

Dogs in a hurry

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Stubby-legged racers take off

ROSCOE, a piebald dachshund, was the runt of his litter. No one wanted to buy him. So the breeder gave him to Jeremy Dingle, who soon realised that he had a special pup, now a top dog in the dachshund-racing world. Fresh from victory in Lubbock, Texas, Roscoe was a potential winner as he prepared this week for the semi-final of the Wiener Dog Races in Buda.

Dachshunds, sometimes known as wiener or sausage dogs, are one of the most popular breeds in America. Racing the little creatures got a boost in 1993 when it was featured in a beer advertisement. Now there are dozens of races each year, mostly in southern and western states. (New England eschews the pastime, although there are fancy-dress parties for dachshunds in New York's Washington Square Park.) The largest event, the Wienerschnitzel Wiener Nationals in southern California, sponsored by a chain of hot-dog restaurants, attracts tens of thousands of visitors.

A wiener dog at full throttle, flying down the lane with his ears inside out and tongue flapping, is a sight worth seeing. And the races return some civic benefits. The Buda event, in which no fewer than 468 dachshunds were taking part, is sponsored by the local Lions Club and has proved to be their best fund-raiser. Proceeds go to scholarships, summer camps and eye care.

The Dachshund Club of America is opposed to wiener-dog racing on the ground that it is hard on the dogs. But at this point the competitions are hardly cutthroat, and the racers are pets first and foremost. In Buda, one owner bragged that her dachshund could catch a bee in its mouth, and release it unharmed.

The young sport is even the subject of a new documentary film, "Wiener Takes All". Shane MacDougall, the documentarian, says that people track him down every week for advice on how to start their own races. Researching the film during the phase of the Iraq war when anti-French sentiment led some Americans to call their chips freedom-fries, he stumbled upon a historical coincidence: during the first world war patriotic owners renamed their dachshunds "liberty pups". "I think we just need to send more wiener dogs to the United Nations," suggests Mr MacDougall.

Illustration by Claudio Munoz

