

Greyhound Racing in Texas



Texas Greyhound Association



Greyhound History

The origin of the greyhound is deeply rooted in ancient history; murals and paintings of dogs strikingly similar to today's greyhound existed more than 4,000 years ago. From the beginning, the greyhound was held in high regard in the Middle East and throughout Europe. Pictures of the early greyhound can be found etched on walls of ancient Egyptian tombs and Pharaohs rated them first among all animals as both companions and hunters.

In Persia, Rome and Greece, the greyhound enjoyed similar stature and is the only canine mentioned in the Bible in Proverbs 30:29-31.

It is documented that the greyhound arrived in England over 3,500 years ago. Their link with nobility was established in 1014 when King Canute of England enacted the Forest Laws, which stated that only noblemen could own and hunt with greyhounds. In fact, greyhound racing in England was first established for the English nobility and could not be enjoyed by other citizens.

The Forest Laws were abolished in the 1500s by Queen Elizabeth I, who later initiated the first formal rules of greyhound coursing (the pursuit of hares), thus officially inaugurating the "Sport of Queens".

Greyhounds were introduced to America in the 1800's to help farmers control the jackrabbit population. It was not long before competitions of greyhound racing were conducted by the surrounding farmers. This proved to be both an exciting event for the local population but also proved that the greyhound loved the chase and excitement of racing. Greyhounds are "sight hounds", meaning they instinctively chase by movement.



Texas Greyhound Association

The Texas Greyhound Association was established in 1987 as the official greyhound breed registry in Texas for pari-mutuel racing. The TGA represents the owners, breeders and other greyhound racing participants. Headquartered in Lorena, Tx, just south of Waco on I-35, the TGA also has a training track for greyhounds.

The TGA registers eligible greyhounds as Texas-bred, calculates and distributes monthly Accredited Texas Bred Awards, prepares performance reports for the Texas Racing Commission and distributes “cross-species” simulcast purse money from Texas horse tracks to the greyhound tracks weekly.

In addition to its requirements under the Texas Racing Act and Rules of Racing, the TGA works closely with greyhound owners and breeders to assist them in placing their retired greyhounds in adoption programs. It also periodically inspects farms to ensure the proper care of racing greyhounds.

The TGA represents the greyhound industry in legislative matters, whether gaming issues or canine welfare legislation. Its focus is always on the greyhound.

Due to gaming competition from surrounding states and the attendant decrease in purses at Texas greyhound tracks, the number of TGA members and greyhound puppies registered in Texas has experienced a steady decline as shown in the following charts.

The TGA remains proactive in dealing with the many challenges facing the greyhound industry today.



Raising Greyhounds

Racing greyhounds are registered with the National Greyhound Association (NGA) located in Abilene, Kansas and differ from show greyhounds registered with the American Kennel Club (AKC). Since racing greyhounds are bred solely for athletic ability and racing temperament, the physical and mental integrity of the breed has remained remarkably intact and free of most genetic anomalies.

The NGA owner or lessee of record selects an appropriate sire to breed to a greyhound brood (also referred to as a “dam”.) Both the sire and the brood must be DNA registered with the NGA. Gestation is approximately 63 days, most often resulting in a healthy and vigorous litter of pups. The average litter size is 6, although it varies from 1 to even 12+ pups. The stud master handling the sire has sent a breeding report to the NGA at the time of mating, and the brood owner sends a whelping report when the pups are born. This report states the date of birth, number of pups, and the sex and color of each.

Within 90 days of birth, the owner/lessee completes a litter registration with the NGA which separately identifies each puppy by tattoo, sex, color and markings. A pup is tattooed in both ears: the right ear tattoo represents the month, year and tattoo order of litter, and the left ear tattoo is the NGA’s litter identification number. Through these numbers one is able to identify the greyhound’s owner of record and its pedigree. At this point, an eligible litter may also be registered with the TGA for future Accredited Texas Bred Awards and Stakes Races.

Puppies live their first 12 months with lots of running room to develop both their athletic ability and socialization skills with humans and other greyhounds. They are vaccinated and wormed on a routine basis, and learn to lead and be handled in preparation for their racing career. Texas farms are subject to periodic inspection by the NGA and/or the TGA.



All greyhound farms are family operations and contribute to the rural economy of Texas.

Training

Usually at about one year of age, pups begin race training. Sometimes the owner/breeder trains his own puppies, but often they are placed with a greyhound trainer, referred to as a “farmer”. The farmer introduces the pup to a crate, which will be its home through its racing career. The crates are roomy, airy and clean and the pup quickly adapts to its own home and feels safe and secure.

The pup begins training by chasing artificial lures, or squawkers, typically pulled on a straight line rope. Once the pup’s natural chasing instincts are sharpened, it advances to a whirl-a-gig. A whirl-a-gig is similar to a horse walker where the pup learns to follow the lure in a circle. It also learns to break from a starting box.

