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BARK RAVING MAD

Six drugged competitors, one dead champion, and a swarm of backstabbing gadflies. Beauty pageants? Olympic wrestling? Nope—just another season on the competitive dog-frisbee circuit

“Move! Move! Move!”

Melissa Heeter is inches from the muzzle of Ariel Asah, a black-and-white Border collie strapped into a fleece-lined sled-dog harness dangling above a treadmill. On command, the blur of paws and tail and tongue accelerates, washing Heeter's face and teased auburn hair with a fine spray of spit. She seems not to notice. What's a little saliva when immortality is at stake?

In 1997, Melissa and Asah won the Alpo Canine Frisbee Disc World Championship in Washington, D.C.—making her the only woman to have captured that coveted prize in the sport's 25-year history. During their showstopping freestyle routine, choreographed to Gina G.'s “Ooh Aah... Just a Little Bit,” Asah seemed incapable of missing a throw.

They were in the zone that day—and the world took notice: A *Today Show* appearance, a Wham-O signature Frisbee deal, and a series of NFL halftime gigs followed. Still, Heeter, a 33-year-old former office manager, knows such rewards are fleeting. True greatness in sports is achieved not under the klieg lights but in the unheralded hours she spends training each of her three competing dogs. It's in the evenings she's devoted to analyzing videotape of herself throwing a Frisbee down a local high-school football field. It's in the peak-performance diet of strictly natural, oven-baked dog food she provides her charges. And most of all, it is achieved during the grueling cross-training—the chilly swims in a nearby pond and the breakneck anaerobic sessions on the treadmill.

The latter take place an hour's drive north of Atlanta, at the home/training facility Melissa shares with her husband, Steven, a 35-year-old civil engineer's aide who himself went to the world championships three times with the late, great Border collie Radical Rush. Out of one corner of the garage, the childless couple has carved a “Frisbee room,” laying down AstroTurf and installing kennels. Here, Steven Heeter constructs ChampionMaker treadmills (“the world leader in quadruped propulsion systems and technology”) and struggles to get over the loss of his dog.

Knowing what really matters in sports makes the Heeters' exile from the disc-dog world that much easier to bear, blunting the serial traumas they've been forced to endure these past two years: the accusations, the lawsuits, their banishment from competition through 2001—and their bone-chilling conviction that Radical Rush was deliberately poisoned.

Early on the morning of August 9, 1997, at a field in Littleton, Colorado, a cleaning-company owner named Bryan Lamky and a Doberman mix named Tatiana are rehearsing for an Alpo open regional event later that day. Alpo competitions generally consist of two parts: “mini-distance” (timed toss and fetch) and “freeflight,” an event choreographed to music that features more elaborate moves, such as the dog vaulting off the handler's body or the handler throwing the Frisbee while doing a one-armed handstand.

The pressure is on: If Lamky and Tatiana place first or second today, they will qualify for the world championships in September. But something's not right. A few tosses into their warm-up, Lamky observes that the congenitally perky Tatiana is dragging her paws. Soon Tat is showing a “third eyelid,” which only a neurological problem—or a sedative—can cause.

Meanwhile, under another tent near the field, Lou “Mack” McCammon, 42, notices that his dog Kirby's eyes have a weird, glazed look. Suddenly, several dogs are exhibiting the same symptoms. The Heeters' Radical Rush—

especially vulnerable because he suffers from epilepsy—is evacuated to a cool van in the parking lot, where he’s administered fluids through an IV.

Their stricken dogs withdrawn from competition, the owners begin comparing notes. They quickly discount more obvious explanations—fertilizer and altitude sickness—because only six of the 40-odd animals are affected. More suspiciously, each dog belongs to a top-flight handler. The possibility of doping is raised, and Lamky and his wife, after driving back home to Michigan, have blood work done on Tatiana.

“We were still thinking, hoping, This is a wholesome sport; it couldn’t be a drugging,” Lamky later recalls. But the lab results indicate the presence of a tranquilizer, most likely acepromazine. Lamky can’t believe it and starts to cry.

