The history of greyhound racing

Modern track racing emanated from coursing. It is thought that the sport of coursing was probably introduced by the Romans. Coursing originally involved dogs of a number of different sight-hound breeds chasing game and exhibited a single dog’s skill to sight, chase and catch a game animal. In the 16th century, coursing became a competitive sport with two dogs matched against each other in a race for the game. Dogs were judged on not only their speed but also their agility, and their owners would often bet on their dog’s result.

Coursing evolved into a spectator sport, with other people coming to watch a race, and soon official coursing clubs began to evolve. Two greyhounds would course a single hare that had been given a head start. Spectators would come to watch and place bets on the competing dogs.

The introduction of an artificial lure (the tin hare) occurred first in England, but it was an American, Owen Smith, who first introduced racing on a track using an artificial lure. He understood the appeal of coursing but wanted to make it ‘a more humane sport with a broader spectator appeal’. The idea took off, and greyhound racing as we know it was introduced to Australia in the late 1920s. In Australia, the sport continues to be largely hobby trainer based, with most trainers only having a small kennel of racing greyhounds, rather than larger professional kennels.

Looking at the whole lifecycle – Identifying the Issues

Similar to the other racing codes, the racing career of a greyhound is quite short. Most greyhounds start their careers at around one and a half years of age, and are usually finished racing by three or four. There are inevitably a proportion of greyhounds that
never even make it to the track due to lack of ability, injury, or other reasons. This ‘wastage’ is one of the biggest welfare and image problems that the industry faces.

Where speed is the desired outcome and the fastest individuals are retained, what happens to the slower ones? Are there ways of breeding more efficiently? And are there other factors involved along the way that influence whether or not an individual ever makes it to the track?

In 2006 Greyhound Racing Victoria brought together industry leaders, the RSPCA, and respected veterinarians to form the ‘Responsible Breeding Task Force (RBTF)’. This taskforce looked at all aspects of the breeding of racing greyhounds and put forward a number of recommendations aimed at addressing the major identified issues within the sport. There was also consultation with industry participants through an Industry Discussion Paper as well as face to face sessions at a number of race meetings. The outcome of this process has seen 17 recommendations be made to address a variety of issues identified as most important.

The RBTF recommendations include better industry education, increased levels of enforcement, expanded racing opportunities, and suggested rule changes. Each recommendation is designed to decrease wastage and improve the likelihood of each greyhound bred actually going on to race.

Education – The key to change

Educated participants = Better welfare.

Probably one of the most important areas identified is the need for education in the areas of breeding, rearing and training of greyhounds. Improving the choices made and methods used at each phase has become a priority with education a key to moving the industry forward. Although there is wide-spread support for these initiatives, there remains a need for cultural change from a national perspective, to support future success in the industry.

Information about the selection of breeding animals, breeding technologies, rearing strategies, husbandry and health can improve the quality of young stock produced and
can potentially increase the number of dogs making it to the track. At present much of the breeding animal selection is based on gut feeling, flavours of the month and advertising - not on hard science. Most pups are reared commercially and the quality of this care can seriously affect the potential of the pups.

GRV has developed a ‘Breeders Education Package’ that is now compulsory for all new breeders to undertake prior to being able to register their first litter. The education package covers basic reproduction and care of the pregnant bitch, along with advice on selection of breeding stock and care of a litter of pups.

Additionally research is being done into the way in which breeding stock are advertised and rated. Currently the statistics available for stud dogs and brood bitches are confusing and difficult to interpret, especially to lay people. A system by which each animal could be compared to others on an equivalent scale needs to be developed that is easy for industry participants to understand.

Information about training methods, dealing with training problems, and suitable rehabilitation for injured race dogs is another area to be addressed. Many trainers new to the industry find it hard to get reliable, up-to-date information on training practices. Much of the training of greyhounds is based on knowledge handed down over time, and often this methodology is out of date, flawed or unacceptable in today’s society. This means that the careers of greyhounds may be shortened, or may never really get off the ground leading to unnecessary wastage.

A new ‘Trainer’s Competency’ is being developed to address this need for information. The information trainers will soon receive will help them understand more about preparing a greyhound from breaking in to racing, and will better prepare them and their greyhounds for the rigours of racing. The trainer’s competency also highlights the need for each trainer to have a relationship with a greyhound veterinarian to assist with the detection and treatment of minor injury, which is very important in the prevention of more serious and potentially career ending injuries.
**Tracking and enforcement**

Although education is vital to improving welfare standards across the industry, it is also important that there is enforcement of these standards as well. Ensuring that every greyhound can be traced throughout its lifecycle is the first step to ensuring compliance. At present there is a period of time whereby the actual person responsible for the care of the greyhound is not known. Unfortunately this corresponds to the time where a lot of greyhounds are lost, most likely due to lack of ability.

Improvement of the tracking mechanism is an important step to ensuring that there is a seamless process by which somebody is responsible for the welfare of the greyhound at all times. Greyhounds are identified by a system of ear tattoos, but there is no reliable and consistent national database at this time, although this is currently being developed. Ideally, any tracking mechanism would be used industry wide to ensure that no greyhounds can slip through the net, and that all greyhounds are accounted for.

GRV staff have been working towards developing a system that will identify a person responsible for each greyhound, and is scheduled for launch along with the introduction of the unified national database at the beginning of 2009. Already, the industry is being educated in regards to some of the required paperwork steps such as retirement notification. The development of this system, although it does not sound like a major change, is an enormous step forward.

