

FOR THE NEW ADOPTER---A SIMPLE PRIMER TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR GREYHOUND By Dennis McKeon

Congratulations.

The Greyhound you have just adopted is a unique individual from a unique population of canines.

The Greyhound breed is steeped in antiquity and history.

While you may have read or heard that Greyhounds were once the cherished pets of the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs, recent explorations into the canine genome seem to debunk that commonly held belief.

It is more likely, given the DNA evidence, that the Greyhound breed was developed by the Celts, a tribal society which inhabited central Europe and the British Isles in Medieval times.

As western civilization progressed, Greyhounds became the favored pets of the nobility in Great Britain, so highly regarded for their skills as hunters and for their charms as companions, that it was unlawful for a “commoner” to own one for some time.

Later on, the supreme speed and skill of the greyhound attracted the notice of sportsmen and agrarians, who coveted them for their superb athleticism, their utility as killers of vermin and pests, as providers of game for the table, and who devised competitions for them, coursing small game.

These “coursing” competitions were extremely popular, and became a major sporting attraction to spectators as well as to Greyhound breeders. The pinnacle of Greyhound athletic achievement soon became victory in the esteemed Waterloo Cup coursing competition.

The Greyhound found its way to the New World, likely with the early Spanish colonists. It is known that US Army General, George Armstrong Custer, was a keeper of Greyhounds, and enjoyed hunting coyotes and smaller game with them.

We do not know for certain if any of our domestic strains are the direct female lineal descendants of these earliest importations to America. Our modern Greyhound is, however, the direct descendant of those old Waterloo Cup winners and competitors.

After World War I, an American named Owen P. Smith had a vision. He imagined Greyhounds competing on an oval track, like the racetracks that horses compete on, chasing not a hare, nor a small antelope, but a motorized mini-cart, with a prey effigy attached to it. All he had to do was invent a device that could attach to an electrified track, and which had an arm that would overhang the racing surface, and to which the “lure” could be fastened.

So the “mechanical rabbit” was born, and along with it, the sport of Greyhound Racing.

By the 1930s, track racing had become quite popular in the US, Ireland, England and Australia. A decade later, it had easily eclipsed coursing as the primary venue for competition among

Greyhounds, and by the 1950s, track racing had become a sensation, the focus of most greyhound breeding throughout the world, as it remains today.

So your greyhound comes to you through the vaporous mists of prehistory, over the emerald and verdant meadows of the British Isles, across oceans of sea and time, to the vast and endless prairies of mid-America, finally, emerging from the racetrack to the adoption kennel... into your very hands...then, onto an all-embracing couch, somewhere, in Anywhere, USA, or nearby Canada.

Throughout his many historic and heroic incarnations, the Greyhound has proven to be supremely adaptable. There are few breeds who match his record of constancy as both a companion and a provider, and none who can match his skills as an uncommonly evolved athlete.

Popular mythology has, at times, cast the Greyhound as both a vicious and bloodthirsty killer, and as a wretched, put-upon, object of pity.

You may, however, rest assured that your Greyhound remains as blissfully unaware of the mythology and the controversies that surround him, as he remains the beautifully adapted embodiment of his ancient and sweeping history and diverse bloodlines, as well as his environment and experiences as a modern, racing athlete.

The Greyhound you see before you was not bred to be a "pet". His parents were selected by his breeder because of their bloodline and family, and usually because both were outstanding performers on the racetrack, in head to head competition with their peers.

A Greyhound breeder does not factor into his selective process, whether or not the sires or dams he chooses to breed from, were congenial or companionable personalities, in the traditional sense that we normally desire in a pet.

Greyhound personality runs the gamut of types, from ebullient and outgoing, to shy and introverted, from aloof and detached, to needy and embracing, from focused and edgy, to playful and mischievous...and everything in-between.

Almost all of them, once they have become accustomed to their handlers and owners, are good-natured and loving with them and their families -- whether it is their breeder's family, their racing family, or their adoptive family.

Most Greyhounds today, in the USA, are whelped and raised on sprawling, elaborate professional breeding establishments, called "farms", as evidence of the rural origins of the Greyhound in America.

These farms have special areas and outbuildings to accommodate sires, dams, newborns, growing puppies, saplings, and greyhounds who are about to begin their race-training in earnest.

Greyhound puppies remain with their dams for a much longer period of time than do puppies of just about any other breed, some litters for as long as 5-6 months. Their dam teaches them correct "pack" behavior, as well social and play skills, and how to stalk and hunt prey.

