

SOCIALIZATION OR HABITUATION?

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It seems that more and more people who are unfamiliar with purpose-bred dogs, who are raised within large colonies, are being confused by the reams of disinformation published on the internet, particularly as it concerns NGA Racing Greyhounds.

There are many people whose vision has been narrowed and occluded by the litany of propaganda that exists about racing and racing greyhounds, to the extent that they can't even imagine a greyhound being completely happy and fulfilled—or even loved—as a natural racing greyhound, believing instead, that a greyhound can only find true happiness in adoption. This is a conceit that is absolutely tragic, to anyone who has ever cared for a kennel full of happy, content, healthy and well-loved racers.

The very idea that a greyhound who has yet to absorb the entirety of his newfound adopted life, and who appears reluctant to embrace it at once, might actually miss and long for his previous life, is beyond the scope of their understanding. This is a direct result of the false, popular narrative that has become an impediment to an adopter's ability to perceive and intuit many of their greyhound's behaviors, and an existential threat to the NGA racing breed itself.

Today, most greyhounds who are bred to race on the track, are raised as part of a large breeding colony. These colonies of greyhounds are usually said to have been raised on a "farm". There can be anywhere from 50 to 500 greyhounds housed at such a facility.

Unlike most other breeds, greyhounds are kept with their dams for extended periods of time, sometimes until the puppies are nearly young saplings. These dams teach the puppies about pack etiquette, they demonstrate "hunting" techniques, and serve as the "playground monitors" for their developing, energetic, and rowdy, would-be racers. At some point, the litter of youngsters is introduced to other litters of similar age and development, usually around the time that serious race-training is to begin.

One of the many remarkable things with which adopters and other greyhound enthusiasts are always impressed, is the greyhound's capacity for getting along with other dogs, even with those to whom they are complete strangers. This is because correct pack behaviors and socialization skills are learned and reinforced at every stage of the greyhound's life — from the farm, to the advanced training facility, to the kennel at the racetrack.

As a result of their colonial, pack-centric upbringing and racing environments, there is probably no breed of canine which has better or more highly evolved, canine coping and social skills, or who is more habituated to a punctual, predictable routine, than the NGA Racing Greyhound. When greyhounds experience difficulties with other dogs, it is often because those other dogs are simply not as well schooled in pack etiquette and social skills.

Because they are valuable, meticulously and expensively bred individuals, racing greyhounds are handled by their human caretakers at very early stages, where grooming, leash-training, and chase-play are all begun. This is done to prepare the greyhound for his/her racing career, where their proper deportment and manageability are crucial to the individual greyhound's success as a racer.

There, at the kennels and at the racetrack itself, they will encounter dozens of people each and every day, from the racetrack leadouts, to the various state and track judges, to the local and track veterinarians, to their personal trainers and assistants (and often their families), as well as assorted visitors to the kennel, all as part of their training, racing and career development. Greyhounds, during the course of their racing careers, may perform at a variety of racing venues, as they seek their competitive level and a racetrack that flatters their individual talents and aptitudes. In so doing, they will encounter and become familiar with dozens of other people.

It is a symptom of our culture, where we often aspire to ascribe human emotions, reactions and perceptions to animals, that many people have been led to believe that a performing, purpose-bred canine, such as a Racing Greyhound, cannot possibly be happy or fulfilled, as a member of a pack or a colony of other, performing, purpose-bred canines.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Greyhounds, like most canines, have amazingly accurate, biological time-clocks. Like most canines, greyhounds demand routine and regimentation. They thrive on it. They are nothing, after all, if not highly sociable creatures of habit. There are few environments or situations which demand more consistency, punctuality, adherence to a routine, repetition and regimentation, than those of a professional performing athlete—be they human or canine—and perhaps just as few which rely upon large colonies of dogs learning to live together in close contact, seamlessly and peacefully interacting with one another.

So, whether you choose to believe it or not, in order to fully appreciate and understand your Greyhound's behavior and formative experiences, you should be aware that the vast majority of Racing Greyhounds are perfectly content and happy to be given the opportunity to express the very behaviors which are written on their DNA, and which define them as a breed, as members of a large racing colony. It may be hard for you to believe that the peacefully snoozing muppet, who currently decorates your sofa, was once a rip-snortin', highly competitive and unthinkably bold racer—one who was thrilled beyond your wildest imaginings, just to partake in the chase with the rest of the pack—win lose or draw.

