

Chapter 1

The History of Greyhounds

In This Chapter

- Understanding your Greyhound's ancient roots
- Knowing what Greyhounds were bred for

If you're considering adopting a retired racer or you already share your home with one, understanding your best friend's lineage provides great insight into his personality and behavior.

Cave paintings in France show that dogs have been part of our lives for perhaps as long as 15,000 years, with the earliest known bones of dogs dated to 12,000 B.C. Greyhounds, or at least Greyhound-like dogs, have been part of that history almost from the beginning.

The Greyhound evolved to hunt on the open, flat plains of the Middle East perhaps as long as 8,000 years ago and became an important part of ancient life in that region. Greyhounds are one of a group of dogs referred to as *sighthounds* or *gazehounds* because they rely on keen sight and blazing speed to hunt prey.



Do I know you from somewhere?

Many breeds of dogs are barely recognizable from drawings or paintings of their early ancestors. However, the Greyhound's appearance has changed little since he first appeared on coins in

500 B.C. The reason is simple: The Greyhound's purpose remains the same. He was, and always has been, bred for speed.



What's in a name?

The origin of the name *Greyhound* is unknown, but it could be derived from the Saxon words *Grech* or *Greg*, meaning “Greek,” because they thought the breed originated in Greece. The name could also be derived from the term *gazehound*, used to describe a dog who hunts by sight.

Regardless of its origin, the name has nothing to do with the Greyhound's color. Gray is actually *not* a common color among Greyhounds.

Of Coursers and Kings

Greyhounds were treated with almost god-like reverence by ancient Egyptians and highly regarded by other cultures in the Middle East. As time passed, the Greyhound became both a hunter and a sporting dog. A favorite pastime of nobility almost from the moment the first sighthounds were bred was a sport called *coursing*, in which dogs compete against each other in the pursuit of a lure. Coursing existed in Rome by at least the first century A.D. For centuries, only royalty were allowed to own Greyhounds.

The modern Greyhound is a product of late-eighteenth-century England. During this time, the Earl of Orford was obsessed with the breed and set about to produce the “perfect” Greyhound. He created the first public coursing club in 1776. The Greyhound as we know him today was the work of careful breeding in England and the eventual practice of keeping careful pedigree records called *studbooks*.

On to the New World

Greyhounds have been in the New World since Christopher Columbus first landed here. But Greyhounds weren't established in the United States until settlers in the Midwest discovered that, just as the jackrabbits were fond of their crops, Greyhounds were fond of jackrabbits. The Midwest became the seat of Greyhound coursing and eventually of Greyhound racing. In many areas of the Midwest and West, Greyhounds are still bred by backyard breeders to hunt and kill jackrabbits and coyotes.



Guinefort and the Cult of the Greyhound

A legend dating back to at least the eleventh century tells of a duke in France who left his faithful Greyhound Guinefort to watch over his young child. When the duke returned, he found the nursery covered in blood, the cradle turned over, and the baby missing, but Guinefort remained. The duke assumed that Guinefort had killed the missing baby, so he drew his sword and killed the dog.

Just as Guinefort made his last dying cry, the duke heard a wail and found the baby safe beneath the cradle and the body of a poisonous serpent nearby. Guinefort had attacked the snake and protected the infant from harm.

When the duke realized his error, he buried his faithful dog in a well.

Guinefort was made a national martyr in France and a saint. The well in which St. Guinefort is buried was thought to hold healing powers for sick infants. The feast day of St. Guinefort was celebrated on August 22.

Over several centuries, the legend of Guinefort gave rise to a cult. The Catholic Church was not amused and viewed the cult as a sacrilege. Sporadic inquisitions were held for hundreds of years to eradicate the “Cult of the Greyhound.”

The Racing Greyhound

Greyhound racing as we know it today developed in the early 1900s. Today there are 47 Greyhound tracks operating in 16 states. Greyhound racing is regulated by the individual states that host tracks and by the National Greyhound Association (NGA).

Racing Greyhounds, like the ones shown in Figure 1-1, are registered with the National Greyhound Association (NGA). The NGA is responsible for registering racing Greyhounds in the United States. The NGA keeps careful ownership records of all registered racing puppies and detailed records about a racer’s bloodlines.

Not all Greyhounds are racing Greyhounds. Some Greyhounds are bred for dog shows. Others compete in lure coursing, in which two dogs race after a lure (usually a white plastic bag) to see which dog is fastest.

Figure 1-1:
Greyhound
racing is the
sixth most
popular
spectator
sport in the
United
States.



Photograph courtesy of Greyhound Hall of Fame