

THEY ADVOCATED JACKRABBITS

Animal rights activists demonized greyhounds as unadoptable 30 years ago. Then the dogs ascended to unimagined levels of popularity as family pets. Now the bloodline desperately needs the strength of racing greyhounds. A former breeder says the animals' so-called advocates once again stand in the way.

By Dennis McKeon

I hung up my leather leads and racing muzzles more than 20 years ago. The main reason being, that despite my love for it, the profession of Greyhound Training simply didn't fit into my desire to spend more time with my family. Working from sunrise until after midnight seven days a week with no time off for good behavior, seldom lends itself to traditional paternal involvement in family affairs.

It is disturbing to see that even two decades since I left the profession, the very existence of such an inoffensive and gentle breed as the National Greyhound Association Racing Greyhound, doing what he was bred to do still boils up cauldrons of emotion and passion.

Stirring the pots not so coincidentally, are those who know the least about this ancient breed. Those who have no working experience with him. Those who have no plans, whatsoever for his future viability as a highly adapted, thriving, healthy population of dogs. They seek to criminalize the state-regulated racing of Greyhounds----the only thing that supports the 46 female families of Racing Greyhounds who comprise the entire Greyhound population.

Back in my day, the hubbub was all about the coursing of live vermin (the destructive jackrabbit) done in certain mid-western and southerly locales as a part of the Racing Greyhound's early training. The Animal Rights extremists of the late 1970s and early 1980s were quite fond of telling the public in the most visceral and hysterical of terms, that Racing Greyhounds were "vicious", "dangerous", "unreliable", and "trained to kill".

Their jackrabbit advocacy and appalling mischaracterization of the Greyhound pretty much crippled the Racing Industry's early attempts at significantly developing formalized adoption programs, which had already begun at tracks in New England and Florida in the late 1970s. The anti-racing extremists never tell the public about that---but I was there. I saw it all happen, and I was powerless to stop it.

I was just one of the many racing professionals who worked to present the retired Racing Greyhound to the public as a gentle, highly adaptable, well-socialized breed who would make a fascinating, loving and endearing pet----only to see

these wonderful dogs savaged in the mainstream media by the hurtful and vicious lies of those who were the most uninformed, and those who were the most tragically ignorant of him. They undoubtedly set comprehensive, formalized adoption back by nearly a decade.

Today, even as the Racing Greyhound has ascended to unimagined levels of popularity in his retirement as a beloved family pet for hundreds of thousands of adoring fans, our contemporary anti-racing extremists still work to undermine him. They still refuse to embrace him for who and what he is. They prefer instead, to recreate him in their own image and likeness, oblivious to the nature or the needs of the individual Greyhound or of the breed. The mythology they have contrived and popularized still goes virtually unquestioned by the mainstream media, and sadly, is often accepted by the public as fact.

Let's begin at the beginning. Recent investigations into the canine genome and mitochondrial DNA have revealed that the Greyhound breed probably isn't of north African/Saharan origin, as had long been romanticized.

They were likely not the legendary dogs of the Pharaohs. Their DNA is different from those desert breeds and unique. They are more likely to have emerged on the plains in Eurasia. They were probably first brought to Western Europe by the Celts. "Stonehenge", a 19th century chronicler of the breed, had promoted that idea long before modern hard science lent it credence.

The halotypes for our modern Greyhounds evolved in the wild, as coursers and hunters of unusual speed and cunning. They branched off from the Grey Wolf some 100,000 years ago. As domesticated coursing dogs and today as selectively bred track racers, Greyhounds continue to evolve and adapt as they did by natural selection.

One of the cornerstones of Grey2K's mythology is that allowing Greyhounds to do essentially what nature herself designed them to do, is somehow "cruel". We have heard and read all sorts of silly, nonsense stories of how Greyhounds are "forced to run" against their will by Greyhound professionals and the evil industry that exploits the dogs.

Now we know as a matter of indisputable scientific fact, that Greyhounds evolved and survived precisely and only because they could run faster than their prey, and faster than any other canines who competed with them for that same prey.

