

# EAST END LONDON AT PLAY

By RALPH D. PAINE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY C. PILKINGTON

ON our way to George Pacey's whippet handicap at "Omerton near 'Ackney," my friend and bureau of East End information, "Brummy" Meadows, pulled from his pocket a crumpled sheet of paper, and used it to call my attention to a sturdy young man who filled a small street stall by the curb.

"He's a cats-meat man," said "Brummy." "An' seein' the likes of him reminds me o' this bit of paper, wot is a challenge I received by mail from another cats-meat artist, and in a manner of speakin', I must be fixin' up a match before long."

He read the document aloud, halting at a few troublous spots:

"Hearing so much of the ability of Jim Belcher, of Shoreditch, and his defiance of all comers, I, Jack Smith, of Camberwell, hereby challenges him to cut and skewer one half hundred weight of cats-meat for any part of ten pounds."

"A cats-meat man serves meat to his customers' cats," "Brummy" explained condescendingly, "an' it takes a bit of skill, d' you see, to cut and skewer it proper like, an' of course, there's bound to be bettin' an' challengin' in it, just like everything else in the East End. This here whippet racin' is a big sport, bigger than linnetsing', but there's many others. I was goin' to take you down to see some oldtime haddock-splittin' for a purse, down at Billingsgate market, d'you see, but when I asked my friend about it, he backs out, sayin', like a bat-headed old fool, that it was one o' them Yankee tricks to steal our way o' doin' things, and he says he'll be damned if he'll show you one bloody, solitary haddock. In a manner o' speakin', he don't know no better. I told him you ain't in the haddock-splittin' trade, but he's as stubborn as a coster's moke, so he is."

This was disappointing, for I had hoped to see old Toddy Ray split haddock. Besides this skilled calling, he is the finest old sportsman in the East End. A few weeks ago he ran third in a distance race, against a formidable field of suburban talent, and

Toddy Ray is in his seventy-eighth year. There was consolation, however, in the pilgrimage to an afternoon of whippet racing as the East Ender follows it, which is with ardent joy, and all the shillings and crowns he can scratch together for the "bookies." This sport of dog racing first flourished in the "Black Country," and on the Lancashire moors, where it is the most conspicuous pastime and excitement of the British artisan and miner. Long ago, it invaded London, and almost any week in the year you can find the whippets and their following, either at Homerton, or at Bow, where Mrs. Conner manages the handicaps.

The East Ender may be as brutal and sodden as you like to call him, but in his sports there is a streak of sentiment and harmlessness. His whippets run for the love of it, without rough handling or compulsion, and the sport is far more humane than its aristocratic cousin, coursing with greyhounds, where many hares must die each day, after torturing flights for life.

We reached George Pacey's grounds so early in the afternoon that no more than a dozen dogs were waiting. Mr. Pacey sat on a high bank, overlooking a cricket match in a nearby field, and to him slouched a lowering and collarless youth, with two whippets at his heels. The rubicund Pacey lost interest in the cricket match, and plunged into a muddy torrent of dialogue, that supplied a rousing introduction to the afternoon's sport:

"You —, — you," said the collarless young man with considerable heat, "Your —handicapper gave my dog two yards the worst of it last week, because your — brother had a dog in the same heat. I'm — if I ever run another dog in your — crooked matches. I'll start a handicap myself that will draw every — entry you've got, for they're all sick of your — dirty work, you —"

"You can take your — dogs, and your — self, and go start another — handicap," replied Mr. Pacey, "and you can

starve and rot tryin' it, for all I care, you——”

When mortal combat seemed inevitable, Mr. Meadows drew me away and explained apologetically:

“It's only a mild bit of argument over the runnin' of a dog at the last handicap. No harm intended, d' you see. They're the best of friends. The young man will

rated by past performances. The novice wondered how and why the dogs should run at consistent speed along this track without barriers of any kind, and what could be their incentive. The whippets themselves soon began to hint at a solution.

