, Saturday marks the final demise of greyhound racing in London, closing a chapter of British social culture in the capital. More than 20 dog tracks have been dotted around London since modern greyhound racing was introduced to Britain in the 1920s, drawing in punters for a cheap evening's entertainment.

Wimbledon Stadium is the last one standing, but it, too, now faces the bulldozers—a victim of cultural shifts and the city's housing crisis. The timeworn ground, built in 1928, is set to be replaced by around 600 flats to service the soaring London property market, and a new 11,000-seater home for third-tier football team AFC Wimbledon. At the penultimate racing event, followers of the competitive sport lamented the closure.

Dressed in a flat cap, a beige overcoat, a blue spotted silk scarf and a yellow tie with greyhounds on, trackside bookmaker John Henwood, 68, has taken bets at almost every Wimbledon race meeting for 34 years. "It will be a really, really sad loss," he told AFP. "In days of yore, it was perceived as a cloth-cap sport enjoyed by the working man," he said. "But now we have a cosmopolitan clientele right across the age and social spectrum. And a big proportion of female attendees, which you didn't get before."

Value of land

Once the mechanised hare was introduced from the United States in 1926, greyhound racing in Britain boomed in now-demolished, giant London stadiums like White City and the original Wembley. Catford closed in 2003 and Walthamstow in 2008, leaving Wimbledon—home of the English Derby, the most prestigious race—the last venue with a London address.

An all-round cheaper alternative to horse racing, dog race meetings traditionally drew the working class as they took place in the city after work. Elsewhere in Britain, around 30 grounds are still going, although the sport has been in decline since betting shops were legalised in 1961, meaning greyhound tracks were no longer one of the few places to bet legally. "None of the tracks closed because they weren't popular; they all closed because of the value of the land," Henwood said. London land is at a premium. The average property price in the wider Wimbledon

area surpassed £500,000 (\$625,000, 575,000 euros) in December.

Fizzypop Hazard, Mystical Charlie

Around 1,500 people filled the stadium's only remaining open stand to watch the penultimate set of 12 races, run every 15 minutes, for the entry price of £7. The racegoers are a mixture of old-timers, newcomers, hipsters, groups on a tipsy night out and families, some with babies. Many dressed up for the occasion, with men wearing blazers and shiny shoes and women in evening dresses.

"It's the whole vibe. It's cheap, sweet and fun. You have your £2 bet and have a laugh and you're so close up," said Theresa Ajid, who was trackside with her husband and young children. A fanfare announces each race and the six greyhounds are then paraded along the finishing straight. Punters size them up and rush to the bookmakers' stands to place bets, pint of beer and race card in one hand, banknote in the other.

They choose between greyhounds with colourful names such as Tashas Wee Nasty, Lenson Rambo, Oo Wants It, Jumeirah Maximus,

Art of Illusion, Fizzypop Hazard and Mystical Charlie. Once in the traps, the stadium lights drop and some dogs bark in anticipation. A bell rings, the traps snap open and the dogs burst out, chasing after the artificial hare, flicking up the sand off the track as they sprint past. Pressed right against the trackside fence, people cheer on their favourites as the greyhounds complete a 480-metre lap in 30 seconds.

'Chunk of history'

Most bets are small-scale but in the last race of the night, a stag party piles in all their remaining cash on 10/1 outsider Office Hazard, picked by the groom-to-be. As it triumphs, they erupt with joy, wildly bounce around cheering with beer flung in the air, before heading off into the night with their £850 winnings. "The excitement is unreal. I'm totally addicted," said pensioner Fred, 78, with the Racing Post newspaper tucked under his arm.

Fred, who declined to give his surname, said: "It's a crying shame. Eight million people and there'll not be a dog track in London. That's it; end of the line." Darren, 40, said he had been coming to the stadium for 20 years. "We're losing



A race goer checks the odds at the greyhound racing track.

a chunk of history here. Once it's gone, you won't get it back."

Online betting shift

"This is an institution, not just a greyhound track," said the stadium's general manager Keith Hallinan. "Fewer people are coming to the tracks. People can watch on their phone and bet," he said. "But people don't realize if they don't come to the tracks, there's not going to be greyhound racing." Around 100 people work at the stadium and have been looking for new jobs. Hallinan said Saturday's farewell would be "very emotional". "We're not looking at it as a celebration but we are looking at it as a night to remember." — AFP



Race goers watch the track during an evening of greyhound racing at Wimbledon Stadium.