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A Brief History of the Greyhound

No one knows exactly when greyhounds came into the lives of humans. At some point after the retreat of the last glaciers people discovered the advantages of dogs as hunting partners -- fast, agile, strong dogs who could run down prey that left clumsy humans far behind. Through subsequent millennia they kept those useful dogs close to them, and at some point they learned to breed them selectively, developing a lean, graceful, swift dog of a sighthound type. Such dogs were bred by Bedouin tribes in North Africa and Asia several thousand years ago and were probably the forebears of modern greyhounds and Salukis. Greyhound-like dogs decorate a funerary vase from what is now Iran that is over 6,000 years old.

Greyhounds, or dogs that closely resembled greyhounds, were the favorites of Egyptian Pharaohs. They were valued so highly that the birth of a greyhound was celebrated almost as much as the birth of a son, and death was mourned with elaborate ceremony. The Egyptians kept many kinds of dogs, but greyhounds were prized as royalty among canines, living with their families or housed in special kennels and cared for by special handlers. They were used in recreational hunts, similar to modern coursing. When a member of the Egyptian nobility died his greyhounds were often buried beside him, while on the walls of the tomb both dogs and men were portrayed pursuing the gazelle into eternity. Anubis, the Egyptian god who helped judge the souls of the dead and guided deserving souls to the underworld, was pictured as having the body of a man and the head of a jackal or a greyhound-like dog.

Over the centuries greyhounds spread throughout the trade routes of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. When the Greeks rose to dominance around 500 B.C. greyhounds rose with them, valued as they had been in Egypt. Images of greyhounds decorate attic vases as they had decorated Egyptian tombs. Greek art, like Egyptian, is the best testimonial to the remarkably consistent breed type of the greyhound. Although many of the dogs depicted are rather heavy-boned, as befits the requirements of a dog chasing large game, others are as delicate as fawns. Some have lopped ears like Salukis, while others have prick ears. All have the deep chest, pointed muzzle, long legs and arched loin of the typical greyhound. And except for some feathering on the tail they are smooth-coated, distinguishing them from other sighthounds such as the Afghan hound or the Irish wolfhound.

Greyhounds appear in Greek mythology as companions of Hecate, goddess of the earth and Hades; Pollux, immortal brother of Helen; and Artemis, goddess of the hunt. A particularly violent story features the greyhounds of Actaeon, a young man who accidentally comes upon Artemis bathing in a forest pool. The outraged goddess changes Actaeon into a stag, who is then pursued and torn apart by his own dogs. At the annual feast of Artemis, hunting hounds partook of the roasted meats with their masters and were honored by being decked with flowers.

Perhaps the most famous of all Greek dogs is the first of many dogs in literature to represent fidelity unto death. When Homer's Odysseus returns home in disguise after twenty years of wandering, his old dog Argus raises his head wearily, wags his tail once in recognition and dies. Argus is described as a hunting dog, fierce, swift and fearless -- the greyhound as the Greeks knew it.

Judging by the Bible, the ancient Hebrews had not much use for dogs; and though Proverbs 30:29-31 (King James version) is sometimes cited as praising the beauty of the greyhound, the translation of the Hebrew word is open to question. In Islam dogs are avoided as unclean. (The desert Arabs do not regard their Salukis as dogs. The word "Saluki" in Arabic means "hound" or "greyhound.") But the Romans knew a good dog when they saw one and treated their greyhounds even better than the Greeks had, feeding them regular meals instead of throwing them the odd bone. In Roman art Diana, who succeeded the Greek Artemis, is almost always portrayed among her greyhounds.

The Romans may have been the first to perfect the sport of coursing, matching their greyhounds against the speed and agility of the hare. They carried their dogs into the farthest reaches of their empire, incidentally importing European hares into Britain for their superior coursing qualities. When the empire fell, both the hares and the dogs were left behind.

The period of famine and war that began the Middle Ages was a bad time for dogs and animals generally. Abandoned greyhounds starved with the rest, but those who were lucky enough to belong to the local clergy or nobility survived. As feudal barons extended their hunting grounds through conquest and expropriation, the demand for greyhounds was maintained. The clergy, being mostly aristocrats themselves, kept and bred dogs for profit and for their own enjoyment. (They enjoyed them so much that in France in the sixth century laws were proclaimed making it a crime for the clergy to keep hawks and hounds.) In the eleventh century King Canute, who briefly maintained Danish rule over England, established the first English forest laws, making it a crime for any "meane person" to own a greyhound. Any large dog owned by a peasant was mutilated to prevent him from hunting in the preserves of the nobility. William the Conqueror upheld and strengthened the laws, while the tenth-century Welsh King Hywel Dda made killing a greyhound punishable by death.

