

Deborah Haak
Ms. Schwanbeck
Honors Engl. IV 17 Nov. 2006

The Greyhound

One may see greyhound racing as simply another sport to entertain the public today. However, most spectators are unaware of the deep roots from which greyhounds have come, and many do not realize what takes place 'behind the scenes' at racetracks across the country. The fate of retired racers might not often cross the mind of a casual bystander, much less the possibility of adoption. As a breed, greyhounds have an extensive history as well as relevance in today's world, and they make excellent pets.

Greyhounds have a long, rich history reaching back thousands of years. The first records of greyhound-like dogs originate from Egypt. The Egyptians highly revered their dogs; one reason may be connected to their belief in the god Anubis, "a deity who measured the deeds of a person's life at the moment of his or her death, . . . represented as a Greyhound" (Stern 14). Greyhounds "were treated as members of the family," writes Cynthia A. Branigan, and the birth of a greyhound was considered "second only to the birth of a son" (29). The royal families mummified their greyhounds after death and placed them in the family tombs. The ancient Greeks also held the greyhound in high regard. Several philosophers and authors wrote about the breed: It is suggested that Odysseus' faithful dog, Argos, from Homer's *The Odyssey*, could well have been a greyhound (Branigan 38). One story of Greek mythology follows the goddess of the hunt, Artemis, as she was bathing one day. Actaeon, out hunting, hid and watched her. When Artemis discovered him, she turned him into a stag and set his own forty-eight greyhounds on him. The names of all forty-eight are still known today (Branigan 45).

Greyhounds made their way into Europe, where, for a long period of time, only nobility and royalty were allowed to own them. Greyhounds can be seen in European art and literature: "in paintings and sculptures by such notable artists as Veronese, Pisanello, and Uccello," as well as in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and mention in some of Shakespeare's plays (Stern 17). The breed was brought across the Atlantic Ocean first by explorers such as Columbus, Ponce de Leon, Cortez, and Pizarro, among others (Branigan 98). Unfortunately, much of the time, greyhounds and other dogs were trained and used by the explorers in brutal, cruel acts against the native Indians in the Americas. The first greyhound of note to appear in the American colonies was a male named Azor, owned by German General Freidrich von Steuben, who trained troops at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777-78 (Branigan 103).

However, greyhounds became more common in the United States in the 1800s. Many Irish and British immigrants settling in the Midwest brought "not only their Greyhounds but also their love of the sport of coursing" (Stern 18). Lee Livingood describes the sport: "In lure coursing, a pair of sighthounds of the same breed competes to see who is the fastest and most agile" (227). Today, a lure is usually a white plastic bag instead of live rabbits, as have been used for centuries. Greyhounds were brought to the United States with the intention of ridding fields of pests like rabbits. The sport of coursing was frowned upon by many people because of the incredible bloodshed. Owen Patrick Wilson worked to eliminate the necessity for loss of life: he invented the first practical motorized artificial lure in 1912 (Branigan 146), which set the stage for modern-day racing. "Smith's invention also allowed the greyhounds to run in a neat circle, making it much easier to watch the race and identify a winner" (Halse 135). Greyhound racing as a new sport took off in the 1920s, and it has been in business ever since.

There is much debate over the ethics of racing and of the racing industry. Some leaders within the greyhound adoption community are working hard to see the sport banned. The racing industry is riddled with stories of neglect and abuse. Catherine O'Sullivan tells of one greyhound coming to an adoption center after her racing days were over, underweight, "infested with hundreds of ticks, in her ears, between the pads of her paws, around her genitals--everywhere. Her entire right side was stained yellow from being crated, in her own urine, for weeks, maybe longer." Another recent discovery of mistreatment involves a man named Richard Favreau who supposedly transported 100 to 200 greyhounds from the Tucson Greyhound Park to Colorado adoption agencies in 2005 and 2006 (Clancy). However, there are no records of the dog's whereabouts at present. Favreau has not "provided documentation of the dogs either from the National Greyhound Association, the official registry for racing dogs, or showed proof they were handled properly." It is reported that in the past, Favreau has sent other greyhounds to Colorado State University's veterinary medicine program for experiments and research (Clancy). Unfortunately, such is the fate of many retired racers: "Because of their superb physical condition and good temperaments," writes Branigan, "Greyhounds are highly prized lab animals" (161).

Some oppose greyhound racing because it is seen as exploitation of animals for humans' entertainment and profit. The industry, they claim, has simply become a business to some owners. The owners care more about the money than the dogs, and that is why many tracks in the country provide such poor living conditions. The aspect of profit resonates with Branigan as well: "When money is scarce it can be easy to stint on food, bedding or medical attention... it can be easy to race a dog that should be rested or to race a dog when track conditions are substandard" (162). Jill Haak, a former greyhound owner, recognizes the shortcomings of the industry in such areas, but she is quick to point out that running is what greyhounds want to do, what they are built to do. She would support racing reform over the abolishment of it. Others maintain that although the racing industry as a whole has worked to "clean up [its] act" by advocating adoption for retired dogs and improving track conditions, the fact remains that the Tucson Greyhound Park, the local racing park, is exerting no effort to join that movement. Laurie Halse Anderson speaks through the main character, Maggie, of a story about caring for greyhounds after they have retired: "Dog tracks should be illegal, but as long as they exist, the least we can do is see to it that the dogs are well taken care of" (109).