Greyhound puppies are bursting with energy and enthusiasm, and they play hard and roughly with one another, often to the point where needle-like puppy teeth penetrate delicate and paper-thin skin, sometimes even leaving scars. It's all in a day's play for them, however, and they wouldn't have it any other way.

As they approach what we might say is canine adolescence, the puppies begin to exhibit the dramatic speed for which the breed is renown and prized, and the litters are usually placed together in extremely long, straight runs, so that they can stretch out and gallop, and begin to find their racing legs.

At this time they often begin lead-training, and are introduced to the grooming bench. Good manners and ease in being handled, to a racing athlete, are very important components to their later success.

The long runs at the Greyhound farm are separated only by chain link fencing in most cases, and you can watch one litter racing another litter, racing yet another litter, and so on, up and down the expanse of these straightaways, competing with and goading one another to keep up the pace.

This sort of competitive urge is bred into them, from centuries of meticulous and high selectivity. They don't need to be taught to compete. It is a part of who they are. Even the most shy and retiring of Greyhounds can turn into a rip-snorting, hell-bent-for-leather competitor once the gauntlet is thrown down.

The young Greyhound is often introduced to the starting box at some point in his early to mid developmental phase, with some breeders preferring to begin this training very early on. Once they have gotten the idea that they must remain in a stalking position, ready to strike as soon as the lid on the starting box is sprung, often they will learn to chase after a "drag lure". This is usually a lure made of hide or cloth, attached to a long rope, which is pulled away from them by a motorized reel.

Some breeders also have what is called a whirlygig, a small, circular track, with a horizontal pole situated inside a wooden rail, on a center hub. There is a small wheel that allows the handler to walk in a circle, pushing the pole. The wheel tracks on top of the rail, with the lure pole overhanging the track, so that the greyhounds can learn the proper footwork of racing around a sharp turn at top speed, and to do so with all abandon and good courage.

It is often on the turns at the racetrack, where the extraordinary will separate themselves from the ordinary.

When they are young, nearly fully-formed adults, in cases where the breeder does not have access to a training track, the greyhounds are then sent to a specialist, called a "finisher".

Usually, the finisher has a standard-size training track on premises (about ¼ mile in circumference) or has easy access to one. In most cases, he will introduce the young greyhounds to a facsimile of a racing kennel, where the routine and the environment approximate that of the routine and environment of the kennel at the racetrack.

Here, everything needs to be done on a tight and precise schedule. Greyhounds have remarkably accurate biological time clocks, and like any other athlete in serious training and competition, they thrive on punctuality and routine, and do less well with the random and the novel.

At the training track, they will likely also compete with Greyhounds from other breeding farms, as well as any the finisher might have been raising.

They will “school” in a rotation that approximates what they will encounter in a racing kennel. Once they have demonstrated to the finisher that they are ready to race in earnest, they will be transported to the track where their owner or breeder has chosen to race them.

The finisher can provide valuable input to the breeder/owner in this regard, as he has a fairly good idea of their level of competitive viability and maturity, and at which tracks they might find their best chances of success.

Racetracks can be either “major” or “minor” league in the quality of competition they attract, and there are levels at each stage. In this way, they are not unlike baseball franchises, where there are rookie leagues, class A leagues, class AA leagues and class AAA leagues for an athlete to demonstrate their abilities, before they can ascend, finally, to the major league level.

Some young Greyhounds are very precocious, talented enough so that they are able to compete at a major league venue as soon as they arrive. Others take time to develop their skills and to mature. Most greyhounds, whatever their natural gift, do find a level where they are able to compete credibly, and go on to have at least a moderately successful career as a racer.

Once the greyhound arrives at the racing kennel, the trainer and his/her assistants become the most important people in the Greyhound’s life. The Greyhound is entirely at the mercy of their intuition, insight, devotion, talent, compassion and skills. Good trainers are punctual, attentive, calm, empathetic, energetic, have the eyes of an eagle, and possess a super-human work ethic.

The trainer is responsible for everything that affects the Greyhound’s physical conditioning, his emotional contentment, and his overall well-being. The better trainers treat each and every Greyhound in their care, regardless of that Greyhound’s ability, as if they were the greatest racer who ever set foot on the Earth -- or flew over it.

A poor trainer, even those who try their best, can completely undo the grandest design that nature and selective breeding might engender.

Good trainers do everything within their power to make sure that stresses within the Greyhound’s environment, both existential and exercise-induced, are kept to a bare minimum. Content, relaxed, stress free Greyhounds are happy greyhounds, and with all other things being about equal, they will outperform Greyhounds who are less so.

