

**Submission  
No 352**

## **INQUIRY INTO GREYHOUND RACING IN NSW**

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## **Submission to the Upper House Inquiry**

**Dr Nathan Absalom**

### **Author's experience**

I have been involved in greyhounds all my life that I can remember, with our family keeping ex-greyhounds as pets, then our family began owning and breeding our own greyhounds. My professional career involves extensive use of animals for medical science, I held a personal license in the UK to perform animal experiments for four years (mice and amphibians), successfully completing the Home Office course. I have also completed the animal ethics course at the University of Sydney where my work is covered by the NSW government regulation, all of which is relevant to the clauses on animal welfare.

### **Reducing the number of injuries as a result of racetrack falls**

A major animal welfare concern of greyhound racing is the number of injuries sustained as a result of racetrack falls or interference. These injuries may prematurely end a racing career or cause unnecessary suffering, although unlike horse racing only in very rare circumstances result in immediate euthanasia. No-one involved in greyhound racing wants to see falls, including owners and trainers. Thus reducing the number of racetrack falls ought to be a high consideration for GRNSW, this inquiry and the industry in general.

Historically, attempts to reduce racetrack falls have been to make changes to the shape of tracks, introducing transitional turns and sloping the track at the corners. However, reductions in falls and associated injuries can be made without expensive capital interventions. In Australian greyhound racing, the number of starters is restricted to 8. This is not a world

standard, in the UK races are conducted with 6 starters. To investigate the effect of fewer starters, I took a random sample of races, looking at all Tab C races conducted at Nowra, Bathurst and the Gardens in 2013 and compared the number of falls in races with 6 dogs or less with races with 7 or more. From data on thedogs website, in the races studied there were 50 races of 6 starters or less with no fallers or runners that failed to finish. There were 595 races in that time period of 7 or 8 starters with 42 falls and 14 runners that failed to finish. It is my view that inexperienced greyhounds should not be running in fields of 7 or 8. I strongly suggest that such a reform needs to be driven by evidence, with a trial period conducted comparing inexperienced greyhounds (with starts of 10 or fewer) racing in fields of 6 to fields of 8.

**Key Recommendation: A trial should be immediately set up where 6-dog fields are drawn for races with greyhounds of 10-starts or fewer on a TAB track. This should be compared to 8-dog fields at the same track and distance, the dogs having similar experience. If this results in a significant reduction in falls and incapacitation certificates, this reform should be implemented across NSW.**

### **Reducing falls, a case study**

Dapto, Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013 Race 1

At time of writing, when going back through videos of previous races, this race was the first that I saw with a fall. The cause of the fall at the first corner was clear, Lizard Girl in box 2 was trying to run towards the middle/outside of the track and took the running of Fast Fusion in box 3, causing it to fall. Unfortunately, this was entirely predictable, Lizard Girl had frequently attempted to race in the middle and outside of the track in all of its previous race

starts. All of these races are publicly available on thedogs website and at time of writing, the only race Lizard Girl had won was from box 8.

In the UK, to reduce interference greyhound races, greyhounds are nominated as inside, middle or wide runners and boxed accordingly. GRNSW provides a video situated head-on in the run to the first corner. From this a system could be designed with simple objective criteria that places greyhounds into categories prior to the box draw. This would prevent wide-running greyhounds being drawn in box one, a common cause of many of the worst incidents. Indeed, the reason for showing the head-on video is presumably to allow punters to better predict which greyhounds will collide with each other. This is a rather perverse situation and in my opinion not ethically justified.

**Key Recommendation. The video technology currently available ought to be used to seed greyhounds into the right boxes, significantly reduce the number of collisions in greyhound races, rather than giving astute punters an advantage. Again, a trial ought to be set up immediately.**