They were lithe and active little brutes, plainly bred from Italian greyhound stock, although a few showed cross-strains of



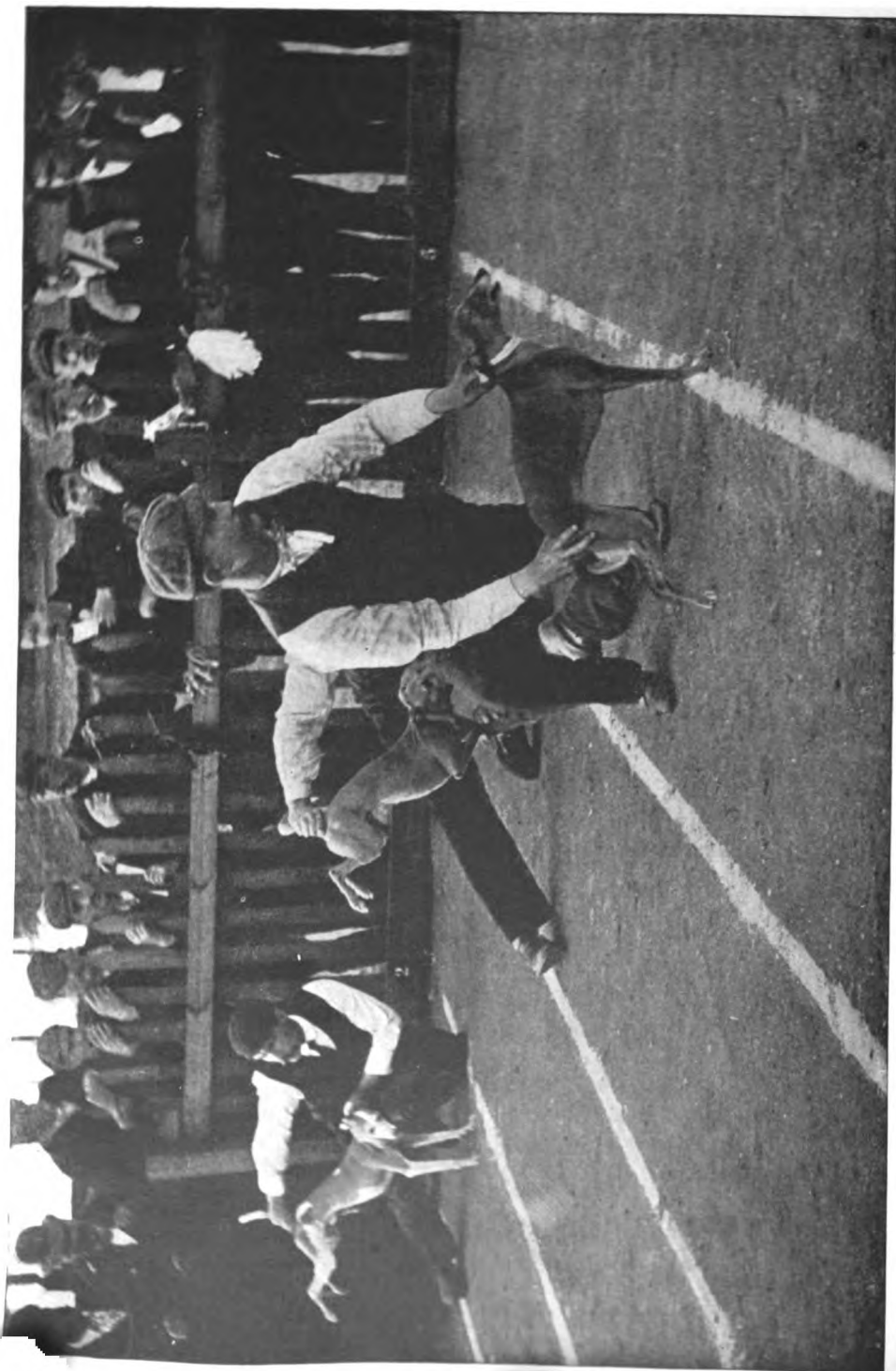
The women take great interest in the race and some maintain kennels of whippets.

be a runnin' of his dogs this very afternoon, when he cools down a bit. They're very keen on the sport, d' you see, an' that's just a manner of speech to show their interest.”

Dogs, owners, and spectators were drifting in rapidly. A ground-keeper was carefully rolling an hundred and fifty yard straightaway cinder track, across one end of which were fresh chalk lines, a yard apart. These were the handicap marks for the start, every dog in a heat being

doubtful pedigree. No thoroughbred was ever more pampered than these small racers. All were blanketed from head to tail, some had bandages on their ankles, and one absurdly important whippet wore tiny patches of porous plaster on his delicate shanks, because he was a “bit proppy,” and had strained himself in a previous match.