Greyhounds disappear from art in these centuries -- indeed, art itself almost disappears. But greyhound-like dogs appear in a hunting scene in the Bayeux tapestry (eleventh century), while in Ireland the Celts, who had been breeding greyhounds for centuries before their migration to Ireland, preserved their own tradition. Medieval Irish

monks included greyhounds in the illuminations of the world's most beautiful manuscripts.

The first reference to greyhounds in English literature is in *The Canterbury Tales*, dating from the late fourteenth century. Chaucer's monk in "The Monk's Tale" is a plump, well-born prelate who likes his swans well roasted and sees no reason for a holy man to forego the pleasures of the hunt. "Greyhoundes he hadde as swift as fowel in flight," as well as "full many a deynte hors...in stable." How these dogs, which were and are any color but grey, came to be called "greyhounds" is a mystery. There are various theories about the roots of the term. What is clear is that by the early Renaissance this particular breed of sighthound had acquired the modern name of greyhound.

Greyhounds figure prominently in the works of Renaissance artists, as classical subjects became popular and the wealthy aspired to being portrayed with the dogs of royalty. Gentlemen had themselves portrayed in a wood, attended by greyhounds and spaniels and surrounded by heaps of dead rabbits and birds. Ladies became Dianas, more or less clothed as conscience dictated.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth greyhounds were used for coursing deer, foxes and hares. The Queen, particularly keen on the coursing of hares, assigned the Duke of Norfolk to draw up rules for coursing that restricted the number of dogs per hare to two and gave the hare a fair start. The sport gained in popularity and eventually became democratized as the middle classes began to acquire dogs and the amount of open land increased. In 1776 Horace Walpole, the Earl of Orford, organized the first public coursing club in England. Orford, who was otherwise quite mad, kept a kennel of 100 greyhounds and experimented with improving the line through outcrossing with other breeds. Fortunately no trace remains of his most famous crossbreed, the greyhound-bulldog.

The first greyhounds in the New World were attack dogs used as weapons. Fierce greyhounds and mastiffs were imported by Columbus and the early conquistadors to subdue the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and often simply to torment them for sport. English settlers in North America did not import greyhounds for some time, both because the forest laws were in effect until 1700 and because there was neither the terrain nor the leisure for coursing. In the nineteenth century settlers in the Midwest began to import large numbers of greyhounds to control jackrabbits and coyotes, and the Midwest became the coursing center of the nation. Modern track racing began there too, in the 1920s, with the invention of the mechanical lure. It began in England at about the same time.

In the 1930s American greyhound racing became hugely popular as tracks proliferated around the country. Increasingly large amounts of money were invested, inevitably attracting corruption and organized crime. Regulatory boards were established in the UK and the US to register racing dogs and oversee the sport. In the US all racing

greyhounds are registered with the National Greyhound Association; show greyhounds, a small minority, are registered with the American Kennel Club.

Today commercial greyhound racing is illegal in the majority of states, New Hampshire being the latest to prohibit it. However, dog racing still remains legal and operational in 7 states. The royal dogs of the Pharaohs have become simply commercial assets, to be exploited or thrown away according to their monetary value. Even the most "responsible" kennels confine their dogs to tiny crates for an average of 20 hours a day, allowing them out only to relieve themselves or to race once every few days. Despite denials by the industry, abuses are rampant -- dogs starved and neglected, kept in filthy conditions, fed meat from dying or diseased cattle. On the track they die of heat exhaustion and hundreds break bones every year.

Overbreeding is a necessity in an industry in which only a few puppies will mature into dogs able to win money. Thousands of puppies are killed before they even reach racing age. Of the roughly 16,000 dogs registered each year, many will fail to earn their keep and be replaced with younger, faster dogs.

Rescued racing dogs, placed by non-profit adoption kennels, do account for several thousand dogs per year. The rest simply disappear -- euthanized by veterinarians, sold to medical labs, shot, or just abandoned. State regulation where it exists is ineffective because racing dogs are routinely moved around the country. If it is politically inconvenient to kill dogs in one state they are moved to another one. Racing in all its phases is a nationwide shell game.

As a breed greyhounds are gentle and affectionate. Remarkably calm in temperament, they are nevertheless sensitive to the least physical or emotional discomfort. They seem heartbreakingly vulnerable to the brutal conditions in which they are raised. Adopted greyhounds are ideal companions for the elderly, and many become therapy dogs in nursing homes. This "sport" which uses them as money-making machines has no place in a civilized society. It needs to go the way of witch-burning and bear-baiting.

Thankfully, greyhound racing is now a dying business. Since 2001, the industry has been cut in half. At that time, there were nearly 50 tracks operating in 15 states, but today there remain 23 tracks in just 7. It is the ultimate goal of greyhound advocates to make dog racing history nationwide.

If we care enough, we can make it happen.

For more information, please consult our web site at www.grey2kusaedu.org.