Five of the dogs fully recover, but Radical Rush appears critically weakened. “After Littleton,” a friend of the Heeters recalls, “Rush was just a zombie.” Alpo, acknowledging the drugging episode without investigating its cause, flies the affected teams to Washington, D.C., for a special qualifying event the day before the 1998 world finals. Radical Rush isn’t among them. Just five years old, the seemingly invincible Border collie will eventually be put down by his grieving owners.

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More than two years later, the events in Littleton continue to reverberate. Just as the Tate-LaBianca killings closed the book on the Summer of Love, so did this incident seem an ominous watershed for dog Frisbee. “None of us thought this could happen,” says the owner of one of the dogs involved. “We were almost in denial. Still, it boggles my mind.”

To the sordid American tradition of fixed fights and thrown baseball games, of kneecapped figure skaters, gunned-down cheerleaders, and garotted baby beauty queens, we can now add doped Frisbee dogs. The game we once knew—of man, dog, plastic, beach, and, perhaps, a little reefer—is no more.

As many as 10,000 Americans now enter dog-Frisbee competitions each year. The majority are run by the California-based Ashley Whippet Enterprises (AWE), whose sole sponsor for the past 10 years has been Alpo (a contract roughly estimated to be worth anywhere from \$250,000 to \$350,000). Disaffected disc-doggers claim that AWE and Alpo’s monopoly on the sport has engendered an almost sibling rivalry among those vying for the glory—and for the spoils. Still, if an overzealous disc-dogger felt compelled to take out a bunch of competitors, money is unlikely to have been the motive. Though some handlers make handsome livings—usually by transforming their hobby into a day job running events and performances—the stakes are fairly modest. At the very highest level of competition, victory can mean a year’s supply of Alpo food and treats, a \$1,000 U.S. Savings Bond, some pro-sport halftime performances, and the chance to enjoy TV fame for considerably less than 15 minutes.

Nevertheless, competitive canine Frisbee has become a fast-fragmenting Yugoslavia of rival sponsors and competitions—fueled by the Internet, which helped create the community but which has since become a vehicle of its undoing. E-mail lists have allowed far-flung dog owners to bond in cyberspace; lately, though, the amiable banter has been drowned out by angry comments concerning AWE’s reliance on a single sponsor, questions about judging bias, allegations of cronyism, and plain old trash talk. “I call this ‘dog-itics,’” says AWE executive director Steve Lander. “We’re talking about a distinct minority—most competitors want to maintain the innocence of dog Frisbee.”

One of the most outspoken members of that minority is also one of the most successful figures in the sport. “I’d say I’m doing pretty well for someone who goes out and throws a piece of plastic to his dog,” says Lou McCammon, who used to perform a sequined disc-dog act in Vegas but now earns six figures helping to run Purina’s Incredible Dog Challenge. A two-time Alpo world champion, he has paid a steep price to get where he is—literally giving his left nut for the sport (his dog Scooter, in an attempt to vault off McCammon’s leg, put a claw through his testicle, requiring parts of it to be removed). McCammon claims that after he struck out on his own and accepted sponsorships from dog-food manufacturers other than Alpo, AWE execs took to bad-mouthing him. “Alpo pretty much thinks they own you,” he says, adding that he wishes his fellow handlers would take the sport less seriously. “I call it a novelty, but you’ve got these wackos who want to ‘legitimize’ it.”

He is referring to a growing band of competitors who believe the sport must forswear its craven past of “pet shows and carnny acts” if it is to get the respect—and eventual Olympic recognition—it deserves. This faction includes Greg Tresan, 36, founder of the International Disc Dog Handlers Association (IDDHA), which counts numerous disc-dog dignitaries among its 150 members. A vandyked Berkeley grad who runs a kennel and training facility outside Atlanta, Tresan does not suffer his fellow Frisbee-doggers gladly. One is “a complete AWE flunky.” Another is so loathsome “even his dog hates him.” The Heeters are “the Jim and Tammy Bakker of dog Frisbee, right down to the smeared mascara and the God-fearing thing.” But his greatest scorn is reserved for Alpo and AWE—“clowns, complete idiots”—who, he says, rebuffed his attempts to join forces. “It’s ugly,” Tresan says. “I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s almost, like, racial.”

The Heeters, watching the fourth game of the Mets-Braves playoffs at the Sidelines Sports Grille near their home, have a less complicated view of the matter. Taking a break from their basket of wings, they ponder the state of their beloved sport.