Tied to fence-posts, or trailing after their owners, the whippets were nervous and un-



At the start—"ready—get set."

easy at sight of the track. The starter happened to walk to the starting-line to try his old-fashioned pistol, an hour before the racing began. Every dog that saw him began to dance and fidget, and when the pistol was fired, they yelped and whined in a frenzy of evident impatience to get on their marks. The fierce joy of the contest thrilled every hair of them. It was already easy to see why this was a cleaner, sweeter sport than rabbit-coursing, even though its patrons were rough of garb, and violent of language. Their manners could not corrupt their racing-dogs, whose ideas of "sport for sport's sake" were impeccable.

For an hour the whippets frisked into the grounds until there were a round hundred of them, and this was only a routine fortnightly "five pound handicap at a hundred and fifty yards."

Several hundred men, and, perhaps, a dozen women hovered around the course, and as the time for starting the heats drew near, a perceptible tide of interest flowed toward a part of the barrier fence, alongside which a number of hard-faced and brazen-throated persons were perched on sundry packing boxes. Masters and whippets joined the growing throng, and it was worth noting that the tangle of dogs remained wholly pacific. There was no quarreling or back-biting among the thoroughbred little gentlemen of the four-footed world, who had come for the sole business of racing each other. They thought of nothing else, and were taking no chances of injury by any vulgar bickering among themselves.

"The blokes on the boxes are bookies," explained "Brummy" Meadows, "an' their clarks is standin' beside em'. Book-makers at a whippet handicap? Certainlee. There'll be twenty of them barkin' away when the afternoon warms up a bit. I've seen five hundred pounds up on the favorite in the final heat up in the Black Country. These Lunnon bounders ain't got th' tin to play heavy, d' you see, but they'll go it for all they can dig up. There they go. Just 'ear him."

A beefy bookie, whose plaid waistcoat could have been heard from Homerton to Hackney, had begun to bawl:

"First 'eat. Three to one, bar one. Tyke your pick of the field, bar Young Bob. A bob's worth o' that, did you say, Bill?

Say, you must ha' robbed the Benk of England. Can you afford to blow yer whole bloomin' fortune? Never mind—don't go away down-'earted. I'll take it. Three bob to one on Kitty Blue, bar Young Bob."

The shillings and half-crowns were dribbling in along the shouting line, with now and then the yellow gleam of a sovereign to show that the plunger was on deck. Now the dogs began to mass around a rough shed at one end of the enclosure. It was time for "weighing in," and every dog must be officially weighed and recorded before being allowed to start. Such a barking and crying there was around the big, old fashioned pan scales, as the owners picked up their pets, and stood them gently in the balance. The printed race-cards had been distributed, and the actual weights of the dogs were compared with the figures set opposite their names. The weights ranged from twelve to twenty-one pounds. As fast as they were entered, the bookies' "clarks" checked them off on their programs, to revise the starting lists, confident that any dog weighed in was sure to start, for one of the printed rules read:

"Any dog weighing in at these grounds, and not competing, will be disqualified for three months."

Here and there in the lists of heats were names that showed a pretty turn of sentiment in their owners, and the nomenclature was more pleasing than that of the average race-track. Here were "Our Lassie," and "Valiant," "Miss Holly Bush," and "Broken Melody," "Merry Boy," and "Miss Fussy," "Blue Fly," "Merry Girl," "Fly Catcher," "Wise Bess," "Mark Valiant," "Young Kiss," "Best of Friends," "Little Nance," "Wait a Bit," "Ivy Leaf," "Hi Hi," and "Minnie Dee."

When the referee called the first heat, six dogs were carried to the "slips," or starting marks. It seemed puzzling to try to guess which was which, but this problem was solved in a jiffy, when one of the "official staff" began to distribute to the slippers strips of colored ribbon—red, white, black, blue, yellow and green. The dogs were dropped on the track, and it was pretty to see them sniff tremblingly at their respective ribbons, and even poke their heads into the gay streamers as their handlers tied them around the necks. Obviously the whippets knew what the



Training the whippets to jump for the rag-quarry.



Around the bookmakers.

colors were for, and wanted to help the business along that there might be no more foolish delays. On the race-card the color of each dog was set opposite his name, so that one might read as they ran.

