

A racetrack filled only with memories

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Summary - John Thomas, now a security guard at the Multnomah Greyhound Park, recalls its, and his, glory days there

Facing the sandy track dotted with weeds, John Thomas still hears the roar.

"Come on 6! Come on 6!" he recalls the crowd screaming. His rough, ruddy face turns toward the empty colossus that was the Multnomah Greyhound Park, the West Coast's last operating dog race track.

"It's spooked," he adds.

He isn't seeing things. Working 50 years in a noisy, crowded place suddenly gone quiet does that to you. Especially when you live in a trailer on the property.

Through the years Thomas held a dozen jobs at this track, including race judge. Now, at 79, he is the security force at the cavernous building that held thousands of greyhound races but closed in 2004. He watches for vandals, thieves, graffiti taggers or kids simply looking for a place to skateboard.

As he walks the building with his wife, Ronna, by day and night, Thomas reminisces about dogs, good times and friends gone by. He knows, though, that this may be the last few months he can see spirits of a lost sport stir. Two Lake Oswego developers, Thomas' employers, want to transform the vacant Wood Village site into a casino and entertainment park. The greyhound-adoption center left several months ago.

"I don't have to do this, but it's home to me," he says, his face growing bright. "So many memories here."

Off to the races

Thomas was born in Newberg and married into a greyhound family, tending to and racing dogs. That led him to MGP months after it opened in 1957, working on the starting track.

"It was full," Thomas says. "Businessmen, governors, basketball stars. They ran a race, and people were jumping up and down. You could hear a heck of a noise."

Now the track encloses a circular infield overgrown with wild grass, blackberry bushes and sow-thistle. The scoreboard still towers among the trees. Thomas and his springer spaniel, Cowboy, begin the rounds, and the memories flood out.

Trailers with prized dogs once parked in the lot, and teenage "grooms" led the dogs to the scales. Thomas enters the grooms' room, where lockers still bear the names of the last batch of grooms. Next door, race numbers hang on a wall.

Thomas, who also worked as a paddock judge for 10 years, circles, showing how the grooms walked the dogs. He pauses in the middle. "Their spirits are still going," he says. "Sometimes you'd be standing and there's a movement over here. Then you look, and there's nothing there."

He heads out to check the track and main building, with its expansive glass facade.

"People say, 'Aren't you afraid to go into that big building? There's so many hiding places there,'" he says. "No. I've been here so much. It's like going to my house."

Bearing a set of keys in his large, wrinkled hand, Thomas unlocks one of the main building's doors. The large, churchlike structure, supported with concrete beams, smells musty. About 60 betting terminals, a few restrooms, a bar and concession stands glare emptiness. Cottonwood and dust crunch underfoot. Bullet casings lay scattered by

SWAT teams that used the facility for practice.

"I had such a great time here, I had so many friends," he says. "And now, everything so dusty."

Upstairs, the often-sold-out grandstand is impeccable, bright red and clean. The view is gorgeous --the track with the small mountains in Washington as backdrop. Birds chirp.

Behind the grandstand hang frames that once held about 500 TV monitors for simulcasting. Die-hard betters could watch races via satellite from Texas, Tennessee or Florida.

A new view

The judge's stand has the best view --all of east Multnomah County --but it requires a little courage. It hangs suspended from the roof, and the floor creaks. Tables and chairs lie scattered with copies of The Greyhound Review and dog yearbooks. Here, Thomas worked as a judge for 15 years. Now it's the best place for a security check.

He can see where, before he became guard five years ago, vandals broke several windows in the facade. Homeless people later tried to sneak in to sleep, meth addicts stole wires and taggers sprayed graffiti, Thomas says. But mostly, it's children who want to explore the abandoned building or skate on the smooth tarmac out front.

He tells them it's private property then takes them out the main gate. "We haven't had any trouble with the kids," he says. "I wish we could set something up for them, like skating. But it's a liability."

Thomas says he hopes the greyhound park can return to serving the community. Magna Entertainment Corp., the park's last operator, placed a covenant on the property that said no one could race dogs for 25 years.

Thomas supports the casino, hotel and restaurants proposal, for which organizers plan to start gathering signatures this summer to get it on the ballot. "I hate to see them build condominiums out here," he says. "It could be an entertainment center that everyone could enjoy."

But for now, Thomas continues his rounds. He feeds birds and squirrels. Ronna gathers plastic bags that blow from a nearby supermarket. After dinner, they'll again walk the property. It's good exercise, he says.

Back in his office, Thomas thumbs through a box of photos, most black-and-white and fading, of winning dogs with names like He's My Man and Desert Fire. "I miss the dogs," says Thomas, who once kept 30 to 40 at home. "I have a love for greyhounds, because they have been good to me."

But now he's used to the emptiness and quiet. After all, he's retired.

"Everything has its time," Ronna says, "and then there's time for it to be gone."

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