### **Intelligent swabbing procedures**

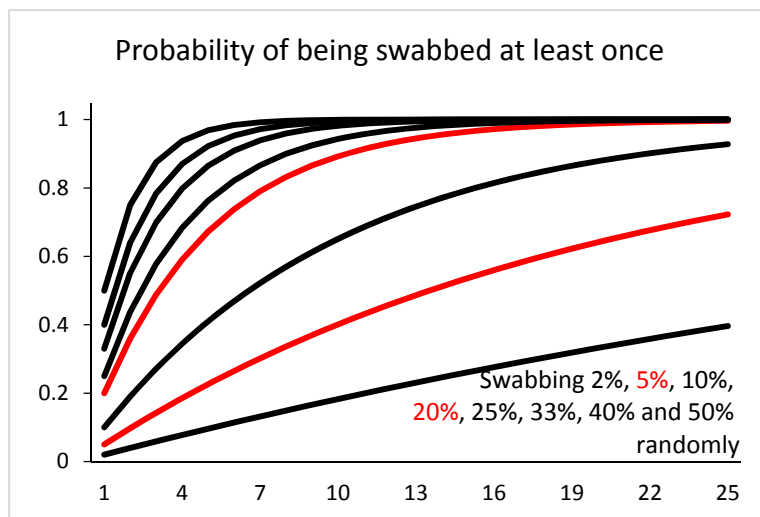
There have been several recent suggestions of substance abuse in greyhound racing, including but not restricted to the administration of substances to improve greyhound performance on the racetrack. Previous administrators in NSW greyhound racing acted corruptly to circumvent the random swabbing procedures that were in place to prevent this, and unfortunately the current administration, while I have no evidence that they have acted corruptly, at various times have weakened the swabbing procedures, wasted resources and decreased the trust between participants and administrators.

Random swabbing is essential in ensuring the best value for money in deterring substance abuse. While feature event winners and placegetters need to be swabbed as a matter of course, not every winner needs to be swabbed. The graph below shows the probability of being swabbed at least once when greyhounds are swabbed and drug tested at a rate of 2%, 5% (red), 10%, 20% (red), 25%, 33%, 40% and 50%. Previously, with the red marble 20% of winning greyhounds were swabbed and this is coloured in red. If a trainer chooses to try their luck, there is a 95% chance their winning greyhound will be swabbed after 15 races or less. If 5% of all greyhounds are swabbed, there is a 50% chance any of the trainer's greyhounds will be swabbed after 15 races or less. This would require just 6 greyhounds to be swabbed in a 10-race meeting to achieve this level of disincentive, which gives a far greater chance of catching someone than random breath testing. Randomness can be achieved in any manner, the drawing of a red marble, the last digit of the first sectional split (i.e the leading dog running 5.40 or 5.41, 5.50 or 5.51 ends up with the winner swabbed) would also be very difficult to be manipulated by stewards or other participants.

The rules governing prohibited substances have often been addressed in black and white terms. It can be difficult and confusing for connections to determine what they can administer their greyhounds, as the current controversy on substances for preventing bitches going on season with testaprop has demonstrated. A list of substances, which can be administered by a veterinarian (I understand this already happens for some substances, such as *pannus*), and substances that can be administered by trainers ought to be clearly publicly available for connections.

**Key Recommendation. Random swabbing of 2 winners per meeting, and a further 4 runners per meeting be re-introduced. Set up a register of veterinarians that are**

permitted to administer substances. When such substances are administered, that information be made publicly available immediately.



### Using data from tracking of greyhounds to improve animal welfare

While the inquiry will look at better tracking of greyhounds throughout their lives, I think it is important to think about how

the data that would be acquired from the tracking of greyhounds could be better used to improve animal welfare, rather than to witch-hunt individuals. There is an argument of euthanasia and the number of greyhounds that are euthanized, and whether so long as the greyhounds are well cared for when racing and euthanized humanely, is there an animal welfare concern? I think that there is a large difference in euthanizing a greyhound that has chronic illness, to a greyhound that is well past their racing age and puppies that are deemed unsuitable to race. I also do not think that there are widespread abuses of animal welfare for the majority of greyhounds that are racing, as they need to be physically fit and healthy to win races.

There is a lot of publicly available information that can help in identifying areas of concern in industry practices. Currently, whelpings are reported to GRNSW and recorded on the dogs website, enabling us to determine how many greyhounds progress to the racetrack. I looked at

a random sample, using the month of June 2011, as most greyhounds that race will have begun their career by 28 months of age. Of 297 pups that were whelped, 65% had made it to the racetrack having at least run in a performance trial. A further 14% were named but had not raced, and there was a discrepancy of 21% of the number of greyhounds listed as whelped compared to the number of named greyhounds listed from these litters. Clearly, the latter two groups become a high priority for improvements in animal welfare.