Even the young greyhound who fails as a racer, is, when compared to the rest of the canine population, a remarkably well-adapted and gifted athlete. The difference between a world-class, racing greyhound and a greyhound who cannot credibly compete, even at the lowest performance levels, is just about .75 seconds, give or take a few ticks of the stopwatch, over the duration of a 550 yard race comprising all of about 30 seconds.

When greyhounds are retired from racing, they are asked to make a universe-spanning leap of change, from the familiar activities, surroundings and routines of their kennel and the racetrack, to the completely foreign and often intimidating environs of the home or apartment, leaving behind their kennel mates and human familiars, some of whom they have known their entire lives. They are no longer required to expend vast resources of energy training, racing and re-charging, and in most cases, they suddenly find themselves absent an outlet for their primal and ingrained need to express themselves—in what for them, is a most natural and healthy behavior, but which can now “build-up” within them.

Your racing greyhound was not bred to be a coursing greyhound, nor was he bred to be a show greyhound, and believe it or not, he was not bred with any consideration in mind, for what we deem as traditional, desirable pet attributes. He is the result of nearly a century of focused and meticulous

selective breeding, to produce a greyhound who will excel at chasing a prey effigy around a dirt-surfaced oval track. His forbears were the competitors and the winners of coursing competition's coveted Waterloo Cup, and those splendid individuals who were capable of producing a greyhound which was athletically well-endowed enough to make the difficult transition from the coursing park to the racetrack.

There are all sorts of strains of greyhound families and bloodlines, which tend toward all types of temperament and manner of disposition.

Some are extremely "keen" and focused, almost to the exclusion of anything other than seeking the chance to pursue game, whatever they might perceive it to be, often to the point of seeming to be aloof or stand-offish, not readily given to seeking or even caring for your approval. These sorts can often be described as having an almost cat-like persona.

Some are hot blooded and mercurially skittish, highly reactive to anything and everything within their 270 degree field of vision, feeling as if they may be either predator or prey in any given situation, or in any split second. They can be reflexively fearful of anyone or anything with whom or with which they are not thoroughly familiar.

Others can be quite gregarious and outgoing, or simply confident and curious, often unfazed by novel experiences and environments.

Still others can be edgy, willful and aggressive, particularly when they view themselves as being challenged by another dog, or in any situation where they perceive the chance or the need to compete.

Many are combinations of all of these things, to a greater or lesser degree, dependent upon circumstances and situations, and their ancestry.

Most of these temperamental tendencies and dispositional traits that greyhounds manifest are heritable. The fundamental maxim that is true of all breeds, and which is chapter 1, verse 1 in the Bible of the greyhound breeder, reads as follows:

"Like tends to beget like" ...with the operative word being "tends".

Exceptionally bold and aggressive greyhounds tend to produce exceptionally bold and aggressive greyhounds.

Unusually durable and relentless greyhounds tend to produce unusually durable and relentless greyhounds.

Timid, skittish and/or painfully shy greyhounds tend to produce timid, skittish and/or painfully shy greyhounds.

Exceptionally fast, agile and tenacious racing greyhound performers, however, can be the offspring of any of these "personality" types, or any combination of them.

The modern racing greyhound is the amalgamation of a vast palette of greyhound temperament and disposition, disproportionately influenced by a dazzling array of hugely influential, prepotent ancestors, who ran the gamut of "personality" types, but who were all racers of almost supernatural talent and ability.

From the sometimes skittish and/or hard to manage descendants of Unruly, to the outgoing and personable descendants of Downing, to the occasionally quirky and inscrutable descendants of Dutch Bahama — the genetics of both greatness and fallibility are there, in a dizzying, diverse variety of context and combination, and they are indelible.

Equally as indelible to your greyhound, are the daily, structured and busy goings-on of the racing kennel. Things are usually done promptly and with near universal punctuality throughout his racing world. A greyhound who begins his career in West Virginia will find very little difference in the day-to-day kenneling and training activities, should he be sent to race in another state, at some point later on in his career. He will, in all likelihood, have very little trouble acclimating to his new surroundings.

