God to Show

By Matt Griesinger

In Bonita Springs, Florida, halfway between Naples and Fort Myers, lays the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track. The track, just like the town of Bonita Springs, exists only as an in-between space. Bonita Springs is not the glamorous commercial haven of Naples to the south, nor is it the crowded beach town of Fort Myers to the north. The track itself is neither pretentious nor gaudy. The poker players on the second level don’t wear blazers and Aviator sunglasses, but they also don’t don Hawaiian button-downs and those cheap, green visors that have become such a poker cliché that they only exist in satires of the game. Importantly, the track is not even credited to the city in which it operates. It doesn’t exist in Bonita Springs because Bonita Springs would more appropriately be named Not-Naples-Or-Fort-Myers. So, in order to rectify the track’s purgatorial state, developers hyphenated two noteworthy locations and correctly assumed that no one would notice. They succeeded.

While packing for her trip, she asked me about my religious views. More pointedly, she asked me if I believe in God.

“I want to believe that there is something out there,” I said. I knew this was not a conversation to take lightly, especially because we had decided to go to church the night before but I slept in instead. My bed was too comfortable. It wasn’t an off-putting question nor was it inappropriate. But I didn’t want to offend her.

“Right. But what do you believe in?” she asked.

“I believe in I Don’t Know. I don’t know what is out there or in here.”

“Do you want to know?”

We had conversations of a similar intellectual level before and she often out-dueled me. I was careful.

“To me,” I said, “you have to look at it like Cindy Brady.”

When you walk into the greyhound track, nothing spectacular happens. This isn’t a museum and it certainly isn’t a professional sports stadium. In fact, there are no clearly defined entrances. Simply walk through the valet parking overhang and let the air conditioning hit you as the sliding doors open. A woman who should be chain smoking for added effect greets you from
behind a counter, asks for the two-dollar entrance fee, and then offers you a five-dollar betting book. On my first trip to the track, I bought the book. I knew nothing about greyhounds or betting and seven dollars was significantly less than what I’d pay to golf or even park at the beach.

The book is straightforward. It lists the eight dogs running in each of the sixteen races that afternoon. Included in the information is everything a track can think to add that makes this experience feel like you are betting on horses. In fact, it is quite clear that the greyhound is the poor man’s thoroughbred. From the posters on the wall depicting the five-foot-nothing jockeys standing astride derby champions to the live races being simulcast on screens inside and outside the track, the understanding is that we exist in the purgatorial Bonita Springs, Florida and we can do everything possible to trick ourselves to the contrary, but those are dogs outside and when they stop on the track to piss, it is much less majestic than when Secretariat did it.

So you read about the dog’s last ten races, best times, trainers, kennels, and age. And you read it like it matters. Like you can accurately predict not only which dog will win, but also which will place and show. Very quickly, you can trick yourself into thinking you are an expert on greyhounds because bitches hit their prime around age three, but males don’t mature until three and a half. And you not only believe these guidelines, but you also tell anyone who will listen and bet every dollar you have in your pocket. In fact, you might even leave the track to run to your car because there is definitely three dollars worth of quarters in the cup holder, and if you put it all on Rock the Dwayne Johnson to win, you can be back in the positive.

On my first day at the track, I lost twenty-five dollars in five hours. Still less than a round of golf in Naples, so I figured it was a good day. Watching eight greyhounds chase a motorized rabbit around a track is entertaining in its own right and I enjoyed the sunshine nonetheless. I returned home and, in evaluating my day, realized that I was too careful. I placed one bet on nearly every race and bet each time for my chosen dog to show. All it had to do was finish in at least third place. Placing requires a dog to finish in at least second and winning is, of course, winning. Cautiously, I took the safest bet each time and, if I won, received a much smaller payoff than if I were to bet on the dog to win or place.

I slept on a new strategy: bet two dogs each race. One to win and one to show. That way, even if the long-shot of winning didn’t happen, I’d have the safe bet of the show to atone.

The next day, I won twenty dollars on my first two races and used just the profits for the rest of the afternoon. As would become a habit, watching from atop the grandstand, I walked down to the finish line for the last race. I had Jones’ Brigade to show and Ride Sally Ride, a two-year-old long-shot to win. Elbowing up to the fence with my rolled-up betting book tapping out a rhythm, I nodded to the elderly woman next to me.

“Good day?” she asked.
“Not bad. This last one could make my day.”

She glanced at my baton of a betting book and raised her eyebrows.

“You’d do much better for yourself if you saved the five dollars on that God-forsaken thing. Doesn’t do a damned thing.”

I chuckled and nodded. No use arguing with this woman over betting strategies. If she really knew what she was doing, she wouldn’t be in Bonita Springs, Florida betting on three-year-old dogs.

“Have a better system?” I asked.

“Sure do. All you have to do is listen. When they bring the dogs out before each race, the announcer says each dog’s name and the name of their kennel. Just listen for a name you like and put ten dollars on it to show.”

