

## Chapter One

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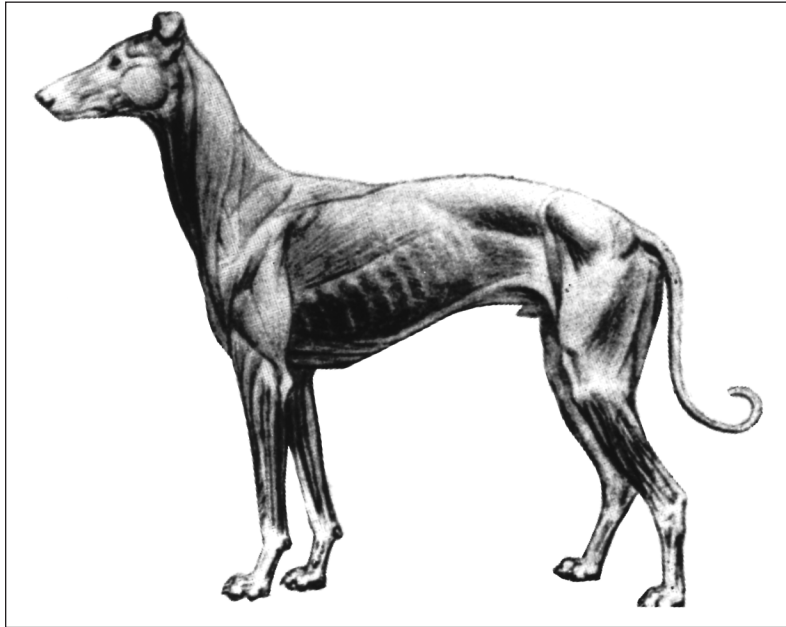
# A Brief History of the Breed

Most dog-care books devote a page, or at most two, to the history of the breed they are discussing. There's a very good reason for this: there isn't that much history to tell. Greyhounds, however, have been with us longer than any other purebred dog. To appreciate fully your dog of today, it is useful to see him in a historical context. What follows is a brief outline to whet your appetite. For a more detailed look at the Greyhound's long and rich history, you might enjoy another book I've written — *The Reign of the Greyhound: A Popular History of the Oldest Family of Dogs* (Howell Book House, 1997).

### THE GREYHOUND FAMILY

When contemplating the history of the Greyhound, it is useful to think in terms of the Greyhound family. As much as anyone may tell you that this or that breed is the oldest known to man, the truth is no one knows for sure. What we do know, however, is that the earliest purebred dogs were of the Greyhound type. The Greyhound family has several characteristics in common. Among them are long legs, a long narrow head, a deep chest and the ability to hunt by sight (hence the term sighthound, or gazehound) rather than by scent as most dogs do. As this type of dog moved to different parts of the world, some of his superficial characteristics,

## ADOPTING THE RACING GREYHOUND



*The musculature of a Greyhound.*

such as the length of his coat and the shape of his ears, began to change to accommodate the conditions of his new environment.

## MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY

Members of the Greyhound family that are recognized by the American Kennel Club are Afghan Hounds, Borzois, Greyhounds, Ibizan Hounds, Irish Wolfhounds, Pharaoh Hounds, Salukis, Scottish Deerhounds and Whippets. Fringe members include Basenjis and Rhodesian Ridgebacks (which hunt by sight but do not share a physical resemblance) and Italian Greyhounds (which share a physical resemblance but don't hunt at all).

## THE FIRST GREYHOUND TYPES

The first traces of the long, lean dogs of the Greyhound type were seen in the ancient city of Catal-Hüyük, located in what is now

### *A Brief History of the Breed*

southwest Turkey. Temple drawings, dating to 6000 B.C., show a hunter pursuing a stag with the help of two Greyhound types.

As people migrated to different parts of the globe, they took their dogs with them. About 4000 B.C., in what is now Iran, a funerary vase was created that was decorated with the image of Greyhounds. Obviously these dogs were held in high regard for their image to have been added to so personal an item.