Regardless of where he races, things like cleaning the kennels and crates, turnouts, feeding, exercising, schooling, grooming and massage all have to be done on a daily basis, in addition to handling the greyhounds before and afterwards on race days. Most trainers follow a basic activities template or “system”, which is inescapable, if they wish to accomplish everything that needs to be done within a 24-hour period.

So, when embarking upon the final chapter in their careers, as a newly adopted retiree, the racing greyhound has a lot to sort out in his mind—the first of these evaluations, being his perceptions of new owner and/or family.

Greyhounds are not necessarily inclined to accept strange humans unconditionally. As a general rule, you have to earn their trust and devotion. A greyhound who has left behind everything and everyone that was known and familiar to him, and who has been suddenly thrust into a situation fraught with novelty at every turn, right down to the food he will consume, can find his innate, intuitive powers and his heightened perceptive apparatus, in a state of utter and complete sensory overload.

This is not a matter of socialization, as the popular narrative would lead one to believe. It is simply a matter of habituation—of adjustment to a brave, new world of objects, situations, experiences and challenges. It is, in no small way, up to you, as to with how much difficulty or ease the greyhound learns to cope with all these many existential novelties, and with this complete life-change, well beyond his formative stage.

The best way to approach matters, is always from the vantage point of knowledge, empathy and understanding. That means, in all likelihood, letting go of certain prejudices and most of the preposterous notions that are shamelessly promoted by those whose sole “interest” in greyhounds is to recast them as wretched, pathetic, objects of pity, with themselves as his “saviors”. It is a never-ending fable of woe, precisely and deliberately contrived to entice you to send them your hard-earned money — which will then be spent on anything other than actual greyhound welfare.

It is a modern tragedy that this unique, phenomenally popular, athletically gifted, and supremely functional breed has been the subject of so much misinformation and often, willful, targeted, counter-intuitive mythology.

The truth of the matter is often much less convoluted and complex than the “garden path” the public-at-large has been led down, as it applies to the vast and overwhelming majority of racing greyhounds.

And it begins with the simple acceptance of what one, solitary visit to a greyhound “farm” or racing kennel will reveal to all but the most imperceptive and canine-averse of individuals.

A racing greyhound, who has been bred, raised and trained to do just that, within a colony or pack of his peers, can be completely happy, well-adjusted and fulfilled, expressing himself to the demands of his genetics and heritage, within a regulated and structured environment, where the humans involved rely upon his optimal well-being to insure theirs.

Suddenly being separated from everything and everyone he has known since the day he was born, and then being asked to seamlessly integrate to a radically different and novel universe, seemingly overnight, is a daunting challenge for any dog. If a greyhound appears reticent or reluctant and fearful of embracing this wondrous, new situation, it is far more likely that he was quite satisfied with things as they were, and is having some trouble processing the plethora of new information and stimuli he has been suddenly confronted with, rather than assuming that he had been the victim of profound neglect and abuse.

We are part of a culture where dog owners literally worry themselves sick over leaving their pets at a boarding kennel, so that they may go away for a brief vacation. Each detail of every peccadillo and quirk of those pets is related to the board kennel operator. The dog’s personal belongings, or those of his owners, are sometimes even brought along to ease any imagined or actual anxiety the pet may feel.

It is a triumph of human conceit and of disinformation and propaganda, that we often view the retired greyhound through prisms of hurtful and sometimes even hateful mythology, in light of a life-change that can be a shattering and awe-inspiring experience, even far more challenging than his former athletic pursuits, not to mention simply going to a boarding kennel for a few days.

There is no excuse, today, in our world of instantaneous, mass communication, for anyone to misunderstand their retired greyhound, in spite of those whose agenda and income requires that you do.

Empathy begins with knowledge. Take the time to truly know, understand and accept your greyhound for the majestic and magnificent individual he was and is — quirks and all — and you will learn far more about each of you than by simply cloaking yourself in the vestments of those who promote pity-advocacy for profit, and who don’t know “greyhounds” from Grey Poupon.