

# Catching Swifty:

## *When our dreams become reality*

*Note: Swifty is the mechanical rabbit that sets the pace at dog tracks, and no matter how fast the dogs run, they never catch him. Except for this one time...*

The greyhound had just finished a routine workout and couldn't believe his good fortune. There stood his longtime quarry. Motionless!

Before you could say "daily double," he broke away from his handler and . . . chomp! He'd finally caught Swifty.

A split-second after that, he keeled over and breathed his last.

The official cause of death was listed as "heart failure," but all the old-timers at the track knew better. The poor dog had died of disappointment.

You wonder what was going through his head as he sank his teeth into the mechanical rabbit. Was there an instant when he realized he'd spent the better part of his life panting after a fake?

Maybe the story is just another urban legend. Who knows? In the end, it really doesn't matter because lessons are where we find them, and this one seems especially well-suited to our times.

We live in an age when more of us than ever before have a chance to "catch Swifty." Our overall level of material wealth and the variety of choices available to us exceed the wildest dreams of our ancestors.

Yet we also live with greater potential for disappointment than they did. We can catch Swifty, but what if he doesn't taste as sweet as we'd hoped? What if we go to school for 15 years and then hate being a lawyer? What if we move to an upscale neighborhood and then miss our old neighbors? What if we spend a small fortune on a "dream vacation" only to discover that our destination isn't the paradise we'd imagined?

Of course, maybe these concerns are simply a measure of how far we've come. Our great-grandparents would have traded their problems for ours in a heartbeat.

For most of human history, scarcity was the norm, and lack of choice was the rule. If

we'd asked people in 1800 if more material wealth would make them happy, they would have answered with an unambiguous "yes." And then they probably would have told us to stop wasting their time with foolish questions.

The same is true for the variety of choices we have in our daily lives. Abundance of choice was seldom an issue in the pre-industrial world. For most people, the future course of life was set at birth, and their only real option was to make the best of whatever came their way.

The small decisions that occasionally paralyze us – What should I wear today? What should I have for dinner? Where should I go on vacation? – rarely, if ever, gave our pre-industrial ancestors pause. Their wardrobes were sparse, their diet was limited, and their free time was almost nonexistent.

By way of comparison, we need only walk into a supermarket or a clothing store to see how much more varied modern life is. And the variety isn't limited to the choices we make as consumers. When it comes to choosing how we want to live our lives, we have lots of options. We don't have to follow in the footsteps of our mothers and fathers if we don't want to. Nor do we have to spend our entire lives within a few miles of where we were born.

The downside, however, is that we have to cope with the anxiety and uncertainty that can come with making choices and pursuing dreams. And all too often we never really know if we've chosen wisely and pursued the dream that's right for us until after we've "caught Swifty" and taken our first bite.

Which is why it's worth taking the time and trouble to figure out what has genuine value to us and why it's worth asking ourselves if acquiring more stuff will make us happier than our grandparents were, or if "GDP per person" is the only way, or even the best way, to measure how well we're living. ■



John D. Eddy in Butte, Montana, with his prizewinning greyhound dog, 1942. Photograph by Russell Lee. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.