

# Improving the Image of Greyhounds as Pets: Recent Data show they are a Good Choice when selecting a Purebred Shelter-dog for Adoption

By Michaela Avery

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## Introduction

Despite being one of the most common breeds of dogs available for adoption at shelters worldwide, the greyhound is still not a popular choice. The low number of greyhounds adopted from shelters may be due to dog-breed prejudice. Historically, studies have indicated that a potential adopter's negative perception of an individual dog can cast an entire breed in an unfavourable light (Wright *et al.*, 2007) and a law stipulating that all greyhounds must be muzzled when in public may have exacerbated low public opinion of the breed (GAPSA, 2009). Once seen wearing a muzzle, an individual greyhound creates the perception that the entire breed is to be feared (GAPSA, 2009). This negative public image could result in the failure of potential adopters to pursue their investigation into the breed beyond first sight, and consequently the breed's positive traits and characteristics are overlooked (GAPSA, 2009; Wright *et al.*, 2007).

## Discussion

In the past 18 months, three papers have been published that provide insights into the true nature of breeds; these go some way to repairing the damage inflicted by breed prejudice. The first investigates traits and factors that most influence successful shelter-dog adoption, including the presence of behavioural problems, the dog's health after adoption, and the actual effort required in caring for the dog in relation to the effort expected (Diesel *et al.*, 2008). The second and third papers contain empirical data indicating that greyhounds are likely to outperform other purebred shelter dogs in these categories.

Implicit expectations and perceptions of a dog may be conferred on it by a preconceived stereotype of its breed in general, despite an individual dog's actual traits and behaviours (Wright *et al.*, 2007). Previous studies have shown that potential adopters who watch footage of a dog acting in an aggressive way will then be disinclined to adopt another dog of the same breed (Wright *et al.*, 2007). The legal stipulation that all greyhounds must be muzzled when in public may have led to the public perception of aggression in the breed and the relative lack of success in greyhound adoptions (GAPSA, 2009; Wright *et al.*, 2007). Support for the notion that greyhounds have been the victims of dog-breed typecasting comes in the form of a 65% increase in greyhound adoptions in the Australian states where this law has been retracted (GAP, 2009).

A study by Diesel *et al.* (2008) determined the causative factors underpinning successful adoption through a British dog welfare charity, Dogs Trust. According to the paper, the most common reason for relinquishing an adopted dog was a behavioural problem, with 58.6% of dogs being returned to the Trust's shelter for this reason. Aggression was the most important behavioural factor, with dogs being 11.1 times more likely to be returned if they displayed aggression toward people post-adoption, in comparison to those dogs that did not.

The same study also indicated that new owners were 9.9 times more inclined to relinquish a shelter-dog post-adoption if it required more effort to care for than they had initially expected, with factors such as the dog's health after adoption significantly affecting their decision to keep it (Diesel *et al.*, 2008). Owners were 3.2 times more likely to return a dog to the shelter if it did not remain healthy after adoption (Diesel *et al.*, 2008).

A paper by Duffy *et al.* (2008) lists the greyhound as the least aggressive of 33 common dog breeds. According to recent dog-attack studies, an estimated 1.6% of owned greyhounds have been involved in attacks on strangers (compared with 20.6% of dachshunds), or on strange dogs (compared with 29.3% of akitas). Most greyhounds studied were shown to exhibit non-

aggressive fear reactions to strange humans or dogs, rather than aggressive reactions (Duffy *et al.*, 2008).

A second 2008 paper, by Calboli *et al.*, investigates the population structure and presence of inbreeding in a representative sample of common dog breeds. The researchers conclude that all breeds contained extremely inbred dogs, the sole exception being the greyhound. Inbreeding and resultant loss of heterozygosity is to blame for the high incidence of inherited disorders and ill-health in particular dog breeds (Calboli *et al.*, 2008). This has a massive impact on canine health and welfare. Dog breeds must traditionally conform to a preconceived ideal appearance, and so breeding for type is focused on the physical appearance of the dog with little concern for increasing genetic and physiological unfitnes within the breed (Calboli *et al.*, 2008). For the most part, the greyhound as a breed appears to have escaped this fate. Their loci have been shown to contain a high degree of polymorphism and they are bred without evidence of popular sires (Calboli *et al.*, 2008). As a result, they have a low prevalence of genetic disease. Hip dysplasia, while relatively common in other large breeds, is rare in the greyhound (Lord *et al.*, 2007).

## Conclusion

A selected dog's aggressive tendencies and a propensity towards ill-health have been shown to be key factors in unsuccessful shelter-dog adoptions (Diesel *et al.*, 2008). Objective, empirical evidence from studies within the past year indicates that, therefore, an innate lack of aggression and low risk of inherited disorders makes the greyhound an excellent choice when selecting a purebred shelter-dog. Duffy *et al.* (2008) indicate in their paper that greyhounds are the least aggressive of 33 breeds, suggesting that the greyhound's aggressive reputation is entirely undeserved. Calboli *et al.* (2008) show the greyhound to be the least inbred among an array of common dog breeds, therefore having the lowest risk of inherited disease. An adopted greyhound lends itself to the role of successful adoptee when using aggression and likelihood of post-adoption health as selection parameters. Negative perceptions of the breed may be to blame for the lack of popularity of greyhounds in the past, but the recent revelations may spark interest in the breed as a pet and serve to reduce the number of greyhounds currently euthanased in shelters yearly (GAPSA, 2009).

## References

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GAPSA – Greyhound Adoption Program South Australia (2009)\* Official website of the greyhound adoption program, South Australia branch (viewed on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2009) <http://www.gapsa.org.au/about.htm>

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\*Denotes reference that is outside the time frame stipulated for this assignment, or from a source that is not peer reviewed.