The next step is the training track, where the pup is let loose to chase the mechanical lure around the track for a short distance. Many Texas greyhounds are trained at the TGA training track in Lorena. Gradually, the chasing distance is increased as the greyhound increases in physical fitness. All of this training takes about 6 months, readying the pup for its racing career at around 18 months old.

At this time, the pup is individually registered with the NGA, including its racing name. NGA statistics show that about 85% of puppies will be individually registered. In other words, 85% of greyhounds whelped will start a career at a racetrack.



Texas Racetracks

There are three greyhound tracks in Texas: Gulf Greyhound Park in LaMarque, Gulf Coast Racing in Corpus Christi and Valley Race Park in Harlingen. Only 3 licenses may be issued for greyhound tracks and they must be located in counties that have populations of over 190,000 and that include all or part of an island that borders the Gulf of Mexico. (TRA Sec. 6.14 (b)(c)).

The Texas Rules of Racing outline the standards for all the racetracks. The racetracks consist of the grandstand and administrative facility, the racetrack and the kennel compound. The majority of races are run at 5/16 mile; there is often one 3/8 mile race per program.

The starting boxes accommodate a maximum of 8 dogs in individual boxes. The lure system the greyhounds chase is called an Aldritt lure, named for its manufacturer, and is standard at most greyhound tracks across the country.

The kennel compound consists of kennel buildings and sprint paths built to standards outlined in the Rules of Racing. In Texas, there is a maximum of 18 kennels and one stakes kennel in each compound.



The Kennel System

Greyhound racing is conducted under the kennel system. A kennel owner (or operator) agrees to supply a certain number of racing greyhounds to the racetrack and enters into a contract which sets out the terms, conditions and responsibilities of each party (TRC Rule Sec. 309.351).

Greyhounds are leased from their owners. The lease agreement is filed with the racing secretary and sets out the terms of the lease, including the greyhound owner's percentage of purse winnings, also called commission, which may not be less than 35% (TRA Sec. 6.11(b)). Other terms and conditions may be in the lease, but typically the greyhound owner is not responsible for any of the greyhound's expenses during the term of the lease. The greyhound owner's share of the purse is paid directly by the racing association on a weekly basis. The kennel owner receives a set percentage of the greyhound's earnings and does not receive any "day" or monthly fee.

At least 50% of the kennels at each racetrack must be wholly owned by a Texas resident (TRA Sec. 10.06). Each kennel must also maintain a certain percentage of Texas-bred greyhounds (TRC Rules Sec. 311.103(d)), depending upon the number of years the kennel has been contracted with the track.

Each kennel building contains a maximum number of crates for greyhounds as set by the TxRC Executive Secretary. As part of the kennel contract between a track and a kennel owner, each kennel must keep a minimum "active list" as part of the kennel contract. Typically, each kennel may have 62-74 greyhounds, with at least 40 "active" greyhounds.



Active List

When a young greyhound reaches the racetrack, it acclimates to its new surroundings through “morning” schoolings around the track, similar to gallops in the morning by racehorses. When ready, the greyhound is entered into an official schooling race for the TxRC judges to determine its ability to compete, based on each track’s qualification requirements.

After successfully completing at least two official schooling races, the greyhound is placed on the “active” list with the racing secretary. When a greyhound is “put on,” it stays on the active list until taken off by the trainer, state veterinarian or judge. A greyhound is automatically drawn in by “grade”, unlike horse racing that requires a trainer to enter the horse in a particular race.

Barring any problems, a greyhound could remain active for its full racing career, with the potential of being drawn into a race twice a week. On average, a greyhound will race three times in a two week period, approximately 80 races per year. The majority of races are run for a distance of 5/16 of a mile, often with one 3/8 mile race each performance.



Grading System

Once a greyhound is placed on the active list, it draws in on a rotational basis under a grading system. A greyhound starts in **M** grade, or maiden, until it wins. Once it wins, it automatically advances to **J** grade. After winning a **J** it advances to **D** or **C**, then to **B**, **A**, and **AA** right up the grading ladder as it wins at each grade level.

In each grade, the greyhound must run a 3rd or better in its last three consecutive starts, or better than one 3rd in its last four consecutive starts to remain in a particular grade. If not, the greyhound drops to the next lower grade. For example, when a **C** drops down in class, it goes to **D**. No greyhound can ever drop to grade **J** since it is for Maiden (**M**) winners only.

If the greyhound does not run 4th or better in four consecutive starts in the lowest grade, **D**, then the greyhound is “graded off.” The greyhound is removed from the active list and must re-qualify through an official schooling race. If the greyhound grades-off again, it may re-qualify again; however, failure to re-qualify a second time makes it ineligible to race for the remainder of the race meet.

A grade **S** is a stakes race, where the top greyhounds compete for added money. A grade **T** race is a combination of grades put together by the racing secretary and is usually a 660 yard (3/8 mile) race.

In the official racing program, a greyhound’s past performance lines indicate the greyhound’s ability and grade level. If there is no grade level indicated, the race was an official schooling race.

