History of the Greyhound

ANCIENT HISTORY

The origin of the greyhound breed is deeply rooted in ancient history. Images of dogs similar to today’s greyhound have been discovered on a site in Turkey dating back to 6,000 BC.

THE FOREST LAWS

In the early sixteenth century, the first “forest laws” were recorded in Germany and similar laws were soon common throughout Europe. The laws forbade trespassing or hunting on nobility land without permission and if penalties were severe. These laws were in effect the first game laws.

THE EGYPTIANS

are often depicted in their art hunting and as pets and they decorated with images of their native animals. The Egyptians declared the punishment for killing a greyhound the equivalent of being hung by his horse, his hawk and his “assisted puppils”. The dog was used to hunt game, particularly the greyhounds that were damaging the early settlers’ crops. The dogs were often worried with other large dogs such as Scottie Deerhounds and were referred to as “Kangaroos Dogs”.

KING HYWEL DDA (C. 880-950)

In the 10th century, a Welsh King named Hywel Dda (Howell the Good) made a law that allowed for the punishment for killing a greyhound the same as for a killing a person - execution.

KING WILLIAM I WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR (C. 1025-1067)

The Conqueror ushered the laws on commoners keeping greyhounds and even went as far as to order all non-greyhounds to have these taxes. The King continued the practice and the law was still active until 1304. As unfair as the forest laws were, the reduced hunting was actually the first steps of forest and game conservation.

GREENHOUNDS IN THE NEW WORLD (1493)

Greyhounds were among the 20 dogs that accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the Americas.

GREENHOUNDS IN THE STARS

Greyhounds have their place in a constellation located just south of the Big Dipper called Canes Venatici. It was conceived by Johannes Hevelius in 1697. The dogs names are Asterion and Chara and are held on a leash by Boetes as the heroes for the stars Ursus Major and Ursa Minor.

HERALDIC GREYHOUNDS

Greyhounds are such a large part of the breed of the aristocracy throughout history that many families chose them as a symbol on their coat of arms. This included English and French Royalty. Greyhounds appear on the shields of more than 400 French families. Greyhounds represented courage, vigilance and loyalty. Some towns also have greyhounds included in their shields.

QUEEN ELIZABETH I (1533-1603)

While horse racing is known as the sport of kings, greyhound racing is the sport of Queens. Queen Elizabeth I was a great lover of greyhound coursing (the pursuit of game) which is the precursor of today’s racing. She was concerned about the unfair advantage the dogs had over the game so in 1561 she ordered “the laws of the Leash” to be drawn up. They included that the prey was to be given a head start before the dogs were released or “slipped”.

GREENHOUND COURSING

Coursing has been practiced throughout history as a means of hunting food and eliminating predators. Later it became a form of entertainment and usually consisted of two or more greyhounds pursuing a live hare. In 1776 Lord Orford organised the first public coursing club in England. It was a popular pastime during the 1800’s throughout Europe and America. The first sporting use of greyhounds in Australia is recorded as coursing in the 1860’s. The first club coursing event was held in SA in 1867, it was a popular pastime through the turn of the century but began to decline with the increasing popularity of racing in the 1920’s.

GREENHOUND RACING

Modern greyhound racing has its origins in coursing. The first recorded attempt at racing in England was on a straight track that was in England in 1876 but it didn’t take off with coursing enthusiasts. Racing as we know it on circular or oval tracks first started in America in 1912. George Patrick Smith invented the mechanical hare. This popularity and profitability of greyhound racing was soon noted by the English who built a track and held their first race in 1926.

GREENHOUND ADOPTION PROGRAM

Greyhounds are becoming increasingly popular as pets. In addition to the privately run programs, each state has a Greyhound Adoption Program (GAP) which works to rehome retired racing greyhounds.

GREENHOUND RACING COMMENCES IN AUSTRALIA 1927

In Australia racing with a mechanical hare, often called the “hare” began in 1907 when the Lang Labour government amended the Gambling and Betting Act to allow legal wagering. The greyhound Coursing Association was formed and the first race took place at Epping (later known as Harold Park) on 18 May.

While horse racing was generally a pastime for the wealthy, greyhound racing attracted the working class man due to the low admission charges, ability to place small bets and the timings of races which were often at night and sometimes even in the morning. As unfair as the forest laws were, it suited their leisure hours. It created much more opposition from the conservative and religious elements of the population against public gambling.

GREENHOUND RACING TODAY

In Australia today there are over 45,000 races held annually. Over $100 million in stake money is paid out in 2014 and there are over 30,000 licenced owners and trainers in Australia.

In the past 50 years many regulations have been introduced and today animal welfare is seen as a top priority in the racing industry. Greyhounds Australasia Limited (GAL) is the governing body responsible for the oversight and welfare of all racing greyhounds in Australia.

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GREENHOUND JOCKEYS

A very strange fad developed in America in 1930 which was practiced in Australia up until the 1950’s. Capuchin monkeys were trained to ride racing dogs for sport over a short course that sometimes included hurdles and water jumps. They used specially designed saddle harness and wore miniature jockey silks. This photo shows monkey jockeys at Shepherds Bush, Mascot, Sydney in 1930.