The wise trainer always tries to maximize the potential of each and every Greyhound in his/her care, and makes sure to place them in situations where they will succeed.

Greyhounds in good health and condition are amazingly consistent and willing athletes. The more the trainer gives to them of his/her attentions, wisdom, empathy and experience, the more

he/she will receive in return. A trainer who bonds with his/her Greyhounds is always in a better competitive position than one who does not, or one who cannot.

No trainer in the world, however, can turn a Greyhound who lacks the skills, speed, stamina and desire to become a great athlete, into one who possesses them.

Fortunately, the economics of racing usually expose poor trainers in no uncertain terms. The racing world is very insular, and bad news tends to travel fast within it.

When the Greyhound reaches the point where he is to be retired, provided the breeder or owner does not plan to use the Greyhound as a sire or dam, the trainer is often the one who makes arrangements with the adoption kennel or group to place the dog.

Trainers can provide the adoption agent with useful information about the Greyhound's disposition and temperament, his quirks, his likes and dislikes, and his history. This can be a help to them in placing the Greyhound with the right adopter, in the most appropriate setting.

We already know that Greyhound "personalities" are individual and variable, and that many of their tendencies are genetically predisposed, and to some degree, predictable.

The adoption group is staffed with volunteers who, like successful trainers, usually have a great deal of experience and intuitive acumen in placing Greyhounds in a situation where they are likely to succeed.

These volunteers have often placed Greyhounds from previous generations of the same Greyhound families and from the same breeders, and inasmuch as there is a familial (and rearing) component that tends to run in families and in certain strains, they can provide unique insights to the adopter.

There are many challenges ahead for both the Greyhound and his new adoptive owners. Your Greyhound is about to embark on a voyage to an entirely new and alien universe.

He has left behind his littermates and pack members, some of whom he has been with since birth. He will confront environments, situations, places, objects, and people with whom he is entirely unfamiliar.

He has bid fond farewell to his human familiars and caretakers, their voices and their touch, to the regimented, predictable routines and the security of his racing environs, and he is now faced with novelty at every turn.

The Greyhound no longer has the outlet of training and racing—"hunting" with the pack, to expend his excess energies, and to express himself in the fashion that forged his very being.

Even the food he will eat in his new home is likely to be strange and unappealing.

As we have previously mentioned, Greyhounds thrive on punctuality and routine. They prefer the known to the unknown. Novelty can be their undoing. Novelty is what they face when beginning their lives as house pets.

Greyhounds, because they are sight-chase-and-kill hunters by nature, have extremely keen powers of perception, and a 270 degree field of laser-sharp vision. They notice things that we may not perceive, and they perceive things from the vantage point that in any given moment, they might be both predator and prey.

As a new adopter, you must be careful not to place your new Greyhound in a “sensory overload” situation.

The track trainer knows that when preparing a Greyhound to race, never to allow that Greyhound to overextend himself. Training is done by increments, gradually increasing the intensity and duration of the workout, over a period of time, until the Greyhound is finally ready to compete.

When introducing your new Greyhound pet to novel situations, environments, objects and people, you can approach it the same way. We never know how much is “enough”, until we know how much is more than enough. Take your clues from your Greyhound, before it gets to that stage. He is communicating things to you all the time.

He has to learn the boundaries and rules of life within your family unit, and you have to learn to interpret his signals and body language, and to react in a calm, compassionate manner.

Your adoption representative has likely given you the basic “do-s and don’t-s”. It is up to you to remember them, and to provide a structured and predictable routine, which will be a great help to your Greyhound as he habituates to his entirely new life outside of racing.

There are ample resources on social media, where some of the world’s most experienced adoption reps, veterinarians, veteran adopters and even racing and breeding professionals are just a simple, typewritten question away.

There is no such thing as a foolish question, and when your preliminary feeling is one of perplexity or doubt, it is always better to ask before forging ahead, or failing to make necessary accommodations.

While Greyhounds are infamous for being “45 mph couch potatoes”, and while they can sleep for 12-16 hours a day, they do need exercise.

Unless the Greyhound has a physical limitation or incapacity, the wise adopter sees to it that his Greyhound has a daily exercise outlet. This can be as simple as a brisk, mile-long walk, or a bracing galloping session in the backyard.

Your Greyhound does not have to be in “racing condition”, but neither should he be allowed to become sedentary and/or grossly overweight.

Once your Greyhound has settled into his new universe, you will begin to experience the full scope of his multi-dimensional and totally captivating charms, which have utterly beguiled humans since prehistoric times, and which have become legendary throughout the pet world.

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