

THE LATE, GREAT, RACING GREYHOUND

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Sifting through the innumerable social media messages posted by adopters, about their retired pet greyhounds, it has dawned on me, through no fault of their own, that the vast majority of “Greyhound Nation”, has no idea whatsoever as to just how and why their greyhounds are bred. I’m not speaking of the physical act of mating, which is more often done by means of artificial insemination these days, anyway.

I’m referring to the selective process itself, and how and why it works the way it does. Now you may be asking yourself, “What the heck is a selective process?”

To understand the selective process and what it means to the breeder of racing greyhounds—and to the greyhounds, themselves—one must first understand that the selective process itself is predicated upon one, fundamental, overarching and immutable principle of transference and inheritance. Five simple words:

“Like tends to beget like.”

Let that sink in for a moment, and keep in mind that the operative word here is “tends”. Breeding is always more about tendencies than it is about absolutes.

Let’s also remember that just about every breed of canine was developed to do a job, or to perform a service or a function for people. There are dog breeds that were made to specialize in herding and/or protecting livestock, in pulling carts and/or sleds, in pointing out and/or retrieving successfully hunted game, and in the case of greyhounds, in hunting and dispatching that game, themselves.

Now, the breeder’s goal is to enhance the capacities of the dogs he breeds, to perform their function, whatever that happens to be. Ideally, his goal is to have each new generation surpass the previous generation, in their abilities to do their job. Now, keeping in mind our fundamental principle—our five simple words--“like tends to beget like”, he then “selects” a female and a male who are to be mated, with that goal in mind.

The key to this entire concept, of course, lies in the ability of the breeder to make accurate selections. His subjective impressions of the individuals he might select to be mated, with the intent of achieving generational improvement in functionality, are not often enough. He requires information. He needs an objective method to qualify an individual as having been an extraordinary example of the breed at performing its function. One who has demonstrated, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he or she has performed that function with a high level of efficiency and consistency.

Toward that end, we have designed competitions among canines, to objectively qualify and to accurately identify those individuals who have distinguished and proven themselves, in competitions with their peers, as having been among the best of their generation or era, at the performance of their respective functions.

In the world of the greyhound, these competitions today, take place among racing greyhounds--and on a much smaller scale, between coursing greyhounds. For the great majority of us, the greyhounds with whom we are familiar, have emerged as a direct result of these racing competitions.

There are few sports that are more focused on performance results, data and statistics, than greyhound racing. This information is critical to greyhound breeders in making their selections as to which greyhounds are to be bred, and with whom they are to be mated. He needs to know which individuals, from which bloodlines, have proven, in head to head competition with their peer group, that they were among the very best performers of their generation. Guesswork and subjectivity are no substitute for hard performance data, for the breeder who desires to engender generation-to-generation improvement of his bloodstock.

As an adjunct to the reams of performance data readily available to the breeder, there is a pedigree database, maintained by Greyhound Data dot com. This pedigree record allows the breeder to investigate which bloodlines have proven to be compatible with which other bloodlines, and the results of various matings between members of different strains and families of greyhounds.

He can also see which greyhounds, sires and dams, have proven to “breed to type”. That is, to produce greyhounds who possess many of the same desirable attributes and aptitudes that distinguished them. All of this information is crucial to the greyhound breeder’s selective process, in identifying which greyhounds, and which families of them, are on the cutting edge of performance adaptation.

In the final analysis, each breeder, whether he realizes it or not, is trying to bend the adaptational curve more sharply than his competitors. In other words, he is attempting to breed greyhounds who have “out-evolved” those of other breeders.

Needless to say, the common misconception is that the greyhound breeder is interested only in speed. But it isn’t quite that simple. While many sports are correctly referred to as “a game of inches”, greyhound racing would be more accurately defined as “a game of nano-seconds”. Even greyhounds who are only capable of competing at the lowest echelons of their sport, are remarkably fast and athletic animals. The difference between a world-class racing greyhound and a bottom grader at the smallest race track, is a little less than one second, over the course of a 550 yard race, lasting all of about half a minute.

So there must be some other considerations that the breeder takes into account. These are what we commonly refer to, when speaking of athletes, as “intangibles”. The most sought-after intangible a breeder wishes to engender in his prospective racers, is what we commonly refer to as “heart”. That is, the will and the character to persevere in a race, despite adversity. Speed alone, without this “heart”, or desire to lead the pack, is a bit like intellect without curiosity.

Because greyhound races are contested by a “pack”, the breeder’s ideal greyhound must possess what we call “track sense”, or “track craft”. That is, the ability to avoid bumping and jamming, and to be able to thread his way, seamlessly, through traffic, when the situation presents itself.

Racing is a stern test of a greyhound’s physical organism, as well as his intangible qualities, and particularly his courage. Racing into a turn at full bore, often surrounded by other greyhounds, requires a greyhound with steel nerve, to hold his line and to maintain his position, while refusing to shirk or sulk.

Along with the breathtaking speed for which the breed is famous, all these intangible qualities of greyhound character are, to a greater or lesser degree, heritable. And as we have noted, “like tends to beget like”.

So the breeder of greyhounds has an exhausting job, when employing the selective process. He must choose individuals for breeding, from among a vast array of diverse bloodlines, and who possess all or most of the speed, stamina, and intangibles we have noted. And he must decide which combination of bloodline is most likely to yield the result he hopes for. It requires a great deal of study, skill, intuition and acumen. Not to mention physical labors of monumental dedication.

As the controversies swirl around them, posing a clear and present danger to their future, we would do well to keep in mind the highly selective and objective process that went into creating that elegant love-seat adornment, you see dozing so peacefully as we speak. It wasn't by accident or serendipity.