From a differing point of view, Branigan asks the question, "If racing as an institution is gone, then what will become of Greyhounds, both present and future?" (190). She points out that greyhounds are well known today as a direct result of racing. Should racing be taken away, the greyhounds' claim to fame would also disappear. Both Branigan and Stern suggest that if the amount of dogs bred for racing was limited, ergo, fewer dogs were registered with the National Greyhound Association, then problems would be easier to address. "Certainly fewer dogs means fewer retirees, fewer mouths to feed and ... fewer farms to inspect" (Branigan 162). According to Branigan's calculations, there are approximately 100 people employed to monitor conditions at all the greyhound farms and kennels in the country (162).

When a greyhound is no longer fit to race, it is faced with either euthanasia (or worse) or adoption. Greyhounds make excellent pets. They are people-loving, affectionate dogs, "neither dominant nor demanding," and very docile (Stern 26). The "sheer beauty and grace" of a greyhound running around the perimeter of a dog park once brought tears to the eyes of Karyn Zoldan, an active member of Arizona Greyhound Rescue. Jill Haak saw her greyhound, Foxy, as a real friend, with a sweet personality and a "mellow temperament."

Greyhounds are unique in that by the time they are finished racing and ready for adoption, they are mature dogs. They have been handled, and their turnout schedule from the track often makes them easy to housebreak (Zoldan). However, “They never enjoyed the typical puppy hood of one to one ownership,” Karyn Zoldan says, and therefore they are not accustomed to certain aspects of home life, such as stairs, TVs, and even toys. Mary Freeman notes that greyhounds often take time to warm up to people because of their past experiences at the track. She watched her greyhound, Domino, learn over a period of six years to become “more and more trusting and loving as time went on.”

The breed has “a short, light coat” that does not shed excessively (Livingood 18). Greyhounds rarely bark, therefore, Daniel B. Stern writes, “they are a very poor choice as watchdogs” (26); “They are quiet and not yappy, like so many small breeds” (Freeman). Many might wonder where the name ‘greyhound’ originated from (since greyhounds are, surprisingly, rarely grey). The National Greyhound Association offers an explanation: The word “Greyhound” is derived not from the animal's color but from its history. The ancient Greeks may have called them “greekhounds,” or may have named them “gazehounds” since they relied on sight rather than smell in hunting. The name may also have been derived from the Latin “gradus” meaning degree, which related to the care exercised in breeding these aristocratic animals (“Facts”).

The breed has earned the nickname “couch potatoes,” because although they are capable of great speed – up to 45 miles per hour (“Facts”) – they need a soft place to rest afterwards (considered a ‘reward’ for their fast-paced track life). Because greyhounds are sight hounds, they must never be let off the leash in an open area: the running and chasing instincts will always be present, even if a dog is trained to resist them after its racing days are over. As Lee Livingood puts it, “when [your greyhound] takes off after a rabbit that you can’t even see or startles and bolts at some strange noise, he’ll be in the next town before you can even get the word ‘come’ out of your mouth” (18). A common misconception about greyhounds is founded on the fact that they wear muzzles when they race; therefore, they are thought to be aggressive. However, the dogs wear muzzles to prevent injury from any “over-zealous” activity (a greyhound’s skin is very thin and tears easily), and “to assist in determining photo-finishes (a camera technique developed for dog racing)” (“Facts”).

Greyhound adoption is vitally important to save the dogs from cruel treatment, or ultimately from death after their racing careers are over. One looking to adopt can adopt from a track kennel or an adoption agency. Adopting straight from a track would generally mean that the cost would be lower than adopting from a private group, and also a larger selection of dogs would be available (Livingood 40). However, a track’s main priority is not adoption, and so personal involvement of the track personnel with the potential adopter throughout the adoption process may or may not be optimal. A private group is able to give attention to each individual adopter, both before and after adoption is completed. Arizona Greyhound Rescue outlines a procedure which must be completed in order for adoption to be authorized: first, an application asking a series of questions about the applicant’s home, expectations, and family life must be submitted to and reviewed by a committee. As soon as the application is approved, an adoption counselor will make a home visit to the house of the prospective owner, to ensure the safety and compatibility of a greyhound in that house. After submission of paperwork and an adoption fee, the adopters will choose a greyhound and take it home! AGR includes that “an experienced adopter [will be available] to help work through issues and problems that might arise with the new adopter and to support and encourage them along the way” (“AGR's Adoption Process”).

Karyn Zoldan and Mary Freeman both agree that to adopt (or “rescue”) a greyhound is to save the dog from “an unknown fate” (Zoldan). Branigan claims it is “a life-transforming experience” (171). Adopters of a greyhound can “become part of a larger greyhound family of caring owners and a support system” (Freeman). Says Mary Freeman: “Adopting a greyhound is one of the most wonderful and fulfilling experiences a person can have. You will have adopted one of the most elegant, sweet and loving creatures that exists and you’ll feel great because you saved a life and you’ll have a fantastic companion and friend...”

Livingood simply states, “Greyhounds are fun” (216).

The necessity for greyhound adoption is clearly evident; the breed’s long history compels one to respect the present-day racers and to ensure that they are treated humanely. In order to achieve this, one of two courses must be taken: either improve the conditions within the racing industry, or shut it down completely. Since greyhounds have been bred to run for thousands of years, they should be able to keep running. Greyhounds also deserve a loving home, like all other breeds, once they have retired. The first step in accomplishing such ideas is to inform the public, to spread the word far and near that these beautiful dogs must be recognized and celebrated.