## ANCIENT EGYPT

It was in Egypt, however, that the Greyhound really came into his own. Not only were the dogs kept as companions (in addition to being hunting partners), but they were practically worshipped.



*The Egyptian god Anubis.*

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The Egyptian god Anubis was, as were many Egyptian deities, half man and half beast. In this case the beast was, depending on which sources you consult, either a jackal or a Greyhound. In looking at a painting or statue of Anubis, the resemblance to the present-day Pharaoh Hound is unmistakable.

The Egyptians valued their Greyhounds so much that the birth of one was second in importance only to the birth of a human boy. Indeed, when a pet Greyhound died, the entire family would mourn by shaving their heads, fasting and wailing.

Greyhounds were mummified and buried along with their owners, and the walls of the tombs were often decorated with figures of favorite Greyhounds that had died before their owners. Among the Pharaohs who kept Greyhounds were Tutankhamen, Amenhotep II, Thutmose III and Queen Hatshepsut. Cleopatra, too, was an aficionada.

While the ancient Israelites did not worship Greyhounds and, in fact, seemed to regard dogs in general with disdain, they did make an exception for the Greyhound. It is the only breed of dog named in the Bible. Proverbs 30: 29–31 reads:

There be three things which go well, yea,  
Which are comely in going:  
A lion, which is strongest among beasts and  
Turneth not away from any;  
A Greyhound;  
A he-goat also.

## ANCIENT GREECE

When explorers from Greece traveled to Egypt, they were suitably impressed by the Greyhounds and managed to take some back with them to their homeland. The dogs' popularity caught on to such an extent that even the Greek hero Alexander the Great kept one, which he named Peritas.

The first dog mentioned in literature, in 800 B.C., was, you guessed it, a Greyhound. In the *Odyssey*, Homer told the tale of

### *A Brief History of the Breed*

the return of Odysseus, who had been away from home for 20 years. The only one who recognized him was his Greyhound, Argus, who was only a pup when Odysseus left.

Greek mythological figures were frequently portrayed with Greyhounds. Hecate, goddess of wealth, is often shown accompanied by a Greyhound, as is Pollux, protector of the hunt. And, of course, the famous story of Actaeon and Artemis tells of the goddess taking revenge on Actaeon by turning him into a stag and setting her 48 Greyhounds on him.

## **ANCIENT ROME**

The ancient Romans appropriated many things of value from Greek culture, and this included an appreciation of the Greyhound. Their gods and goddesses, too, had Greyhounds, and the most well-known story is of Diana, goddess of the hunt, who gave her best friend, Procris, a Greyhound named Lelaps. Lelaps accompanied a hunter into the woods and, when the dog spotted a hare, went off in hot pursuit. The gods watched the scene and, not wanting the hare to be killed, turned both it and Lelaps into stone. This scene of Lelaps chasing the hare is often depicted in Roman art.

The Romans loved to run their Greyhounds, but in even those bloodthirsty days, there was at least one person who had a vestige of humanity. In A.D. 124 Arrian wrote a treatise entitled "On Hunting Hares." He urged his readers to concentrate more on the sport and less on the gore, stating, "The true sportsman does not take out his dogs to destroy the hares, but for the sake of the course and the contest between the dogs and the hares, and is glad if the hares escape."

## **MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE TIMES**

During the Middle Ages, a time of famine and pestilence, Greyhounds very nearly became extinct. They were saved, however, by clergymen who protected them from starvation and bred them for noblemen. It was during this period that ownership of a Greyhound became the exclusive right of the nobility.

## ADOPTING THE RACING GREYHOUND

King Canute enacted a law in 1016 in England that prohibited any “meane person” from owning a Greyhound and punished any infraction severely. A hundred years earlier in Wales, King Howel decreed the punishment for killing a Greyhound was the same as for killing a person — death.