Running and competing is etched on their DNA. It is the most natural of all expressions for the Greyhound. Anyone who has ever worked with Racing Greyhounds knows that running and competing, for them, is not merely a desire or a want. It is a deeply and genetically ingrained demand, which calls out to them across eons of time and countless generations.

Any athletic expression whether performed by humans or animals, is accompanied by an element of risk. Insurance companies which insure the huge contracts of professional athletes are compelled to know the statistical probabilities of an athletically induced injury occurring to an athlete, in order to set their rates and to make a profit.

So while Grey2K and the Committee to Protect Dogs have noted the various injuries sustained by Racing Greyhounds over the course of 7 years, they have not placed them in any sort of a context that might illuminate the statistical probabilities of injury occurring among Greyhounds when racing. Any insurance company would demand much more information----and so should the public.

The fact of the matter is that accidental injury is not the sole province of the Racing Greyhound. There is no injury sustained by a Racing Greyhound which does not occur day in and day out, among dogs in the general canine population, thousands of times over.

We know the number of injuries sustained by Greyhounds who raced in Massachusetts over a given period of time. We know how many races were run during that period of time. Because we also know how many individual racing performances by individual Greyhounds that sample comprised (since there are 8 Greyhounds in each race)---- we therefore know that the statistical probability of any injury occurring in any given greyhound race is less than 0.03%.

We also know that the raw odds against any injury occurring in any one race, either a minor injury or career ending one, are roughly 999-1 against---whether it is an individual Greyhound's first official race or his 200th. Those are the facts that Grey2K and the Committee to Protect Dogs don't want you to know.

Nevertheless, 60-85 pound dogs who can achieve speeds of well over 40 mph and who can turn on a dime without losing significant velocity, certainly can injure themselves, sometimes seriously. Since we already have hard scientific proof that Greyhounds run as a matter of natural selection, and are driven to do so by 100,000 years of evolutionary demand, the first questions we need to ask ourselves are these:

Should we perform a surgical procedure on all Greyhounds when they are puppies so that they cannot run and therefore can never injure themselves while running?

Are Racing Greyhounds, in their tightly controlled and state-regulated racing environs and racing on a specially formulated and groomed racing surface, at a greater risk of injury than they might be racing around the local dog park?

Are they safer while coursing over rocky, tree-studded terrain?

Are they safer left to their own devices running loose in the streets, in the suburbs, or in the country, as so many dogs in the general canine population do?

I have over 4 decades of experience with the breed. As one who has raised them, trained them at the track level and kept them as retired pets, the answer to all of those questions is “no”.

One thing we do know for certain is that Greyhounds need and love to run and compete. The cruelest blow would be to deny this breed the one expression and behavior that defines them, and which has made them unique and which allowed them to survive in nature.

Show me a normal, young, healthy Greyhound who is denied the opportunity to run and to compete, and I will show you a Greyhound with a thoroughly broken heart and spirit.

As a veteran greyhound handler who has seen and dealt with every sort of injury Greyhounds can sustain--- given the choice between letting my dog run and compete over the hard ground at the dog park, or over the rocky and/or uneven terrain of the open coursing field, or over the groomed and more forgiving surface of the racetrack, I’m going to choose the racetrack every single time---and so would any sane insurance estimator.

Interestingly enough, Racing Greyhound owners don’t insure their racers against injury. At one point in time insurance companies tried to interest Greyhound owners in their insurance policies. But they could never convince enough owners to purchase the insurance to create a viable, cost-effective insurance pool. Because the owners already knew what Grey2K and the Committee to Protect Dogs refuse to acknowledge. Career ending injuries to Racing Greyhounds simply don’t occur frequently enough to justify the cost of the insurance premiums.

Since Grey2K and the Committee to Protect Dogs have not proven that Racing Greyhounds are subjected to comparatively inordinate risk doing what it is that they do as a matter of nature and genetics, it behooves us to ask them what amount of risk dogs who are employed by police and the military are exposed to?

What amount of risk are dogs used in hunting exposed to?

How about agility competition dogs?

What amount of risk are sled-racing dogs are exposed to?

