

## Statement to the Massachusetts Legislative Committee Members

I apologize for not being here in person today and for my previous silence regarding the racing greyhound issue. My name is Debbie Gehrke. I have been a veterinarian for almost twenty years. In 1992, I accepted part-time employment covering the Wonderland Greyhound Track. My initial concerns about adequate care and safety of these magnificent dogs were quickly resolved when witnessing the treatment provided by their trainers and track staff. Consequently I have continued to work at both Massachusetts tracks, averaging 1-2 shifts per week, and during this time I have never witnessed any type of abuse or cruelty. If I had, I would not have remained for 17 years, and would have voiced my observations and opinions quite loudly. The only health issue I have ever needed to address with a trainer and the racing commission, was a flea problem in one kennel, several years ago.

Relative to the major concerns by anti-racing proponents (which are socialization, crate size, scheduled time out of crate, diet, and injuries), I have observed several similarities and dissimilarities of the racing greyhound compared to my average household canine patient:

Both the racing dog and household dog can vary in personality when at the track or vet clinic setting, but primarily most are friendly and readily interact with others. In general I would say that the racing dogs appear more eager to interact with strangers than the average household pet. Many of my clients state that the only time their dog leaves the house or yard is to go to the groomer every 2-4 months and the annual or bi-annual vet visit.

Required minimum cage dimensions for the greyhounds is more spacious than the usual crate size used for household dogs that need crating to curb destructive habits or prefer the crate to nap.

The required out-of-cage schedule for racing greyhounds (which is five times per 24 hours) would be the envy of most of my canine patients. My dog would love that schedule. I would love that schedule!

The racing greyhounds are fit, the average household dog is NOT!!! Sadly, it is a rarity these days, in clinical practice, to see a dog over the age of three that is considered normally proportioned.

Regarding the diet, I personally have not witnessed the actual ingredients used or their respective ratios but based on the racing greyhounds remarkable physique and performance, it seems ridiculous to me to question the overall nutritional value of the food and supplements. I know from my Animal Science Classes that discussed the inspection and grading of meat, that the 4-D grade does not mean that the entire carcass is diseased or contaminated. It means that the carcass has a problem, usually an isolated problem, and that portions, usually major portions of the carcass, are still considered edible for other animals. And it just makes sense to me that if an owner or trainer thought

that feeding their dogs a higher grade of meat would help shave valuable seconds off of racing times that they would have voluntarily switched years ago.

And lastly, regarding injuries, unfortunately, they do happen. According to the Massachusetts Racing Commission; the percentage of injured racing dogs was 0.15% for the years 2000-2007. The primary injury in my experience has been to the right hind leg, but reported numbers can include torn toenails to minor lacerations to the very rare sudden death. (I personally have only witnessed one sudden death at the track and have had to euthanize two dogs due to severe front leg fractures sustained while racing. FYI- Greyhound specialists have concurred that many of these severe fractures occur due to a pre-existing unsuspected cancer lesion of the bone). All other dogs that I have witnessed sustaining an injury while racing have been attended to immediately and many have eventually been able to return to the track.

Comparatively, according to American Sports Data, the percentage of children and teens injured while playing typical sports such as basketball and baseball was a whopping 10%. And one of the highest death rates was in baseball, with an expected 3-4 fatalities per year! Statistics for injuries to the average household dog are not available due to lack of required reporting, but in my own practice, certainly well over 0.15% of these overweight couch potatoes rupture ligaments, break legs, and on rare occasion, also die of sudden death when chasing whatever moves in the yard or across the street.

In summary, these athletic dogs are more visible to the general public and professional veterinary community than most household dogs will ever be. The rules and guidelines for their care are outlined with great specificity and from what I understand, most of these rules were drawn up by the very groups that now cry out that the cages are too small or the time period out of the cages is not sufficient. When children get injured in typical sports, we modify the playing conditions or require improved safety equipment, but we do not ban the sport altogether. So, IF deemed necessary, let us modify the dog racing conditions to improve on the 0.15% injury rate, but do not ban the sport altogether plus put hundreds of people out of work in the process.

I invite any of you that are interested in observing dog racing from the veterinarian perspective, to contact me through the dog owner and track representatives here today.

Sincerely,

Deb Gehrke DVM

P.S. I worked on this statement while covering the track at Raynham this past weekend. On the record there were 3 shifts worked, 38 races watched, 301 dogs competed, and zero injuries sustained. Off the record, my checking account may have suffered an injury or two during some between-race internet shopping. Please don't tell my husband!