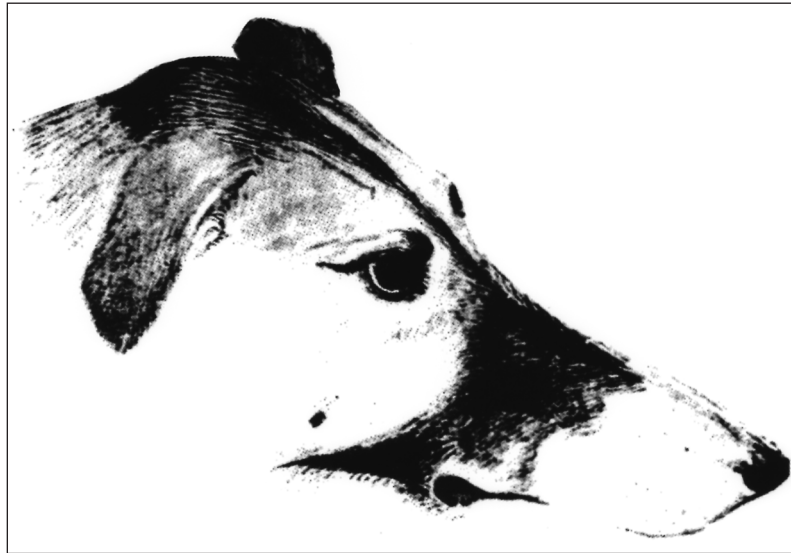
Since Greyhounds were the first breed of dog mentioned in literature, it is only fitting that they also were the first breed of dog written about in the English language. In the late fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in *The Canterbury Tales*, “Greyhounds he hadde as swift as fowels in flight.” Shakespeare, too, mentioned them. In *Henry V* he wrote, “I see you stand like Greyhounds in the slips, / [Straining] upon the start. The game’s afoot!”

During the Renaissance, the elegant lines of the Greyhound were not overlooked by the most famous artists of the era. Among those who saw fit to immortalize these dogs in art were Veronese, Pisanello and Uccello. While Veronese’s works tended toward the sacred, Pisanello and Uccello seemed to appreciate the Greyhound form for its own sake. Uccello’s painting “Hunt in the Forest,” for example, shows dozens of Greyhounds in a dark woods helping hunters capture their prey.

## COURSING

The sport of coursing, which has its origins in ancient Greece, helped keep the Greyhound a popular animal. As coursing was originally practiced, two Greyhounds would be “slipped” (released) in a field to run after a hare that also would be released but given a 100-yard advantage. The victor was not necessarily the dog that caught the rabbit, and, in fact, quite often the rabbit escaped. Instead, the dogs were judged by a complicated set of rules that valued such things as the dog’s agility and concentration. In the mid-1700s, a set of rules was developed that helped popularize the sport and caused it to spread throughout Great Britain and across the Continent.

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*A Greyhound head by the Italian Renaissance artist Pisanello, circa 1400.*



*A modern Greyhound head shows very little change.*



## ADOPTING THE RACING GREYHOUND



*Two famous coursing Greyhounds, Riot and David, from an 1878 engraving.*

## THE BULLDOG BREEDINGS

The mid-1700s were also important in Greyhound history for another reason: it was then that an eccentric English nobleman by the name of Lord Orford began his now-famous Greyhound-Bulldog breedings. His idea was that by breeding a male Bulldog with a female Greyhound, the result would be a dog that had a uniformly smooth coat (which had eluded breeders up until that time) and which would possess what Lord Orford called “courage.” Bear in mind, however, that the Bulldogs of those times did not look like the Bulldogs of today. They had a much longer muzzle and resembled Bull Terriers.