What amount of risk are herding dogs exposed to?

And are they at greater or lesser risk of injury than are Racing Greyhounds?

And if they are subjected to similar or greater risks of injury, as well they might be, will we then make it a crime to train and employ dogs for any public service or for any sporting purpose at all which involves a significant element of risk? Where does this runaway train of prohibition finally stop?

Without this critical comparative information, are we not acting prejudicially toward, and singling out Greyhound owners for special censure?

Is this the way we wish for our Democracy to work? By holding one segment of the citizenry to a nebulous and undefined standard that no other segment is held to?

The Orthopedic Foundation for Animals was developed to verify and help prevent the incidences of crippling, genetic defects like hip dysplasia, elbow dysplasia, and patellar luxation among purebreds.

These degenerative, genetic defects are rampant among many purebreds and cause untold suffering to dogs and grief to their owners, as well as costing millions of dollars in veterinary treatments.

In some breeds, like the St. Bernard, Neopolitan Mastiff and the Otterhound, literally half the population is afflicted with the faulty genetics of hip dysplasia. Forty-six percent of the Chow Chow population has elbow dysplasia, as does 40% of the Rottweiler population.

These diseases can emerge as a consequence of diminished breed populations, often as a result of certain breeds who once had a function, no longer performing that function.

So dogs who were once chosen for breeding only because they excelled at their function, were replaced by dogs who were then chosen to carry on with the breed, simply because they looked a certain way in the absence of an objective method of selectivity.

The results of shrinking gene pools and loss of functionality have been devastating to many breeds and have negatively affected nearly all the working and sporting dogs.

There is one notable exception, however.

The NGA Racing Greyhound is kept virtually free of these widespread, horrific diseases of genetic defect. Those defective genetics simply cannot gain a foothold in a large population of dogs that is as genetically diverse as the Racing Greyhound, and whose breeding specimens must prove their suitability for carrying on with the breed through head to head athletic competition.

Only the most perfectly and correctly adapted individuals of a generation are chosen to input the gene pool. We identify these individuals by their racing performance excellence. Without racing we are merely rolling the dice on the future and on the future well being of the Greyhound.

So formalized macro-scale racing supports the population of Racing Greyhounds and its vast genetic wellsprings. It insures that the breed will continue to adapt and evolve soundly and correctly toward an objective, quantifiable performance ideal---- rather than toward a subjective, nebulous, arbitrary visual standard---- with a plethora of painful, crippling, sometimes fatal genetic defects.

When we endorse legislation that is blind to the nature and to the needs of an entire population of dogs and which virtually insures the degeneration, if not the near-extinction of that breed, we need think outside the box so that we can estimate what the long-term effects of such uninformed and emotionally driven legislation might have on future populations. To get a sense of that first hand, we need only look at Greyhounds outside the realm of racing.

While there are nearly 75,000 NGA Racing Greyhounds in the active racing and breeding population, there are less than 2,000 non-racing Greyhounds registered with the American Kennel Club. Their gene pool is very limited. The breeding population is extremely small and non-diverse. Many of the AKC Greyhounds are incestuously inbred. The AKC breed has fallen into to a state of noticeable dysfunction and inbreeding depression.

Some AKC Greyhound Breeders recently became alarmed by what they perceived as the palpable degeneration of their non-racing breed. These breeders fought a long, successful battle to have the AKC allow the cross-registration of NGA Racing Greyhounds.

They realized that they could revitalize and reinvigorate their morbidly inbred strains with the functional and highly evolved genetics of the NGA Racing Greyhound.

Their actions have spoken volumes about the Racing Greyhound as a thriving and magnificent breed. They have proven the beneficial effects of legalized, regulated racing and the meticulous selectivity that competitive racing demands and compels upon a population of dogs.

What's the bottom line? The Racing Greyhound has been chosen to save the non-racing Greyhound from irreversible degeneration and dysfunction. Far from being an object of pity, the Racing Greyhound is recognized as a breed apart from all others, by those who know Greyhounds.

Anti-racing ideologues and those who understand nothing about managing a colony or a large population of dogs, like to point out that if racing ended today, “Greyhounds will still be around. They’ve been around for thousands of years, haven’t they?”