Having spent two days creating a careful and logical system, I enjoyed the moment of superiority in knowing that betting to show won’t get you anywhere and that knowing a dog’s last five times is actually quite helpful.

“There’s not enough of a payoff for me in betting to show,” I said, and then added, “I don’t have the patience.”

“You’ll get there. But for now, just watch Cindy Brady come in third.”

“Why that one?” I asked.

“My daughter used to love The Brady Bunch. I hated it, but it’s not about liking the name. The name just has to set something off in your mind.”

“I see,” I said. “Seems like you are picking them blindly.”

“I have just as much information as you do in that book.”

As the dogs left the gate, the scrawny Cindy Brady stumbled only slightly and sat comfortably in fifth place. She remained there until the last fifty yards when she passed two dogs to finish in third place.

I threw my betting ticket and book into the garbage can on the way out. The two dogs Cindy Brady had beaten were Jones’ Brigade and Ride Sally Ride, my two bets. I never bought another betting book.

“I should look at religion like you look at dogs?” she asked. She was curious, but also
unsure if I was taking her seriously.

“I think it’s more complicated than that. But I’m not sure I want to know everything about God. This might be one of those times when I don’t need the betting book.”

“Do you think some of that information might be important though?”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well I think it’s sad when people don’t believe in an afterlife. When they say, ‘When you die, nothing happens.’ I feel badly for them. How can you go through life not believing in a goal?”

“I’m not the journey more important than the destination? Shouldn’t life be about something more than maybe getting to a place when you die?” I asked.

“When you go to the track, where do you stand?”

“I sit at the top of the grandstand.”

“Because you want to see the race.”

“Of course.”

“And when the race is over, how do you know if it was successful?”

“If the dog I bet on to win, won.”

She smiled.

Two minutes before the race is scheduled to begin, track hands parade the leashed dogs in front of the grandstand. It’s ninety-four degrees and they wear pale purple shirts, tattered blue jeans, and white hats. The dogs are muzzled and wear brightly colored coats with bold numbers indicating their post position. The hands stop at the finish line and allow the announcer to call each dog’s name and kennel. Often, dogs will sniff at the ground or each other and, only occasionally, pull at their leash, causing their handler to strain, nearly fall, and pull back hard. It is even more rare to see a dog squat and piss on the track. Six track hands walk out the eight dogs. Four bring one dog each and two are graced with the responsibility of handling two dogs. It is always the hands with two dogs who have the unfortunate task of handling the jumping and pissing dogs. Such a mystery has yet to be explained.

The dogs are ushered into their small boxes and they begin to bark and wail. The starting gate is against the nearside fence, just fifty yards from the finish line. They will run through the finish line and run one lap of the track. Along the inside of the track is a metal fence with a
small, metal set of wheels on its inset.

The announcer will say, “Spunkys in motion,” and the set of wheels with a cloth rabbit attached will travel from the far side of the track. As it rounds the turn, passing in front of the dogs, the announcer will shout, “Here comes Spunky,” and the dogs will be released.

The first ninety yards are the most carefree of the forty-second race. The dogs run straight and avoid contact. They are happy. They are chasing a rabbit. These are dogs as they were meant to be. But then the first turn comes up. You hold your breath because these eight dogs aren’t paying attention to each other. The rabbit is turning so they are turning. The collective gasp is deafening when the smallest of the pack tumbles over itself three times after getting pushed out of the turn. It was a miserable sight to see the underweight two-year-old, Dear John, a blonde-red bitch, fifty yards behind the pack, chasing the rabbit she knew she’d never catch. I had her to win, of course, but that loss didn’t hurt quite as badly as the others. My disappointment seemed unnecessary and groundless.

As they begin to round the final turn, it becomes clear which dogs have a chance. A man, usually wearing all white and stinking of beer, will stand and urge on his dog. That final-moment coaxing will always appear to out-of-place. The dogs can’t hear you. And yelling at a dog to, “Hustle!” is one of the more ridiculous things to shout. He doesn’t know what it means to hustle. He’s chasing a stuffed rabbit. Worse yet, this is his forty-second career race and the forty-one times before this, he never got to the rabbit. The wheeled contraption retreats behind the fence and the dogs run into a mesh curtain, are leashed, and led off the track. He has never gotten his rabbit. So stop yelling at him. Of course, maybe the yelling is to coax his money back into his pocket rather than his dog across the finish line.

After the race, you either throw your betting slip into the nearest garbage can, after crumpling it up to demonstrate your disgust, of course, or take the slip to one of the thirty betting machines throughout the complex. The machine returns a receipt which can be taken to the teller window for cash. Oddly, the money in your hand after winning is the anti-climax of the experience. All you want to do is put the cash right back into the machine to bet on another dog.

“Well, you have to believe in something,” she said.

“I don’t have to do anything.”

“Argue my point, not my words,” she was upset with that response and rightly so.