“It’s lost its. . .” Melissa Heeter turns to her husband: “What do you call it?”

“Innocence!” he shouts over the screams of Braves fans.

Bottom of the eighth, only now it’s 1974, and the teams are Cincinnati and L.A. At Dodgers Stadium, a 22-year-old Ohio State student named Alex Stein, sporting Levi’s, a Hymie’s Hot Sub T-shirt, Earth Shoes, and an Afro, steals past a security guard and onto the field, along with his 22-pound dog, Ashley Whippet. For the next eight minutes, live on NBC, the whippet prodigy—who’s been fed from a Super Pro Frisbee since infancy—captivates a nation. Clocking 35 miles an hour to field Stein’s 80-yard throws, the diminutive canine soars as high as nine feet above the outfield grass. Stein is arrested, but a sport is born. “In 1974,” the pioneer recalls a quarter century later, “people were throwing sticks and balls to their dogs, not Frisbees. Dogs and Frisbees weren’t put together yet. I put them together.”

For Stein, who previously failed in his efforts to secure a talent agent, the stunt triggers a windfall. Soon Wham-O, the L.A. Rams, Merv Griffin, and Kal Kan are all knocking on Ashley’s kennel door. And Stein, in partnership with a Wham-O flack named Irv Lander, launches Ashley Whippet Enterprises to promote the nascent sport and start a competition.

The promotional mix blazed by Stein is copied by subsequent generations of disc-doggers. But in other respects, the sport changes. After 15 years, Stein decides to open a deli, leaving the operation of AWE to Lander (whose son is at the helm today). Toss and fetch morphs into a stylized, almost balletic performance art, and Ashley Whippet aside, canine Frisbee comes to be dominated by Border collies and other herding breeds with a strong “prey drive.” Dogs like Radical Rush.

Rush was no ordinary dog, that much is certain. “From six months old, it was clear he had something,” says Steven Heeter, who named the dog after the right-wing radio host. The three-time world finalist’s obituary in *The Fire Hydrant*, a dog-Frisbee newsletter, might have put it best: “A tremendous athlete, Rush amazed fans wherever he performed or competed.” Once, Rush made one of his graceful trademark leaps for a Frisbee that had been thrown too near a crowd. “He took ‘em out like bowling pins,” Heeter recalls, a catch in his voice.

For Heeter, time seems to be standing still. Rush’s ashes rest on the mantelpiece; a wall of awards is anchored by a large display case memorializing the storied Border collie’s illustrious career. Online, too, Heeter fans the eternal flame, with a Web shrine displaying action photos of an airborne Rush. Closure has been inordinately difficult for the Heeters—as it would be for any parents who are convinced they know the identity of their child’s killer but feel powerless to seek justice.

Within a week of the apparent drugging, the Heeters, and others, zero in on a possible culprit, who attended the Littleton event as a spectator. He was also present at events in Georgia and San Antonio, which newly skittish handlers start remembering in a more sinister light, reinterpreting their own dogs' lackluster performances as the result of other druggings. In Littleton, the suspect was seen feeding Rush through a car window, and carried a suspicious pouch at his side all day. And strangely, before anyone even suspected him, Bob Evans, a folksy 67-year-old mergers-and-acquisitions broker from Dallas, had gone out of his way to telephone people and profess his innocence.

Lamky and McCammon think Evans is involved, though others are less convinced. "Bob Evans is a strange cat, man, but I have a hard time believing he went around the country drugging dogs," says Greg Tresan. At least one person who was as Littleton suggests the "victims" completely imagined the incident. But Steven Heeter, not known for his restraint, is soon fingering a "Bob" on his website and firing off e-mails calling Evans "the Tonya Harding of the disc-dog world." Evans sues the Heeters for defamation, and the Heeters countersue.

In the midst of the melee, Evans, of all people, wins the 1998 world championships with Luke, an Australian shepherd. Shortly after, Evans and the Heeters arrive at a confidential settlement, forestalling a PR nightmare for Alpo. (The Heeters are unable to comment on the lawsuit per the settlement.) And on October 27, 1998, Radical Rush is euthanized.