As the slippers crouched on the chalk lines, according to the handicaps, from scratch to fifteen yards, they grasped the dogs by the loose skin of the neck and the hind quarters, and held them clear of the cinder path. In front of them danced a bunch of howling dervishes, waving disreputable rags and towels, each trailing his guidon in front of his racer, in order that the dog might renew acquaintance with its particular bit of cloth. At a word from the starter these owners ran down the track for dear life, frequently turning to trail their cloths behind them, or to wave, shout and whistle at their dogs. It was not until the agitated owners had trotted to the far end of the track, beyond the "trig," or finish line, that the way was clear for the starting of this first heat.

Then the starter raised his pistol arm in air, the slippers crouched like statues, swung the dogs in air off the track, and for an instant the tense figures hung there, fixed as in a photograph. "Bang!" went the pocket edition of a cannon, and like a flash the slippers shot their dogs forward, with a deft skittering motion, so that as the clutching hands left them, the whippets landed on their feet in full motion, propelled with the added speed of this impetus in the slips. It looked as if the dogs were in full stride as their paws first gripped the cinders.

The six dogs were strung out in a line fifteen yards long. They flew down the straightaway, as if death were at their heels.

Beyond the finish lines, the owners were "running down" their dogs, waving their absurd cloths, shouting, whistling, imploring, as if an epidemic of St. Vitus Dance had smitten them. Every whippet ran with an eye on his far-away master, striving to reach him in the shortest possible time. Now the scratch dog began to overhaul the leaders, cutting down their advantage a fraction of an inch for every smooth stride. He was a mite of a racer, was this Young Bob—a thirteen pound dog—that looked like a puppy compared with one or two of his rivals of almost greyhound size. Flying

paws scattered the cinders until a cloud of grayish dust almost obscured the bunch.

Half way down the course, and it was easy to see that the handicappers' work had been skillfully done. The leaders were dropping back, the penalized dogs were creeping up. Wee Young Bob was going like a black bullet, his slender legs were a blur of furious motion, it seemed, for an instant, as if he would be pocketed, for the other five dogs were spread out just in front of him, but he sailed around the outside without wasting an inch more ground than was necessary, straightened out, cut in between two dogs racing neck-and-neck in front, and locked strides with them. The manœuvre could not have been executed with prettier skill if a tiny jockey had been piloting Young Bob, who was racing with his head as well as his heels.

Here was rare handicapping, indeed, for twenty yards from home, a baby-blanket would have covered four of the six whippets. Then Young Bob let out his last link of speed, and poked his black nose in front of Duchess and Santoi. When they swept across the chalk line, like a little whirlwind, Young Bob had won the heat by a clear length. Every dog made for his master without slackening speed, and leaped headlong at the particular rag or towel which claimed its frantic allegiance. Snapping jaws closed on the fabrics, and, spinning in mid-air from the impetus of their flight, the dogs were lifted into their masters' arms, their teeth fast in the towels which they still worried with growling enthusiasm. Young Bob's owner swung him twice around his head and the little dog hung on for dear life.

"A pretty race," said Referee Jack Taylor, as he hung out the painted bits of board, which announced to the crowd the colors of the first and second dogs. "There's a lot in the slippin', you know. The man what handles Young Bob is the champion slipper of Lunnon. A first class slip is worth a matter o' distance in a close heat."

The next heat was varied by an incident that set a hundred men along the fence to howling and cursing with black rage and disappointment. A dainty whippet—Quarrel was her name—was entered with two yards handicap allowance. She had won a previous fortnightly handicap, had done some rattling private trials and was heavily

backed along the bookies' line. By starting time Quarrel was a sweeping favorite. It was all her race two-thirds of the way, and she was making the other entries look like so many street curs. Her owner danced with joy beyond the finish line, for he stood to win twenty pounds in bets, and

and grinned, shamelessly proud of her performance.

Her delicate sensibilities would have been shocked beyond mending, could she have understood the remarks yelled at her, volleys, showers of them. A hundred fists were brandished at this silly little figure



The clean cut racer-built whippet—carefully blanketed.

to have a "look in" at the handicap money in the final heat.