“All I’m saying is that I’m hesitant to pick one religion or one set of ideas.”

“I’m not asking you to pick a religion,” she said. “I’m asking if you believe in God.”

“But that’s the same thing. Saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ is picking a side. And I don’t know.
There’s so much evil and hurt in this world.”

“And there’s goodness. There is hope that the hurt will end. There are good people actively doing something about the evil people. If you change the parameters—”

“See? That’s it right there. Religions change their parameters of goodness all the time,” I countered. “I’m good if I give ten percent of my wealth, but you’re evil if you want to plan for a family and use birth control. You’re good if you talk to God before you eat, but you’re evil if you have sex before you’re married.”

She rolled her eyes. “All of your examples are about sex.”

“Everything is about sex.”

“No it’s not.” She held up one finger. “And you didn’t let me finish. I’m not talking about changing the parameters of goodness. I’m talking about changing the parameters of the implications of the question.”

“I’m lost.”

“Well, think about it like this. What if saying you believe or don’t believe in God isn’t a final answer? What if you believe in God, right now? What if you choose your religion cafeteria style?”

“I’m not sure any religion would want me. I can’t walk into a mosque and only participate in twenty-five percent of the service because I only subscribe to twenty-five percent of their beliefs.”

She sighed. I wasn’t understanding her. “No, but you can learn about many different faiths and pick things you like.”

“For example?”

“For example, you know that the Mormons beat FEMA to New Orleans and provided relief work for almost a full week before the government did anything.”

“Right.”

“Okay, so you take that altruism and service toward others that you like and you apply that to your life.”

“I’m not sure the Mormons would consider me to be a Mormon,” I said.

“Yes, but that doesn’t matter. They are your religious views, not theirs.”

I nodded. “My plate of cafeteria food, not anyone else’s.”
“My Catholicism, not yours.”

Making plans based on the weather is one of those odd experiences in which your decisions seem justified and correct even though you’re working off a blind guess. Like the political analysts who explain that the rain in Orange County, California will certainly affect the congressional race. It’s one of those times that sensing how the weather will affect people projects an air of importance and only slight elitism. So, when a neighbor counsels that today would be a perfect day to go to the track because it is ninety-eight degrees and “everyone will be at the beach,” you happily take his advice because you’re starting to hate the tourists who show up to the track and have no idea what they are doing. You conveniently forget that, just three days ago, you were a tourist showing up to the track having no idea what you were doing. Also, this is a better reason to go to the track than the fact that you can’t think about anything else in your life that doesn’t involve the prospect of making heaps on money on a dog running faster than seven other dogs. So, you nod to your neighbor and thank him for his great idea.

It isn’t until you walk out of the air-conditioned lobby and into the grandstand that you realize the weather clearly has no effect on the amount of people at the track. Or, maybe, the hotter and more humid it is, the more people come to the track. The soothsaying of your neighbor is quickly forgotten, however, when you put ten dollars on Red Red Wine to win and another ten on Afternoon Delight to show, his inaccurate prediction is quickly forgotten.

But then, before the third race, after you’ve already lost forty dollars, you walk down to the finish line to get a better look at the parade of dogs. The old woman, who you haven’t seen since her brief counseling session, remains in your head as you listen closely to the names of the dogs in front of you. After the second dog, Paula’s Pride And Peter’s Prejudice, is announced, you wonder if these dogs have other, shorter names that they answer to. There’s no way that the trainers and owners call him that. Could they call him Four-P? Pride? Petey? More likely, he goes by Sparky, and I’m leaning on this fence watching my money float into the abyss.

The number three dog is Pablo IX followed by Hazel Grace, Tippecanoe and Tyler Three, Simply the Best, and Mama’s Miracle. All of the names so far have been contenders for my bet and, on a different day, I could have had that rush of adrenaline telling me to choose them. But I wasn’t listening. Instead, I was watching the eighth dog. Her name was God, as she calmly surveyed the crowd. Dogs don’t stare at the crowd. They are aware only of the other dogs around them, and sometimes they piss on the track.

But God watched us as if she was aware that we were spontaneously questioning our passion for this sport. As if she was aware that we held a collective breath at the first turn and had to sit out a few races when a dog stumbled. As if she was aware that we harbored doubts as to how these dogs are treated when they aren’t running. It was as if she was aware of our feelings.
I put the twenty-seven dollars I had left on God to show. I wanted to know everything about her, but I didn’t care about the information in the book. The “everything” that I was concerned with was not her age, weight, kennel’s name, or her last ten times. That’s not everything. Instead, I wanted to know how she liked to come out of the gate. I wanted to know whether she was aware of the other dogs squeezing her to the rail on the first turn. I wanted to know if she really thought she’d catch the rabbit and what she planned to do with it once she got it. I wanted to know if she held onto the lead for the entirety of the race or if she would sit safely in fourth place until making a charge in the last fifty yards.

I put the twenty-seven dollars I had left on God to show. I needed her to show.