

# Easy pets or fast dogs? The problem with labelling greyhounds

March 22 2018, by Kerry Sands

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Racing greyhounds [suffered around 5,000 injuries](#) last year, and more

than 900 were put down. As many as 257 animals were destroyed at the trackside, another 333 were killed due to the cost of treatment or a poor prognosis, and at least 348 were destroyed because they could not be rehomed.

These shocking statistics [were published](#) by the Greyhound Board of Great Britain, under pressure from [animal welfare](#) campaigners.

The League Against Cruel Sports [responded](#) by describing these deaths as unjustifiable. A spokesperson for the charity said: "We believe these figures disguise a life of suffering and a deplorable end for many of these [dogs](#) who are simply born to be raced. It's time greyhound racing was consigned to the ranks of cruel sports that are no longer acceptable."

Greyhound racing isn't a sport about fast dogs. It's a gambling industry and the dogs are its commodities. The greyhound is a breed of dog, and one that had a rich and varied history before existing in the public consciousness as the "racing dog" of modern times.

Unfortunately, the modern husbandry practices of racing greyhounds are a huge animal welfare issue. Poorly socialised to life outside of racing, they are bred and trained to chase, and under stimulated for much of their racing lives. Many racing greyhounds live a very insular existence which does not set them up for the transition to domestic homes.

They carry the physical and psychological scars from their former lives, which can make it challenging for them to settle into life as a companion. Often they have poor dog skills, an inability to regulate their own excitement levels when outside the home, and are fearful of the everyday experiences they encounter as a companion dog.

It can make life tough for their new adopters – especially at the start. In my [professional work](#) training some of these dogs, I have worked with a

number of people who adopted ex-racing greyhounds, only to discover that they refuse to go for walks, can't be left alone, and react aggressively to other dogs they meet.

Without specialist help and support, these dogs are anything but the "easy" pets some owners expect them to be.

Many greyhounds exhibit a passive coping style, which is typical of their breed. They quite often "freeze" if they become overwhelmed by a situation (rather than opting for fight or flight).

Misunderstandings about greyhounds abound. After the release of the sobering statistics relating to their racetrack fate, chief executive of the Greyhound Board of Great Britain, Mark Bird, [commented](#): "There were 348 dogs this year for whom no home could be found and our mission is to reduce this number to zero." He added: "Greyhounds make calm, gentle and loveable pets that are excellent with children."

As well as being a hugely sweeping statement – greyhounds are all individual dogs, after all – comments like this are misleading, inaccurate and potentially downright dangerous. No group of dogs can be simply described as "good with children".

## **Being better friends**

Relationships between humans and animals are built on trust, mutual understanding and respect. Children need to be taught how to interact safely and ethically with dogs.

The [Be A Tree Project](#), for example, is dedicated to teaching children how to effectively read dog body language to keep them safe. And it's true to say that some dogs will enjoy the company of children – others less so.

But we cannot say that this will be true of a whole breed. What also concerns me about suggesting that these dogs are good with children is the information being used to make that assessment. As I mentioned, greyhounds tend to passively cope with situations that they dislike (stand still and hope the scary thing goes away) rather than actively making a fuss. In some ways, this is what makes them "good" racing dogs – they don't complain very much. (Good luck trying to handle a German Shepherd into a racing trap...)

Of course, this doesn't mean that they are necessarily happy *or* safe. It just makes us more complacent about the situations we put them in.

Also, if these dogs make such excellent family pets, why do we spend several years of their lives training them to perform behaviours that the average pet dog owner would struggle to cope with?

Greyhounds continue to be a vulnerable population of dogs, and we need to be better friends to this breed. I concur with the League Against Cruel Sports' position that greyhound racing is an industry that is beyond the kind of reform necessary to make life better for these dogs.

My work is about helping society to reimagine greyhounds as dogs. Yet for as long as they continue to be used by the racing industry, our scrutiny and attention needs to be on all aspects of their care and welfare, at each and every point of their difficult transition.

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