Evans will later say of the alleged drugging, "I can't believe anyone would do that to someone's dog," and suggest that Steven Heeter went after him because he was "jealous" that Melissa was offered an invitation to Japan only after Evans had turned it down. He has a harder time explaining away the accusation by Lamky, whom he once counted among his friends.

"That really, really, disappoints me," Evans says, speaking by phone from Dallas. "I sat next to Bryan at that Denver competition. I carry turkey jerky and peanut M&Ms with me—in fact, like this one here"—there's a momentary silence on Evans' end of the line, followed by an unmistakable crunching sound—"and I gave him some. I ate two bags at that Denver competition. It surprises me that Bryan would say anything. A lot of people have just let this fester and fester."

In the wake of the lawsuits, Steven Heeter, newly enamored of the Web, quickly broadens his virtual assault to include AWE and Alpo. He questions everything from their judging methods to the amount of shade being provided for dogs at Alpo competitions. In May 1999, Melissa Heeter shows up at a regional qualifying event in Miami, and a sheriff at the registration table, flanked by AWE executives, threatens to arrest her if she tries to compete. They tell her a letter has been sent to her house in Georgia, a letter that bans the Heeters from competition through 2001.

By September, the furor appears to have finally subsided. With the Heeters in exile and Evans failing to even qualify for the 1999 world championship, AWE and Alpo seem to have dodged the risk of an ugly confrontation. Then both Evans and the Heeters decide to fly to D.C. for the Saturday event on the Mall.

While the competition itself will hold only one moment of high drama—when a team tied for first chokes in the final round and the handler begs a vulturous *Animal Planet* cable TV crew to turn off their camera—the real soap opera will unfold later, at the celebratory banquet. Melissa Heeter, attending as the guest of finalist Gail Mirabella, will walk out when Evans stands to speak, and Bryan Lamky will tell Evans to his face that he thinks he drugged the dogs.

Bob Evans can't seem to escape the ugly accusations, but on the morning of the event, he is sad more than anything else. The day before, he journeyed to the championship field and scattered the ashes of Dan, his recently deceased dog, in the shadow of the Washington Monument, on the very grass where Evans and Luke took the gold last year. Wearing Maui Jim mirror shades, an Alpo baseball cap, and an Alpo windbreaker, Evans has his ash collection replenished by Alex Stein, who presents him with a tiny plastic urn containing some of Ashley Whippet's loamy remains. But the gift isn't enough to stem Evans' sense of impending loss. The 1998 world champion, the only

senior citizen to hold the title, has just a few more minutes of dog-Frisbee glory. Standing on the sidelines showing off wallet photos of his dogs, as the clock runs out on the greatest achievement of his life, Evans seems on the verge of tears. He begins to sing, from the song he had custom recorded for his winning freestyle routine, to the tune of John Fogerty's "Centerfield."

"I'm a red merle Frisbee dog," Evans croons gently, his wistful if somewhat tuneless drawl punctuated by the barks of finalists. "Ashley Whippet looked down and watched me play." Nearby, Bryan Lamky is warming up with Tatiana, and Melissa Heeter is kneading the shoulders of another contestant; for now, Evans is free to savor the final moments of the year when he was king of the dog-Frisbee world.

"Put me in, Dad, I'm ready to play today," the old man sings, his lower lip trembling ever so slightly. Then he perks up a little, showing his appreciation for the company that made it all possible. "You knooooow," he warbles, "a great dog deserves Alpoooo."

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A few weeks later, unsettling news about Alpo spreads through the canine-disc community. After a 10-year run, the dog-food manufacturer has decided to end its partnership with Ashley Whippet Enterprises and launch its own competition. Some of the more optimistic disc-doggers put a hopeful face on the rift, anticipating even more opportunities for glory. Others see a darker implication: the further balkanization of an already fractious sport.

The storm swirls, but at its center stands Melissa Heeter, unbowed. On a red-clay hillside in the heart of Georgia, she starts the morning as she always does, hosing down the kennels, washing away another day's worth of urine. With its perpetual controversy, canine Frisbee increasingly seems the inspiration for the bumper sticker "The More People I Meet, the More I Like My Dog." Heeter couldn't agree more. "Canine Frisbee creates a bond unlike any other sport I know," she says, aiming her hose at the yellowed cement. "This is what God put me here to do."