I would suggest, from my experience, that the 21% is an overestimation of the greyhounds that were euthanased for not being suitable for racing from the sample group chosen. A small but significant proportion of greyhounds are victims of a whole assortment of problems, including fighting between greyhounds within a litter, snakebites, cancer and defects acquired at births. There is also likely to be a cohort of greyhounds that can no longer be cared for as the owner suffers a health issue. The reality is that breeders are breeding enough greyhounds to adequately fill the demand for racing created by arrangements between GRNSW and the TAB.

On the other hand, it would be much less likely that named greyhounds in the 14% group (41 greyhounds in the sample) succumb to these problems, as a greyhound is named when they are older, usually after they are 12 months of age. While there are owners of these greyhounds that would keep these dogs for domestic pets, others wouldn't. It is true that GRNSW requires owners to fill in a disposal form when their greyhound is retired or euthanized, but to my knowledge this information is not made public, so I am unable to estimate the percentage of greyhounds that are euthanized. Furthermore, the disposal form doesn't really address the issue, as theoretically one could fill in the form to say the greyhound has retired, and then

euthanize them as any domestic pet. Regardless, this number of greyhounds is manageable by GRNSW or another party affiliated with greyhound racing. I understand that just 300 dogs have been rehomed by GAP from June 2009. I do not wish to criticise the people at GAP, I think they perform excellent work on behalf of the community and the greyhound that pass through their program, but it is clear to me that there should be better options for more of these greyhounds.

Making significant changes to increasing the number of greyhounds kept as pets after their racing career is finished requires an understanding of how many are kept and by what type of owners and trainers. Do people tend to keep their fastest dogs, or the ones with the best temperament for a housedog? Is it a mix of both? Is it just winners that are preferred? What are the differences between smaller and larger owners, and owner/trainers?

To both address this issue, and to improve the fate of greyhounds within the 65% that do race after completing their racing career, serious consideration must be given to a retirement facility for greyhounds that caters for a variety of different greyhounds. While it is preferable for any greyhound to be rehomed via the GAP program, it will always struggle to provide the number of places that are necessary. So long as the greyhounds are well cared for and enjoy living in such a facility, this would enhance animal welfare outcomes for greyhounds. While this would take some capital expenditure, it would be a wise investment from the State Government, TAB or betting agencies that all profit from greyhound racing. Not all greyhounds are suitable to be pets in homes, and participants could pay a small fee to such a facility to ensure that their greyhounds are given space in the facility after they finish racing.



I am sure that many participants would be happy to pay additional money at the time of registration to get a place in the retirement facility.

**Key Recommendation: Set up a facility for retired greyhounds, funded in part by State Government, participants, TAB distribution and betting agencies Question GRNSW on how they acquire their statistics and how they use this to inform the decision-making process within GRNSW. If this is not satisfactory, allow an advisory committee to make recommendations to GRNSW based on the statistics they accrue.**

### **Making it easier for greyhounds to kept as domestic pets**

To keep greyhounds as domestic pets, several regulatory obstacles need to be overcome. Councils often regulate the number of domestic dogs that can be kept on a property. For those living in rental properties, domestic pets are often forbidden in the terms of their agreement. No-one needs to be reminded of the difficulties in purchasing real estate in Sydney, and indeed other parts of NSW. It's a high price to pay if you want a dog in the inner city!

**Key Recommendation: Greyhounds that have passed the "Greenhounds" program to be exempt from council regulations, and publicising of clauses that can exempt such greyhounds from rental agreements.**

## **Ethical breeding of greyhounds for racing**

The greyhound breed has different characteristics to thoroughbreds, mainly driven by the size of litters. The larger size of litters means that the pool of sires that are used is much smaller. This has the unfortunate consequence of a shallower gene pool with higher risks for inherited disease. These inherited diseases may be caused by single gene mutations. They can also be a result of breeding the quickest dogs, as measured by their race times, against their ability to withstand the stress of racing, as can be roughly measured by the amount of times they race. Complicating this is that there will be sires and broodbitches that have very short racing careers, but have successful progeny without any inherited diseases.

