

## **FITNESS FOR FURBABIES**

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Today, someone asked if I might post guidelines for taking a sedentary, out-of-shape, retired greyhound, and bringing them back to a reasonable state of physical fitness. While there are no magic formulas to accomplish this, and inasmuch as there are usually several ways to climb the proverbial mountain, there are some basic methods, strategies and precautions to use -- and to be aware of and to take. An active, fit, mentally and physically engaged and challenged greyhound, will likely have a much better quality of life, than one who is allowed to become sedentary, bored, and entirely out of shape.

When we speak of "fitness" in a retired greyhound pet, it does not necessarily mean getting the greyhound in professional, performance shape. But we do want to condition, tone and strengthen muscles, and to increase "Anaerobic" capacity -- which is essentially the ability to persevere while out of breath. And we want to increase "Aerobic" capacity -- which is essentially what we call "staying ability", or stamina.

So when we are dealing with an out of shape greyhound, the first step in the process is to develop a deep fitness base. We do this by walking them, as briskly as possible. As with any exercise regimen, we increase the duration, intensity and frequency of the exercise by increment. It is not too little exercise to begin with half-mile or so walks, once or twice daily, gradually working up to as long a distance as 2 miles, once or twice daily. Or more, if we and the dog(s) are so inclined.

Once we have worked up to the 2 mile point, or thereabout, we can begin to add free galloping to the greyhound's routine, within enclosed areas, and again, that should be monitored so that the dog does not overextend---which they are not likely to do, if they are a single dog, galloping alone.

In the event that there are 2 or more dogs involved, begin by limiting the exercise to no more than a minute or so of hard, free galloping. We need to watch the dogs, and see what their level of fatigue is, and react accordingly. Certainly, in warm, humid and/or hot weather, it is especially important not to allow them to become overly stressed or overheated during exercise.

Depending upon the time of year in most areas, swimming can be a great exercise adjunct. Greyhounds, who lack the buoyancy of dogs with more body fat, have to work hard to swim, and so that activity, again, needs to be monitored. Even with in-shape track dogs, I would limit swimming sessions to a minute or so, less to begin with. However, frequent access to swimming will allow the dog to work up to longer sessions.

Now if our only venue for confined exercise is a fenced in yard, what we used to call a "lure pole", and what is now called a "flirt pole" can be a great exercise aid. We can make a simple lure pole with a buggy whip (buy it at a tack shop), and simply attach a cloth to the end of the whip---for the dog to chase. We extend our arm holding the tool, and walk briskly in long circles, and figure 8s -- and most greyhounds will be quite enthusiastic and willing to chase with good vigor -- a simple cloth at the end of a buggy whip. We can make it dance a bit, up and down, and the greyhound will jump and lunge at it, using the necessary muscles, as he tries to catch it.

Again, begin with 30-60 seconds or so of vigorous lure poling, and increase the time by 15-20 second increments --- 2 minutes of animated lure poling is a good workout---and too much for a beginner.

A more rudimentary version of a lure pole can be made by attaching about 18 inches of rope to a broomstick, and then attaching a rag or an old stuffed toy to the end of the rope.

In any case, it is great fun for greyhounds.

A "squawker" is also a tool that is useful, not only for call-back, but to encourage galloping. If we have a longish stretch of turf, where one person can release the dog, and another can catch him -- if the catcher has a squawker, preferably in or attached to an old animal skin or even a stuffed toy, the dog will usually respond by racing full tilt to the person with the sound effects and the lure. Make sure the ground we are exercising on is free of rocks or dangerous holes that could cause serious injury. A 200 yard sprint is a good point to begin, with a dog who has been adequately prepared, as previously described, via walking --work up to 2 or 3 of those gallops, per session, which is good work for a dog who is not actively competing in racing or lure-coursing.

Now, for the cool-down -- and this is very important. Never allow the greyhound to "tank up" all at once, on water---which he/she will need after a tiring exercise episode. Smaller drinks, 30 seconds or so apart, while walking them off to cool down, is the best way. Ideally, we also want the greyhound to empty their bladder, before and after bouts of exercise, as we walk them, and walk them off. In warm, humid and/or hot weather, hose them down thoroughly (most greyhounds are used to being hosed down with cold water after exercise), or apply wet, cold towels, to assist in cool-down. An ice chest, with cool water, ice cubes and towels inside, is a simple add-on to our travelling fitness extravaganza. (As is a basic first aid kit).

Once cooled off, or back at home, it is a good idea to wash paws, paying special attention to the cuticles of each digit, and to the webbed spaces in between, topside and underside. A soft bristled nail brush, or even a toothbrush, can do a good job of cleaning those sensitive areas thoroughly, of any accumulated debris that may cause discomfort or infection.