Breeders and breed custodians all realize the vacuity and ignorance, if not the utter disdain, of that often-repeated statement.

Greyhounds have “always been around” only because they have always had a job to do.

In nature, they controlled vermin.

In their early domestication by men, they were hunters and coursers, providers of food.

Today, where the coursing of Greyhounds after their natural prey has been outlawed, the Greyhound’s only job is racing.

Job #1 for any successful breeder is to always seek to improve the breed. Responsible breeders who have empathy for the dogs are not content to simply “have Greyhounds around”.

Their responsibility is to insure the correct adaptation and soundness of the breed, and to focus on breeding in the strengths, and breeding out the flaws, so that future generations are even more soundly evolved and even better adapted examples of the breed. That’s the way Mother Nature did it, and it’s the least we can do.

As racing contracts, there is an exponential loss of the diverse and critical genetic foundations of the 46 female families of Racing Greyhounds. Once the last viable breeding specimen of any one of those families falls by the wayside, that crucially important mitochondrial DNA and those unique genetics are lost forever.

I don’t know which or how many of the 46 families of Racing Greyhounds Grey2K and the Committee to Protect Dogs are prepared to sacrifice on the altar of their emotional, hysterical and irrational anti-racing activism. But none of it portends any good for the Greyhound breed.

Advocacy by extinction is not an acceptable or humane concept.

We are told that racing is cruel because Greyhounds are put in sleeping compartments that are too small and cramped for them, and that they are kept in those enclosures, against their will, for 20 hours a day.

The facts are that other large breeds, which are much less active and have much less demanding exercise routines than Greyhounds, are well known to sleep for up to 16 hours per day. That's about how long canines in the wild will sleep each day too. And of course, all canines naturally seek out small, enclosed areas in which to sleep, for instinctive demands of protection and self-preservation.

Some breeds, like the Newfoundland, St Bernard and Mastiff, can sleep as long as 18 hours per day. They used to be called "mat dogs" because they could always be found sleeping on mats

So let's use some common sense here, rather than recreating the Racing Greyhound in our own image and likeness.

Racing Greyhounds expend incredible amounts of energy while training for racing, while racing and while exercising in-between races. A normal racing greyhound can lose up to 14% of its body weight during a full out racing performance. They require significantly more rest than other large breeds. Greyhounds do not store body fat like other breeds----yet they derive most of their energy from fat stores, not carbohydrates.

So it's very simple, they need their downtime. They need to relax and to feel secure when they are allowed to rest.

The idea that the breed with the highest muscle-to-bone ratio of any dog could develop their rippling muscles and maintain muscle tone and flexibility---or recuperate sufficiently in-between races---were they kept for too long a period of time in enclosures that were somehow too small or harmful to them, just doesn't square with the intensely competitive nature of racing.

Were there a better way for owners or trainers to house a large colony of active, sporting dogs, someone would have long ago discovered and adopted it. And if that had any positive effect whatsoever upon the general well being of those dogs, then it would have certainly translated into improved racing performance.

Then those dogs would have won a disproportionate amount of the races----enough so that everyone else would have been forced to follow suit just to keep up! Considering the amounts of money that are at stake at casino racing venues, it strikes me as more than a just a bit curious that greyhounds at those ultra-lucrative casino venues are housed similarly and use the same type and size sleeping compartments that greyhounds at tracks like Raynham and Wonderland use.

It might surprise you to know that in bygone days, many small, local kennel operators, racing at tracks throughout the country, used to kennel their racers off the track premises and on their own property. The dogs were usually kept in

conventional kennel enclosures like those we see at boarding kennels for large breeds.

There was no tangible benefit to it for the dogs. There was no difference in the performance results that would prove conventional kennel enclosures served the Greyhound any better than the on-premises enclosures. And the reason for that is, over the course of a normal month, a Racing Greyhound gets more hands-on and undivided, individual attention, and more frequent and vigorous exercise, than even the most active and fit pets do in a year---wherever he happens to sleep for his 16 hours a day. Greyhounds are walked, galloped, massaged, receive whirlpool sessions, groomed, bathed, inspected for injuries and otherwise fussed over as a normal part of their daily and weekly “racing routines”. They lead very busy and full lives as racing athletes.

