

Greyhound Advocacy and Adoption – A History

By Susan Netboy

(Excerpt from Spring/Summer 2008 issue of *GCNM News*)

Looking Back

Today, as we lovingly indulge our pet greyhound's every need, care for foster dogs, schedule time for meet and greets and all the other tasks involved in greyhound adoption, it's difficult to even imagine that less than two decades ago 50,000 of these magnificent, docile creatures were summarily killed every year. Those were the days when the climate was such that the president of the American Greyhound Track Operators Association could unabashedly say to *People Magazine*, "The animals must be disposed of. It's an economic thing." At the time, there was not a breed of dog in America who was more in need of advocacy than the racing greyhound.

Astoundingly, for the first 70 years of dog racing that was the prevailing attitude held not only by those in the greyhound racing industry, but also by the majority of humane societies who considered the greyhound to be a dangerous, unadoptable animal. Consequently, dog pound incinerators in the vicinity of dog tracks were choked with the bodies of unwanted greyhounds; research facilities were provided a steady supply of victims donated or sold by members of the dog racing industry; and the services of kill-truck drivers were in constant demand. At some tracks, the bodies of losing dogs were stacked up in plain view outside the kennel compound. Few outside the racing industry knew, and no one cared.

During the 1980s, the betting public had become enthralled with the speed of the long dog. Politicians and state governments also had a stake in the sleek racing dogs – cash and lots of it. Wallowing in campaign contributions from wealthy track owners, legislators instituted an open-door policy to any palm-greasing racing lobbyist who came calling. State governments reveled in the new-found source of revenue for state coffers – never giving a moment's thought to the greyhounds who just kept dying.

Society was primed for the meteoric rise of dog racing in America. At its height in 1990, 61,000 greyhounds were brought into the world to keep a steady stream of "fresh hides" (as they were crassly referred to), readily available for North America's 60 dog tracks. Everyone involved was making money and the over-breeding of racing greyhounds was the lynchpin to success. Sadly, the silence of the animal-welfare community had provided the industry with an unfettered path to unprecedented over-breeding and nationwide expansion. But the heightened interest in greyhound racing invited a new kind of breeder into the industry's midst – the small-scale "backyard" greyhound breeder. The kind who developed a personal relationship with their pups. The kind whose income did not depend solely on the success or failure of their most recent litter. The kind who, eventually, could not stomach euthanizing another healthy three-year old dog that they had raised from puppy-hood. The kind whose advocacy for the racing greyhound would contribute to a movement that would ultimately bring a multi-billion dollar industry to its knees.

The Advent of Greyhound Advocacy and Adoption

During the latter half of the 1980s, a few fledgling advocacy/adoption groups emerged in various parts of the country. The struggles were many, creating interest in the greyhound as a pet, refuting misconceptions about greyhound temperament. And a host of other challenges, not the least of which was money. These were folks who by and large had no connection to the racing industry and wanted no part of it, except for the dogs. Having seen the worst of the worst, they spoke the unbridled truth about the plight of the racing greyhound. It was a time before there was pressure from the racing industry to expunge the words “rescue, save and advocacy” from the vernacular. A time when everyone involved in greyhound adoption considered themselves advocates for the dogs – including the handful of greyhound breeders who were pushing for reform.

The pro-adoption breeders ultimately opted to form a new greyhound adoption organization, but their numbers were few so relationships were fostered with rescue organizations outside the industry. The big hurdle would be to obtain permission and financial support from the greyhound racing industry. The industry was quick to recognize the dangers posed by adoption and the intrusion of outsiders, but slow to grasp the fact that its very survival would depend on its response to this new concept. If this fledgling effort for industry-supported adoption was to be considered, concessions by adoption groups would have to be made. The code of silence that had long been the industry’s standard of acceptance would have to be met. Although the language adopted was not quite that explicit, it accomplished the purpose: In return for an annual grant of \$1,000 per chapter, each would have to agree to operate in support of the industry and issue no negative quotes about greyhound racing to the news media. Money in exchange for silence – not a wholly unreasonable demand - especially from a business that could ill-afford scrutiny. The stipulation became known as “neutrality” or what one might call “the thin grey line” between those whose focus would be strictly limited to finding homes for greyhounds, and those who believed that little change would occur without the freedom to speak about the stark realities facing tens of thousands of racing greyhounds. Ultimately, everyone found a niche where their efforts could make a difference.

In the early 1990s most members of the racing industry were complacent with the status quo. They took care of business in the same way they had for generations – separate the chaff from the wheat and get rid of it in the most expeditious manner. After all, you couldn’t succeed in greyhound racing with a farm or kennel full of losers; besides, there had been no negative consequences to that business model for decades. But times were changing... greyhounds were seen walking on-leash down city streets, wagging their tails and offering kisses when greeting strangers and romping with children in backyards. Some were even graying from the novelty of old age. The public began to take notice that racing greyhounds were not just a commodity; they were loving, affectionate pets. It seemed that with every pet greyhound that stepped into the limelight, the allure of greyhound racing dimmed bit by bit.

