

Athens Still Sniffing for Solutions to Dog Problem as the Games Approach

By Neil Trent

In ancient times, when the Olympic games were as much about religious observation as they were an athletic competition, animal sacrifice played a central role in the festivities. The gods of Mt. Olympus were feted with the steady flow of blood. On the final day, no fewer than 100 cattle were slain on the altar of Zeus, the undisputed king of the hill.

This summer the games are returning to Greece, where they were first celebrated in 776 B.C. While no official sacrifices are planned, many in the animal welfare community fear a massacre is forthcoming.

Athens teems with stray dogs. Non-existent animal control policies, a lack of shelters, and a national resistance to keeping pets at home have allowed this problem to mushroom to the point where an estimated half million homeless pooches roam Greece, some 15,000 in the center of capital alone. Now, with the city poised to bask in the international spotlight, these unfortunate creatures could face animal control of the cruelest kind.

Call it poison ball. Someone in Greece has learned to play a very nasty sport. Visitors to the national gardens came upon the ghastly aftermath on New Year's Day 2003: scores of dogs and cats lying dead among the lush greenery, apparent victims of strychnine-laced balls of meat called *folia* ("poison ball") in Greek. Animal advocates in Greece have documented numerous cases of stealth massacres, including one last August in which nearly 3,000 street animals were culled while Athenians blithely enjoyed their traditional vacation period.

Government officials have emphatically denied any involvement in the indiscriminate killings, though that hasn't stopped animal protectionists from pointing fingers in their direction. After all, as animal advocates note, the mass killings tend to happen on the eve of high-profile events. For instance, the national gardens massacre occurred just as Greece assumed the presidency of the European Union.

Death by strychnine is slow and extremely agonizing—hardly in keeping with land that gave the world the word euthanasia, or "good death." The ironies aren't just etymological. There is strong objection in Greece to putting down sick animals humanely, by such means as injections of sodium pentobarbital. The country also has shown an aversion to commonsense spaying and neutering programs that would help keep the population of feral dogs and cats under control.

For years, animal welfare advocates have fought to get Greek authorities to adopt humane policies, and many hoped the Olympics would give their crusade an important boost. For a fleeting moment those hopes seemed well placed.

In November, the United Kingdom-based World Society for the Protection of Animals hosted a conference in Athens to discuss humane solutions to the dog problem with Athens Deputy Mayor

Tonia Kanellopoulou, among others. I was at that meeting, along with representatives of another UK animal organization, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, as well as a number of Greek groups. We felt more than a little encouraged when officials signaled their resolve to solve the canine conundrum.

But reality has not borne out the hopeful rhetoric of that day. Following the gathering, the Agriculture Ministry issued a report, proposing the creation of more shelters to warehouse animals for longer periods of time, and little else. The report did not address how the animals would get to the shelters or how to keep tabs of these mom-and-pop facilities, some of which have notorious track records of neglect and cruelty. The plan also gave short shrift to spaying and neutering programs, and sidestepped the thorny issue of euthanasia altogether.

So here we are just months from the start of games, and there's no pragmatic plan for dealing with these street animals who literally beg for scraps at sidewalk cafes or force tourists to sidestep them on their way to the Acropolis. *The Guardian of London* reports that animal protection activists "have launched a mass evacuation campaign, transporting the strays by plane, train, truck and bus to new homes around Europe." Yet this mostly cosmetic approach seems to address only the symptoms, not the underlying causes.

For their part, the Greek authorities are scrambling to do what they can. Athens Mayor Dora Bakoyanni has reportedly adopted two strays, and last year her office announced a 10-point plan to address the canine and cat crisis. Among other things, the mayor's plan calls for the round up, sterilization and adoption of stray animals. On the national level, the government has passed a law that penalizes Greeks for abandoning their pets to the streets.

All of these are small steps in a long journey toward a more humane Greece. Moving forward, the Greeks should continue to improve registration and licensing procedures, place feral animals in approved and appropriate shelters, and implement effective sterilization programs. We can only hope that the next time the Olympics come to Athens, the street dog problem will be a dismal chapter from the past.

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