The grading system is very efficient at keeping greyhounds competitive in class and is used, with minor variations, at all greyhound tracks in the country. It aims to give the betting public the best opportunity at handicapping a race, since the grade level is based solely on the greyhound’s ability and past performance.

Purses and Points

Purses paid by Texas tracks are a percentage of live and simulcast handle. Depending on the type of handle, the purse percentages are either set by the Texas Racing Act or annual contract with the Texas Greyhound Association. Greyhound purses are calculated and paid out weekly. A percentage is sent directly to the greyhound owner and a percentage to the kennel owner as determined by the lease contract in place with the racing office.

The track pays purses based on points, with the *number* of points set by grade and finish. The higher the grade of race and finish, the more points awarded. For instance, a top grade **AA** race would pay 7 points for a win. A grade **B** race win pays 5 points; a **C** win pays 4 points, etc. Points are awarded on placing first through fourth in each race. On average, 800-900 points are awarded each week, based on the mix of the different grades of race with a 6 performance schedule. A sample weekly purse schedule from Gulf Greyhound Park is enclosed.

Total purse for the week divided by the number of points in the week equals point value. This term is often used as a reference when discussing greyhound purses.

Fewer races each week or running more lower-grade races (which have lesser total point values) will reduce the weekly points available. On the other hand, the grade mix affects the quality of the racing product, which affects handle. Higher grade races typically handle more wagering dollars. The racing secretary balances the weekly performances between the active list and grade.

TGA Cross-Species

Each week, the Texas horse tracks pay to the TGA 5.5% of wagering handle on out-of-state greyhound tracks (the intra-state purses are paid directly to each greyhound track). The TGA subtracts its administrative fee and distributes the purses to the greyhound tracks based on a formula approved annually by the Commission (TxRC Rules Sec. 303.102(d)).

Economics of Greyhound Racing

Greyhound Owner

The business of greyhound racing carries financial risk. A fairly accurate rule of thumb to use in raising a puppy is \$3,000 per pup. For a litter of 6, the owner has about \$18,000 invested in the litter by the time they are ready to compete at the track. Of course, not all puppies will have the ability to “make the track” and the competitive level of each puppy will differ, often not determined until the greyhound starts in an official schooling race.

Using the NGA statistic of 85% whelped-individually registered ratio, in the above example the investment of \$18,000 would be earned by 5 greyhounds to recoup the litter cost. As with horses, better greyhounds will run for better purses. A greyhound owner will lease his/her greyhound to a kennel at the highest-paying track where the greyhound can compete, based on its ability.

In this example, using a 35% commission rate, 5 greyhounds must earn \$51,428 (\$8,500 per greyhound) just to return the litter cost over a typical 2 year racing career to its owner. Greyhounds are moved between tracks in order to compete for the highest purses, and the greyhound owner’s purse percentage is often 40-50%, depending on the level of purses at a track.

Kennel Owner

Kennel owners face a similar financial risk. The only source of income for the kennel owner is a percentage of race earnings; there is no board or training fee involved. The kennel owner wants to have a competitive, balanced group of greyhounds with as high an active list as possible. While the kennel owner receives a percentage of purses earned, he or she has 100% of the greyhound expenses. If a greyhound is sick or injured, it reduces the ability of a kennel to meet its overhead, so the greyhounds receive the best of care.

A rule of thumb for weekly expenses of a kennel is \$2,500-3,000. At a 65% commission rate, the kennel must earn \$3,800-4,600 just to break even on its operating costs, not counting any income to the kennel owner. If the kennel owner has agreed to pay a higher commission percentage to the greyhound owner, it must earn even more.

This system is different from the horse racing business. In greyhound racing, there are two primary factors for either a greyhound owner or a kennel owner to consider: purses and opportunities to race, as determined by number and value of points available.

Greyhound Safety and Welfare

The safety and welfare of the greyhound is primary, both during and after its racing career. While racing in Texas, the Rules of Racing set out a number of requirements on the greyhound's housing and care at the track. Both the National Greyhound Association and the Texas Greyhound Association have Owner Responsibility requirements in their by-laws.

From 2002 through 2006, Gulf Greyhound Park, the TGA and the American Greyhound Track Operators' Association held an annual seminar on track surface and safety. This seminar will again be held in the Fall of 2009. It generally is attended by well over 100 representatives of greyhound racetracks, state commissions and members of the veterinary community as a forum to discuss safety and welfare issues.

Greyhound Adoption

The greyhound adoption program is a major success story. Through non-profit groups in Texas and throughout the country and Canada, the greyhound industry has reached a 90% adoption rate for retired racers. Gulf Greyhound Park has its own on-site adoption kennel and retired racers greet customers on most race days. Valley Race Park coordinates with Greyhound Adoption League of Texas in Dallas to place retired racers from its meet. At the closing of Corpus Christi Greyhound Race Track, a number of Texas and national organizations stepped up to place 203 greyhounds in adoptive homes in a six month period.

The Texas Greyhound Association coordinates with all the adoption groups and greyhound owners to ensure that every greyhound finds a couch.



Maggie