But it wasn’t just the general public who began to notice.

The Mainstream Media Gets Involved

For 70 years the dog racing industry had enjoyed a free ride completely beyond the scrutiny of the mainstream press. Sports writers had extolled the attributes of the day's big winner and written glowing promotional pieces about their local dog tracks. The sub-culture beneath the glitz and glamour of the clubhouse had never been explored. Now, the press was brimming with curiosity. Fueled with press releases, statistics and information provided by greyhound advocates, inquisitive reporters were beginning to ask questions – questions for which the industry didn't have any viable public-relations responses. And the most stinging inquiry of all: "What is the fate of the tens of thousands of greyhounds that aren't being adopted?"

The floodgates had opened. Over the next five years, hundreds of adoption articles appeared in newspapers across the country, and each included a reference to the number of greyhounds that were destroyed annually. Major media pieces focused on the plight of the racing greyhound – *Life Magazine*, *The Miami Herald*, *Inside Edition*, *CBS News*, *People*, *National Geographic*, *Penthouse*, *Tucson Citizen*, *CNBC*, *The Crusaders*, *I Witness Video*, *The Boston Globe*, *CNN*, *the Associated Press*. And greyhound abuse cases that had previously been relegated to a few lines on page 58 were fodder for headline news. The public's long slumber was finally over; but unfortunately the nightmare for the majority of racing greyhounds would continue for many years to come.

The public scrutiny forced change within the racing industry as more people came to recognize that the old way was no longer acceptable. In some areas of the country, trainers began to hold onto dogs until they could be taken in by an adoption group. And although the industry's financial support for adoption was minuscule, and limited to industry-friendly groups, it did indicate that the racing industry was beginning to come on board.

The tipping point in terms of major industry change occurred in 1992, after the Chandler Heights, Arizona, massacre took center stage in newspapers all over the country. The public outrage that surfaced after the discovery of 143 greyhounds who had been shot to death shook the industry to its core. This, along with a number of other high-profile abuse cases – dead and dying greyhounds in Key West, Yuma, Coeur d'Alene, Cherry Lake, Tucson, Summerfield, Dowling Park, Ballinger and Pensacola – seared the plight of the racing greyhound into the entire country's consciousness. It also forced an American Greyhound Council spokesperson to issue the following declaration to his people: "We must face up to reality. We have a terrible image. And we can't expect that image to be whitewashed by rhetoric or tokenism." Roger Caras, president of the ASPCA, was the first to test the sincerity of the statement. The ASPCA came away with an AGC grant of \$100,000 that was earmarked for adoption groups – irrespective of their position on greyhound racing – though these monies were not distributed among all eligible groups.

The Greyhound Adoption Movement Flourishes

Adoption organizations of all stripes flourished and multiplied throughout the country.

Everyone pulled together for the sake of the dogs, especially during track closings and other crises. The threat that adoption groups who dared to speak out against the racing industry would not get access to greyhounds proved utterly ineffective. The reality was, and is, that trainers need to move losing dogs in order to make room for potential winners. Most trainers didn't really care who took them off their hands. An increasing number of trainers welcomed the opportunity to be a part of something genuinely positive for the dogs. And out of it emerged a few true industry heroes; people who would hold dogs for adoption regardless of cost, inconvenience and pressure to opt for other alternatives.

Almost all adoption groups shared a common goal: To save as many greyhounds as possible. We became a part of a movement that over the next 15 years would unfold as the most successful single-breed rescue effort in history. With adoption numbers rising, and a decline in industry profits forcing a decrease in breeding, fewer greyhounds were being destroyed. The racing industry boosted financial support for adoption programs affiliated with race tracks and emphasized its concern for the welfare of the dogs. But in spite of these efforts, redemption for the dog racing industry remained elusive; particularly as evidence of greyhounds in research facilities, and other cruel means of disposal, continued to surface.

By the mid-nineties, it was evident that the greyhound racing industry had more to worry about than its tarnished image. The entire gambling industry was changing. Indian gaming, riverboat and off-shore gambling were booming, leaving dog racing little more than a few scraps of the gambling pie. Profits were down from one end of the country to the other, and the downward spiral was apparent at all levels of the industry. Dog tracks and breeding farms were cutting their losses and shutting down. The expansion of simulcast venues failed to adequately reverse the downward trend. Now the press was focused on the financial decline of the dog racing industry.