Another foundation block of anti-racing mythology is that racing is cruel because the dogs are fed substandard meat. Even though this meat is the same meat that is used in most commercial dog foods, which the overwhelming majority of dog owners feed their pets---even though it is the same beef that zoos feed to their valuable carnivores--- when a Greyhound trainer feeds it to his racers it suddenly becomes “cruelty”.

The meat that Racing Greyhounds eat is sourced from non-food crop cows. They are not raised or desirable for human consumption as meat. The meat is significantly leaner than the beef that humans eat.

Again a bit of perspective is in order. There was a time when USDA inspected perfectly-fit-for-human-consumption Horsemeat was readily available to Greyhound trainers and many of them fed it to their racers. The only problem was that the dogs performed miserably on it after a couple of months’ time.

They lost weight, their muscles cramped under normal exercise-induced stresses and they became prone to dehydration. The highly competitive marketplace of racing again ruled the day, and USDA inspected perfectly fit-for-human-consumption Horsemeat, soon proved to be an inferior dietary staple and eventually fell out of favor.

The kennels that race at lucrative casino tracks, like Wheeling and Twin River, can afford to feed their racers Pheasant Under Glass if they choose to. Were there any tangible benefit to an alternative racing diet, someone competing at one of these venues would have garnered a bonanza of purse winnings simply by switching to it and winning a disproportionate share of the races. Then everyone else would have had to adopt a similar feeding program to keep pace. But that hasn’t happened. We’ve learned a few things about Greyhounds and their needs---and what serves them the best---over the course of 8 decades of competitive track racing.

The entire litany of Grey2K mythology is utterly perverse and non-sensible. We are told by Grey2K and by the Committee to Protect Dogs, that Greyhounds are viewed simply as “commodities” by an entrenched, exploitative and insensitive Industry. We are told that Greyhound professionals are interested only in profits.

We are then asked to believe that the first thing these greedy and unfeeling exploiters do in order to begin to accrue those profits, is to subject their significant flesh and blood Greyhound investments to cramped sleeping quarters in improper housing, prolonged periods of torturous boredom and inactivity, poor and inadequate diets, and unreasonably high risks of injury. That makes perfect sense, doesn't it?

Anyone with just a shred of critical thinking ability, or a bare modicum of business acumen, or even a solitary iota of everyday dog-smarts, can appreciate how patently contradictory, irrational, self-defeating and absurd such a situation would be. Yet this is the very essence of Grey2K's anti-racing dogma.

Caught in the crossfire we have the noble and venerable Racing Greyhound. With over 100,000 years of heritable collective consciousness, he can and should tell us all we need to know about how we can best serve him. We need to listen.

The Racing Greyhound has been unanimously acclaimed as being one of the most charming, loving, beguiling, gentle, adaptable and tractable of pets, by hundreds of thousands of pet owners who have adopted him.

To suggest that casual or institutionalized abuse is intrinsic to their upbringing, their training, their kenneling and their racing experiences, flies in the face of all common sense. Everything we know to be empirically true, as it concerns the cause and effect of breeding, environment, handling and function upon a large population of dogs---- their disposition, their temperament and their emotional well-being---tells us that the Greyhound personality is a direct a reflection of those who are his custodians.

The Racing Greyhound is the remarkable, unique, loveable, and cherished character he is, **because of**, not in spite of his selective breeding and his painstaking, meticulous upbringing-----and **because of**, not in spite of, the totality of the myriad attentions and empathetic handling he receives as valuable and dearly beloved track racer.

Protect the Racing Greyhound. Vote “NO” on Question 3.

Dennis McKeon of Swansea, Massachusetts is a retired Greyhound trainer, who spends his spare time studying the Greyhound's bloodlines and origins. He is a co-founder of RaceForAdoption.com, which encourages greyhound owners

to dedicate the winnings of selected greyhounds to adoption groups of their choice.