Enforcement of welfare rules and standards is something that is necessary to send a message that the industry is serious about welfare. GRV stewards already conduct regular kennel inspections of trainer’s facilities as well as swabbing for illegal drugs on race days. The number of inspections and tests increases every year, but this needs to continue to increase so that all industry participants who are responsible for the keep and care of greyhounds (of any age) are subject to regular checks of their facilities. The penalties for failing to provide adequate care need to continue to be harsh to encourage compliance, and to highlight how seriously the industry takes this issue.
Codes of practice/minimum standards for the industry

In Victoria there are already industry-based, and government ‘Codes of Practice’. These set out minimum standards for the keep and care of greyhounds of all ages, and assist by defining things such as space requirements for each greyhound. The industry code is unique in that it also contains information about establishing a greyhound facility, and the council requirements for planning, permits, layout and design.

The idea of minimum standards is something that the industry needs to continue to promote to its participants. This gives everyone an idea of what is actually expected, and what can be considered the minimum for good welfare. Having a written standard also makes the job of the kennel inspectors easier as they have a reference on which to base their findings.

Drugs in sport

The use of illicit substances to enhance performance is a recognised problem in all racing codes. Testing has become increasingly sophisticated, with random and selected testing occurring at most race meetings. The rules of racing state that a greyhound must be presented to race ‘drug free’ to ensure the integrity of the sport and the welfare of the racing animals. Current rates indicate positive drug testing of around 0.6% in most States.

Greyhounds Australasia has recently announced that testing for anabolic steroids will be introduced in July this year, which will address a large problem within the greyhound racing industry. Anabolic steroid use is something that has been accepted as a normal practice in the industry for far too long, and the inability to determine threshold levels has made testing impossible. Although this change will see an initial period of adjustment, the long-term benefits to the greyhounds and to the integrity of the industry is something that will be a major benefit, and can be considered one of the biggest steps towards improved welfare for racing greyhounds.
Retirement

Although the racing opportunities for older greyhounds has increased through increased scheduling of ‘veterans’ and ‘picnic’ races, it is inevitable that the racing career of each greyhound will eventually end. What happens to the greyhound at this time is an area which has received a lot of publicity, with many animals euthanized despite being otherwise healthy.

Images of ‘mass’ burials or anecdotal stories of greyhounds being shot or killed in other unsavoury ways continue to surface. Probably the biggest outrage occurred in England with the publication of a story in the Sunday Times in July 2006 about a man in Seaham who claimed to have shot and buried 10,000 greyhounds at his property for trainers who no longer considered the dogs suitable for racing. The article included a photo of the man wheeling a wheel barrow containing the bodies of a number of greyhounds. This article led to a parliamentary enquiry into the welfare of greyhounds and a complete overhaul of greyhound welfare regulations in the UK.

Around the world there are now many groups dedicated to re-homing greyhounds at the end of their racing career so they can live out their lives as family pets. Greyhound adoption is now increasingly publicised and supported within the public arena. Support for the adoption programs from the industry itself varies with the country and state, with many programs fully funded and supported by the industry either directly or through levies.

GRV leads the country in terms of financial support for their Greyhound Adoption Program, recently spending $1.3 million to improve and expand the kennel facilities and offices located at Greyhound Adoption Program property at Seymour. This huge financial input will see the number of greyhounds that are able to enter the program significantly increase, reducing the list of greyhounds who are currently waiting to be accepted into the program.
GRV has also embraced a Prison Pet Partnership, whereby greyhounds accepted into the adoption program are fostered by prisoners in minimum security prisons. This is a win-win situation, allowing prisoners to learn more about the care and training of the dogs whilst experiencing the special relationship and benefits that come from sharing time with animals, as well as providing increased opportunity for fostering within the greyhound adoption program.

The prisoners are thoroughly screened prior to their inclusion in the program to ensure that they have no history of violent behaviour, and the right to participate in the program is awarded to those prisoners with exemplary records. The result has been phenomenal, with the greyhounds that graduate from this program being better trained, and quicker to adapt to their new lives as pets than those from regular foster carers. The program is being run at HM Prison Derringhile, but with support from GRV and Corrections Victoria, it is planned to extend the program into three other minimum security prisons within the next few months.

Although it would be wonderful to think that all greyhounds could become family pets, there will always be a proportion that are not suitable for re-homing due to injury, disease, or temperament issues. Ensuring that euthanasia is conducted in a humane manner then becomes a priority. Although shooting can be considered humane if carried out properly, the industry has set a standard for its participants to ensure that euthanasia by lethal injection administered by a veterinarian is the only acceptable method of euthanasia.

Welfare as an industry role

The increasing focus on ensuring that welfare remains at the forefront of all industry decisions led to the development of an ongoing full-time Welfare role. In September 2007, GRV employed their first Animal Welfare Officer, who is responsible for liaising with all departments to ensure the welfare of the greyhounds is represented in all decision making processes. The role is continually evolving but enjoys the luxury of excellent support from within the controlling body and has been well accepted by most industry participants.
Conclusion

The future of greyhound racing certainly relies on the ongoing identification and timely addressing of welfare issues within the sport. GRV has made a conscious decision to take a pro-active role in this area to ensure that both the welfare of the racing greyhounds and the image of the sport remain paramount in all decisions made. Although there still remains much to be done, the industry is constantly striving to improve.

References