The Call to Arms

Double-edged as it may have been, greyhound adoption provided the only positive publicity the industry had experienced in years. But there was imminent danger in the increasing power of adoption groups. If the various groups ever united in the recognition that to a large degree the very fate of the racing industry was in their hands, a decades-old way of life would come to a crashing halt. The interface between adoption and advocacy would have to be dealt with. In 1997 the American Greyhound Council and the National Greyhound Association signed on with a public relations firm that represented the fur industry and animal research corporations. Their expertise was in advising clients in the animal-use business who found themselves mired in controversy. Their adeptness at justifying the indefensible was legendary.

Talking points and catch phrases were formulated. Buzz words like "extremists, terrorists and animal-rights whackos" were introduced to characterize the opposition. It was a virtual declaration of war, designed to discredit and marginalize greyhound welfare advocates. From a cold-blooded business perspective, it was a smart move on the part of the racing industry. Pressure from a relatively small number of greyhound

advocates had been amazingly effective, and one can hardly blame the industry for trying to defend itself. In the desperate struggle for survival, it really didn't matter that their derogatory epithets didn't represent the truth which, as they say, is the first casualty of war.

But it wasn't enough to have industry spokespersons engaging in name calling; industry-controlled adoption organizations would also have to take up the call to arms. To remain in the industry's good graces, track adoption programs, satellites in non-racing states and other like-minded organizations would have to take on the defense and promotion of the dog racing industry.

The Great Divide

Compliance was not difficult to establish, especially with the scare tactics and wholesale nonsense that was injected into the rumor mill: "All the dogs will be killed if anyone speaks out against racing. Greyhound racing is a 'political' issue; non-profit organizations are not allowed to have an opinion. Greyhounds will become extinct without dog racing." Leadership for this new adversarial approach to greyhound adoption was not hard to come by. Those working in the trenches were so overwhelmed trying to save dogs that they never looked up to notice what was going on at the top. Some were more than willing to become water carriers for the industry. A witch hunt to ferret-out and blacklist "anti-racing" adoption organizations failed to silence the opposition, or to prevent access to the dogs, but it did serve to fracture the adoption movement and fuel hostilities. Eventually, the middle ground and the comfort of "neutrality" were erased – everyone was pigeon-holed as either "pro-racing" or "anti-racing." And the rhetoric was ramped up on both sides of the issue.

The racing industry experienced a certain amount of relief as the century came to a close. The press had tempered its focus and adoption stories had become passé. But the hard-core animal-rights community who had no connection to greyhound adoption, and had previously stayed out of the fray, still smelled blood in the water. A frontal assault against dog racing was launched in the year 2000 with a ballot initiative to ban greyhound racing in Massachusetts. Fearing this threat was a harbinger of 21st century values, racetrack owners from all over the country poured millions of dollars into a campaign opposing the ban. Although the initiative failed by a razor-thin margin, it forced everyone in the adoption community to further refine their positions. Some stood shoulder to shoulder with the industry in vocal opposition to the ban; others lent both vocal and financial support in favor of the initiative.

A Look at the Future

The industry was right. The 21st century did bring change and none of it has proven beneficial to greyhound racing in America. Additional track closings have reduced the number of dog tracks to 34. The industry's assertion that "nearly all *'adoptable'* greyhounds are adopted" continues to be undermined by the discovery of greyhound bodies and the disappearance of designated pets from racetrack kennels. And so, the interminable haggling over numbers and terminology drones on. However, the final chapter will not be written by either "pro-" or "anti-racing" factions, but rather by the very

force that once served as an excuse for killing greyhounds – the harsh, cold-hearted reality of bottom-line economics.

The live-racing product which brought so much wealth to a few, and so much misery and death to hundreds of thousands of greyhounds, is nearing the finish line. The goose that laid so many golden eggs for greyhound breeders is now laying poker chips and slot machines for track owners whose interest is money, not greyhounds. It's only a matter of time before state governments change gambling laws, and release the racing greyhound from its servitude to state government. At least casino patrons are *willing* victims of corporate greed and state budget deficits.

As greyhound lovers, should we not all welcome that day? The day when we no longer face the heartbreak of saving some and leaving others behind; when the greyhound no longer needs the voice of an advocate, because he has the same chances for a long and happy life that every other breed enjoys. And when that day comes, the magnificent greyhound breed will – just as it has for centuries – survive the transition and continue to grace our sofas and bring love and joy into our lives.

About the author: As a founding member of Northern California Sighthound Rescue, Susan became involved in greyhound rescue in 1986; she briefly worked with Greyhound Pets of America in the late 1980s. Her first encounter with the greyhound racing industry evolved out of an effort to obtain the release of racing greyhounds from Letterman Army Institute of Research and eleven other research facilities in California and Arizona. The resulting revelations about the system of dog racing and the state of greyhound welfare left her with an indelible impression – silence was not an option. In 1991, she founded the Greyhound Protection League, a national advocacy voice for racing greyhounds and Greyhound Friends for Life, a California greyhound rescue organization.

Copyright 2008 Susan Netboy