



The text below appeared in Melbourne's The Age newspaper on July 10, written by Clem Bastow in her column On The Town, describing her first visit to the greyhounds....

Clem Bastow / Courtesy of The Age.

Given a lifelong love of all things "sighthound" (greyhounds and whippets to the layman), and a tendency to jump up and down like a lunatic when my own greyhound-whippet cross runs around the oval, it was rather a surprise to realise I had never attended a greyhound race.

"The dishlickers", as they were known in my family (and many others) were a thing of rumour and myth; a cultural phenomenon minted somewhere between The Castle and The Simpsons' Santa's Little Helper. We used to joke about getting a racing greyhound and calling it "My True Fancy".

So, when it was suggested we attend the night races at The Meadows greyhound racing club, and visions of hundreds of greyhounds wearing coats and wagging their tails flooded my mind, I was powerless to resist.

The Meadows is one of Melbourne's premier greyhound racing association. Tucked away in the middle of a wiggly warren of industrial estates, it glows like a miniaturised MCG when you approach it on a Saturday evening for the weekly night races. The grounds are like a miniature Flemington: flowerbeds and manicured lawns surround the 450-metre track.

A small exercise yard to the right of the building offers the chance to view the runners up close, and witness firsthand the mysteries of pre-race ritual (one Drizaboned trainer-breeder stood with his dog's head in his hands, whispering unheard encouragement).

Once inside, the atmosphere is genial: kids getting their faces painted in the foyer; groups of blokes bonding over beers (in their pink official Meadows stubby-holders, no less); older couples sitting contemplating the form guide in a meditative and, no doubt, long-held weekly ritual. Unlike the often hard-drinking atmosphere of the (horse) races, the mood at The Meadows is family-friendly.

Downstairs a pair of lovely Country Women's Association types dish up canteen fare - potato cakes, hot pies, sandwiches - while upstairs a dining room offers sit-down meals for those keen to make a night of it (\$35 a person includes a three-course buffet, race admission and bar facilities); the sweeping views of the racecourse and Melbourne skyline are a bonus.

But there's one thing we came for, and that's greyhounds, and I nearly squeak with delight when a classically Australian (recorded) announcement heralds that "The greyhounds are on the track". Every 20 or so minutes the punters spill out into the cold Melbourne night, rugged up and watch "the doggies" do their thing.

The "lure is rolling" and they shoot away, tearing around the track, then finally coming to a standstill near the catching pen, where - rather appealingly - they all stand around wagging their tails. Indeed, there was a lot of tail wagging sighted; if anything, the dogs seemed in danger of being loved to death (and not just by those who'd backed a winner).

One of the most impressive things about Greyhound Racing Victoria is its dedication to finding homes for retired racing greyhounds, and both the Meadows and GRV offer copious links to GRV's Greyhound Adoption Program (gap.grv.org.au), as well as encouraging owners to keep "post-racing" greyhounds as pets. It certainly puts some of the more cloak-and-dagger aspects of the horseracing industry to shame.

After spending a night at The Meadows, you come away with new-found respect for the sport of greyhound racing (every bit as exciting as their pony peers), and a desire to hug and kiss as many of the hounds as is humanly possible. If it weren't for GAP, there'd be reports of a serial track invader at greyhound race meets, who was last spotted writing for On The Town.

THE FACTS:

Where: The Meadows (night races Saturdays), 80 Northcorp Boulevard, Broadmeadows. Most Victorian clubs also offer night or twilight races.

How much: \$5 entry

Great dining packages are available every Saturday night at The Meadows. For more information, call 9355 5222 or go to www.themeadows.org.au