Just then a totally irrelevant impulse sifted through the mental processes of Quarrel. She slackened speed way down to a foolish little trot, then turned, and deliberately loafed off the track, and sat in the grass on her haunches and looked at the crowds facing her beyond the fence. To make it worse, Quarrel was laughing at them. Her mouth was open, her little pink tongue hung out, and she sat and grinned

sitting in the grass, while the race swept on, and the towel of Quarrel's master waved in helpless rage and amazement. He ran down to his fickle jade of a whippet, but made no attempt to punish her, for, once afraid of the game, she would have been ruined for more racing.

"Brummy" Meadows shook his head with an air of tolerant amusement:

"There's no understandin' the bally tykes. Now, who'd ha' thought Quarrel would ha' done the likes o' that. It was all



straight, tho! No dirty work. I marked that."

"How could it have been made a crooked job?" I asked, having taken it for granted that there must be some seamy streaks in the sport.

"There's ways an' means of throwin' a race," said "Brummy," "but it ain't easy, d' you see? Maybe it's worth a nice pot o' money to have a dog lose? Maybe the owners has a friend or brother, what has helped him train th' tyke. Well, the owner goes to the finish, to run his dog up, all right, but the dog knows the other chap too, d' you see? And when the dogs is slipped, and comes by him, saunterin' alongside the track, he just shows a bit o' handkerchief, or maybe he whistles, which mixes up the whippet. 'Here's a pal o' mine,' says the dog to hisself. So instead of keepin' on, he turns off the track and chucks up the race.

"Maybe it's made an hobject to the slipper to hold the dog in the slips, not give him a fair start, in a manner o' speakin', hold him just enough to make him lose a yard, in gettin' away, d' you see? Then there's the owner at the other end. If he overruns his mark, when he's wavin' his dog along with the towel, his dog gets disqualified. But it's takin' shockin' chances to try them dodges with a referee like Jack Taylor. There's one sure an' easy way to kill a dog's speed, an' that's feedin' of him, just before he comes to the grounds. If his little belly's full, he can't run himself out of a way of a buss 'oss. But there ain't as much crooked work as you might think. These men takes a lot o' pride in the runnin' of their dogs, and every one of them hopes to breed a champion, and sell him for a fancy price."

Fifteen heats were run off—six dogs in a heat—and even the long English twilight was hinting dusk, before the final race was run. A number of the whippets raced with muzzles on. The reason appeared in a heat where a leading dog lost its temper. Another whippet swerved square in its path, and instead of making the best of it, and trusting to generalship to get around the obstructionist, the offended dog turned and nipped the culprit in the neck. The bitten dog instantly lost all interest in the race, and turned on its foe. The two mixed it up in a yelping, dusty swirl, while the race went on without them. The referee

at once notified the owner of the hot-tempered whippet that he must run this dog muzzled thereafter, under penalty of disqualification if he failed to heed the edict.

In the horde of owners and handlers were three women, one of them a pretty young girl in her teens. The wives and daughters play their part, by calling "up" the dogs at the finish, while their men-folk handle them in the slips.

"The women like the game," said Mr. Pacey, "but there's a bit more in it than that. The fancy whippet trainers hold that a dog will run a yard to two yards faster for a woman than for a man. Odd, ain't it, how the women folks makes 'em all jump livelier?"

These swearing, jostling crowds from the East End enjoyed this afternoon sport, without buying one solitary drink of strong liquor on the grounds. Between the heats they flocked to a big booth and drank tea and ate sponge cake and currant tarts. This was another item in a list of incongruities.

The keen edge of whippet racing is in the handicapping, which is a marvel of painstaking accuracy. Whippets run in more consistent form than horses, and there are few "in-and-outers." The speed standard for handicapping is a mark of twelve seconds for two hundred and twenty yards, and champion dogs have cut under this figure by a shade. This is at the rate of fifty-five feet a second, or nearly twice as fast as a crack sprinter can run the "2:20" Figured for a mile, it is at the rate of a mile in one minute and thirty-five seconds, as fast as thoroughbred ever ran the distance. In other words, when the whippet whizzes down his cinder track, he is moving at the rate of forty-five miles an hour, which is express train speed.

He cannot be handicapped by a weight-carrying system, and in working out a method of distance handicaps, say, for a hundred and fifty yard track, such nice timing is required that whippet handicappers are not content with the finest stop-watches used on the race-track, which split the second only into fifths. One maker of Rochdale turns out many watches every year for whippet experts, with a mechanism adjusted to split the second into sixteenths, and this is the kind of time-piece generally used in this sport.