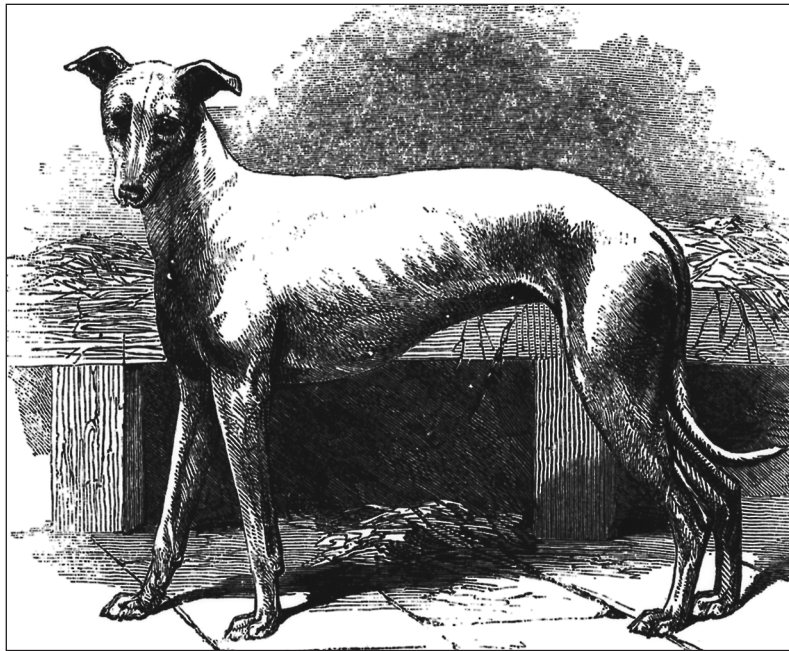


### *A Brief History of the Breed*

Lord Orford's crosses continued for seven generations, and the resulting dogs were of such high quality that those who had previously been skeptical were now clamoring to buy his dogs.

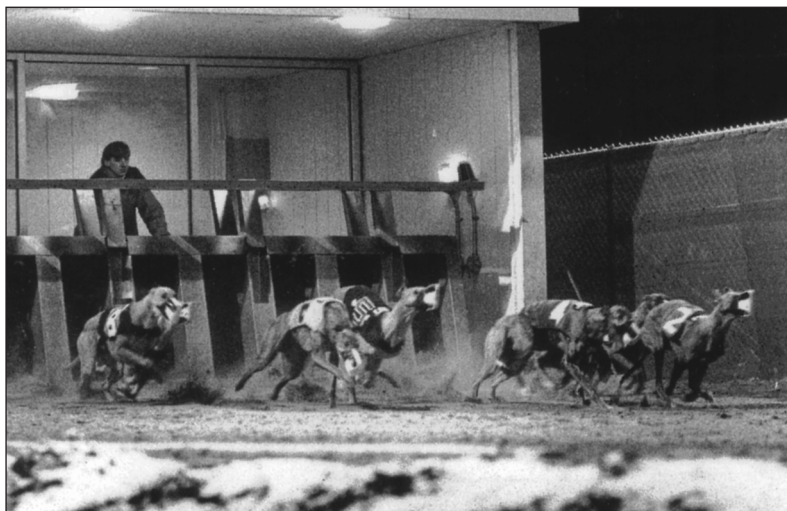
## ON TO AMERICA

As people from the British Isles emigrated to America, they often brought their Greyhounds with them. Coursing was a sport that was a natural for the wide-open expanses of the prairie, and the participants justified the killing of rabbits with the argument that they were helping to protect the farmers' crops from hungry hares. General George Custer coursed his 14 Greyhounds on the day before his defeat at Little Big Horn. Perhaps he had a premonition about the next day's battle because directly after coursing his dogs, he sent them off with an officer into town so they would stay out of harm's way.



*Hecate was a second-generation cross from the Bulldog breedings of Lord Orford in the mid-1700s.*

## ADOPTING THE RACING GREYHOUND



*Greyhound racing is a sport made in the United States.  
(Photo: National Greyhound Racing Association)*

### GREYHOUND RACING . . . AN AMERICAN SPORT

In the early 1900s, Owen Patrick Smith invented the artificial lure that accomplished two things at once: it allowed more people to see the Greyhounds as they were raced on an oval track, and it eliminated the need to kill live rabbits. And so, Greyhound racing was born. In the years since, Greyhound racing has become increasingly popular. It reached its peak in 1991 when it was the sixth most popular spectator sport, with revenues of \$3.4 billion from betting. Casino gambling has sharply cut into Greyhound racing's popularity, and profitability, but it is still a major industry. In 1995 the total betting revenue was \$2.5 billion.

But the history of the Greyhound is not finished yet. The one you write with your dog will be the most interesting of all.