

# Vet's Notes

## **Training Tactics**

By JOHN KOHNKE

The majority of trainers have developed their own methods of managing and training their greyhounds. Some use the gentle approach, avoiding physical force, a raised voice and military style commands, to get the best out of their greyhounds.

Many women trainers are successful with this approach.

Others use a more disciplinary method of training to produce a subservient greyhound that develops respect out of fear of making a mistake or not performing as expected.

Greyhounds, like many other breeds of dogs, have a well developed sense of loyalty and perception of conformity as well as a gregarious nature and temperament.

Very few trainers, thank goodness, nowadays impose abuse by physical contact, or, for example, the practice of locking greyhounds in the dark to make them “keener”.

This is consistent with an approach that a “meaner and leaner” greyhound has the “guts” to win races. Why am I overlooking the different types of training attitudes?

I have seen them all in my many years as a greyhound vet, from the kind considerate trainer to the commanding and dominant person. These extremes win races, but perhaps for different reasons.

### **Greyhound Mind**

There is little published information on the mind of the greyhound and its response to different training and disciplinary methods.

Volumes have been written on the “mind” of the horse because of this animal’s ability to be trained and dominated although it is a large animal.

Some years ago, Peter Yore, a leading vet in Australia, presented a paper on the mind of the greyhound, which outlined his interpretation on how a greyhound typically reacts to command and

discipline imposed by its human handlers.

He found individual greyhounds reacted differently to each training method. Often a greyhound that was regarded as a wimp that couldn’t win a race by one trainer, adapted to a more caring method by a new trainer and started to gain confidence and show its natural ability. The reverse also happened, where a greyhound was toughened up by a disciplinary approach and won races, commanded a high sale price, was purchased by a trainer with a “softer” method, and didn’t show any further race ability.

He also observed that trainers with larger numbers of dogs relied more on numbers and a standard training method, whereas smaller trainers, especially women trainers, spent more time working with the greyhound, attending to its injuries, on a more individual basis. Often they found the winning potential in the greyhound that was not successful in a larger kennel.

### **Intelligent Animal**

Greyhounds are an athletic and well adapted breed of dog that is intelligent, but not overly aggressive by nature if it is raised and trained using humane, caring methods.

Although some are very timid and sensitive to other greyhounds, people and especially crowds, with skilled handling, they can be moulded into tough, competitive racers.

Historically the greyhound is a pack animal, and there will be an established hierarchy within any kennel group.

Although most are gregarious in nature, the pack leaders will still demonstrate dominant behaviour to other greyhounds lower in the pecking order.

Years ago, I remember a trainer who had success with a whole bloodline of greyhounds that would cringe at a raised voice or a stern or displeased look. He and his family used the TLC approach virtually adopting the greyhounds into the family as pets.

Over time, they were able to gain each of the greyhound's confidence and trust making the timid ones more confident. The bloodline, luckily, had some natural ability on the racetrack and the kennel won a number of major races.



Sometimes, other factors can alter a greyhound's natural temperament or behavioural reactions. For instance, when anabolic steroid hormones were routinely administered to racing greyhounds up to 15-20 years ago, it was often claimed that a trainer "trained with a needle".

The male hormones produced aggressive, well muscled greyhounds. However, often their racing careers were short lived because the bulging muscles and increased body weight often slowed them down.

They also suffered a high proportion of muscle injuries because of their artificial strength without the conditioning to match and adapt it for racing. They also wasted a lot of energy with aggressive behaviour.

Because of the excess testosterone, small shrunken testicles developed that on retirement reduced their fertility as stud dogs.

With today's modern approach to training human athletes, sports psychology plays an important role in training.

Coaches are expected to instruct their charges in a constructive manner to give them confidence as

individual competitors, just like a greyhound in a race.

A greyhound trainer has to be astute and able to sense the mind and mood of each individual greyhound.

Just about every greyhound responds to individual care and attention, but some are stronger both physically and mentally than others.

Indeed, to be successful, it is important to always match a greyhound with another of similar ability when trialling.

To develop racing confidence, it is a good idea to match the speed and ability of a greyhound to its running mate in a trial or from the hand, so that each is competitive and has a good chance of winning.

A greyhound that is regularly beaten in trials may eventually develop the attitude that this is its position in life.

One of my own greyhounds, a bitch, was placed second 8 times out of 12 starts.

She was fast out of the traps initially, often leading the field to the second bend, but when challenged, she would simply give up and run with the others.

Unfortunately, she sustained a wrist injury in a race before we could try some alternative tactics in trials to match her with consistently weaker greyhounds.

Of course, providing a well balanced ration with a supplement such as Feramo to provide additional Vitamin A, iron, trace minerals and vitamins to correct an inadequate dietary content, is an important way of ensuring greyhounds can compete to their full potential.

Some greyhounds also have a pain tolerance that is higher than others, running consistently even when carrying an injury that would cause a weak minded greyhound, so many trainers say, to give up and limp home.

Greyhounds are sensitive individuals and respond to care with some discipline and set routines, but react adversely to brutal, dominating or inhumane treatment.

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