

History of the Greyhound

Ancient Times

In Egypt, the ancestors of modern greyhounds were used in hunting and kept as companions. When the pet hound died, the Egyptian family would go into mourning. The walls of Egyptian tombs often were decorated with images of their hounds. The pharaohs kept greyhound-type dogs among their hunting animals. The only breed of dog mentioned by name in the Bible is the greyhound (Proverbs 30:29-31, King James Version).

The Greeks probably bought greyhound-type dogs from Egyptian merchants some time before 1000 BC. The ancestor of the greyhound makes an appearance in the first work of Western literature, Homer's *The Odyssey* (800 BC). After a long absence the hero Odysseus returns home in disguise and is recognized only by his faithful hound Argus.

The Romans used hounds for coursing, testing their speed and agility against the hare. The Roman poet Ovid describes coursing in the early first century AD: the impatient greyhound is held back to give the hare a fair start. Arrian, a second-century AD Roman, wrote that the purpose of coursing is not to catch the hare, but to enjoy the chase itself.

Middle Ages

Greyhounds became nearly extinct during times of famine in the Middle Ages. They were saved by clergymen who protected them and bred them for the nobility. Hunting in Europe and Asia with specially bred and trained dogs was the sport of nobles and the high clergy, in large part because they owned or controlled much of the land suitable for hunting. The greyhound is the first breed of dog mentioned in English literature (Chaucer's 14th century *The Canterbury Tales*).

Renaissance

Coursing races, with dogs chasing live rabbits, became popular during the sixteenth century. Queen Elizabeth I of England (1533-1603) had Thomas, Duke of Norfolk, draw up rules judging competitive coursing. These rules established such things as the hare's head start and the ways in which the two hounds' speed, agility and concentration would be judged against one another. Winning was not necessarily dependent on catching the hare (although this did earn a high score). Often the hare escaped. Unlike Elizabeth, King James I (1566-1625) preferred hunting to hard work. He was an avid fan of greyhound coursing. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) mentioned greyhounds in a number of his plays.

By the close of the sixteenth century, many more people were able to own game dogs such as greyhounds. The need to exterminate unwanted animals from newly-claimed farmland led to the breeding of cast-off greyhounds (and other breeds) of the upper classes.

Eighteenth Century

Late in this century, the English Earl of Orford crossbred greyhounds with several other breeds, including the bulldog, in pursuit of greyhounds with greater stamina. His experiments met with some success, but experts differ about whether modern greyhounds descend from cross-breedings with bulldogs. One of the most famous greyhounds of this century is Snowball, who won four cups and over thirty matches in his coursing career. In the eighteenth century breeders began to maintain pedigrees of their dogs.



Nineteenth Century

Greyhounds remained a familiar sight among the royalty and nobility of England in the nineteenth century. The popularity of greyhound coursing in Britain increased greatly in the early nineteenth century. At huge coursing grounds like Ashdown and Amesbury, spectators followed the dogs on horseback. In live-hare coursing, two greyhounds were slipped (released) together. The winner was judged by a code of points.

Greyhounds were imported to America from Ireland and England in the mid-1800s not to course or race, but to rid Midwest farms of an epidemic of jackrabbits. The greyhound soon became a familiar sight on farms in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. Americans soon discovered that greyhounds could be a source of sport. One of the first national coursing meets was held in Kansas in 1886.

The US cavalry used greyhounds as scouts, since the greyhounds were fast enough to keep up with the horses. General George Custer reportedly owned 14 coursing greyhounds, which he coursed the night before the battle of Little Big Horn.

Twentieth Century

In 1921, Owen Patrick Smith invented the mechanical lure. He opened the first greyhound track (circular in shape) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Six years later he owned 25 tracks around the nation, including ones in Florida, Montana, and Oregon. Florida became the U.S. capital of the sport after dog racing was introduced there in 1922. The first track race in England opened in 1926. Greyhound racing became very popular with the working classes in America and Britain. Before long it spread to Ireland and Australia as well. Greyhound racing has become one of the most popular spectator sports in America.

For the first year of their lives greyhound puppies live together with their littermates and are handled frequently by the breeders and other staff. They are given a lot of exercise in large pens that allow them to run at full speed. Training starts at about eight weeks of age. They are placed in individual crates in the kennel from 4-18 months of age, where they spend most of their time between exercise periods and training.

Training with the drag lure begins around 10 to 12 months of age. A mechanical device drags an artificial lure along the ground so the puppy can see it and pursue it. By age 18 months, their training is usually over, and they are sent to the track. They are given a number of chances to finish in the top four in their maiden race and avoid being retired—put up for adoption or euthanized. The best runners go to the most competitive tracks. Dogs that fail to continue making money for their owners are retired.

Competitive coursing is an amateur sport in the United States today. The greyhounds compete for honors, not money. A white plastic bag, as it is pulled by a line running along a series of pulleys in a large field, mimics the erratic movements of a wild hare.

Greyhound Adoption

The greyhound adoption movement began in 1982. Prior to that time, the vast majority of dogs retired from tracks were put down. Today, with dozens of groups around the nation devoted to placing retired racers in loving homes, more than half of those that retire each year make the happy transition to pet status. GreySave, an all-volunteer greyhound adoption group based in Southern California, uses foster homes to acclimate greyhounds to life as pets and family members. Home visits and dog personality profiles help the group match the right greyhound with the right family.

by Jim Jeffers

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