Behavioural traits can also be inherited, and the disincentives to breed with greyhounds that fight on the racetrack has, in my opinion, led to a friendlier and more gentle breed of dog. It would be interesting to study whether there has been an increase in the ratio of greyhounds bred that are suitable for racing over time. I would expect that inherited behavioural traits would have this effect.

While the tracking of greyhounds ought to help somewhat in this respect, there needs to be a set of criteria that greyhounds should meet before they breed. Authorities need to be vigilant to prevent genetic diseases being acquired in the breed, at the moment it is still treated on an *ad hoc* basis. Breeders need to ensure with a registered veterinarian that their greyhound does not have any inherited disorder before proceeding with breeding.

I previously mentioned statistics regarding greyhounds that were whelped in June 2011. That 79% of greyhounds that are whelped are named suggests that most people breed with every intention of racing all their dogs. The sample size I looked at was too small to identify if certain breeders have significantly less greyhounds that are named, but if this is a problem it can be identified with the data we have at present and rectified. The truth is that the main driver of overbreeding is the number of greyhound races that are conducted, and the number of greyhounds that are racing in these races. Both these drivers are the responsibility of GRNSW, and pressure from the TAB to conduct “wall-to-wall” racing has intensified the pressure on the numbers of greyhounds that have been bred.

I earlier suggested reducing races with greyhounds of less than 10 starts in fields of 6. This would also take significant pressure off breeding more greyhounds than can be accommodated after their careers are finished. It would also encourage greyhounds that currently have very few starts, as they are much more likely to win a race of 6 starters. The most important point to make here is that the combination of the TAB business model and the distribution of TAB money to the racing codes are directly linked to the welfare of greyhounds, much more so than most people consider.

**Key Recommendation: A register of inherited disorders be created and, prior to breeding, breeders must ensure with a veterinarian that the sire or broodbitch does not have one of these disorders. Use the information gained from better tracking of greyhounds to modify current breeding practices to breed greyhounds better able to withstand the stress of racing.**

## **Changing the financial incentives in Greyhound racing**

Since the privatising of the TAB, the intercode arrangement has greatly distorted the prizemoney distribution within the three codes. The introduction of wall-to-wall racing and the incessant demand for product from the TAB has led to a great deal more greyhound racing being telecast on the two Sky channel networks, with little extra money provided for these races. The introduction of Tab C racing, a category seemingly specifically designed to broadcast races with lower prizemoney distribution, has been handled very poorly by GRNSW. Essentially, more greyhounds are racing in NSW without any additional benefit compared to the two horse codes. Many greyhounds are kept as pets with their owners after their racing career is finished, but they are at least in part financed by the winnings of their owners' greyhounds. In essence, the financial incentives for the TAB are to substantially increase the numbers of greyhound races, while the participants in greyhound racing do not receive additional funds necessary to maintain the welfare conditions. The continuation of the status quo in this agreement will be disastrous for participants in greyhound racing and for the welfare of greyhounds themselves. If you pay less money per greyhound to the participants, how do you expect the welfare of those greyhounds to improve? Indeed, shortening the lives of the greyhounds, or keeping fewer greyhounds as domestic pets, is an expected consequence of these actions. Blaming the owners and trainers for this situation won't help matters at all.

It is important that the inquiry realise that the main beneficiaries of greyhound racing, the TAB and betting agencies, cannot absolve themselves from responsibility over the sports they choose to profit on. It is perfectly reasonable that more of their profits be channelled both to

the owners and trainers that provide the races for the betting agencies, and for improvements into the welfare of the greyhounds that race.

**Key Recommendation: Renegotiate the intercode agreement so that greyhound racing is not used to fund the owners of horses, freeing up money for greyhound racing participants and the welfare of racing greyhounds.**

### **A new regulatory body for integrity and ethics?**

In my opinion, the current regulations for greyhounds while they are racing is more than adequate, and the incentive to having a healthy greyhound is extremely high for connections as it is more likely to win races. This would not be the best place to channel resources for animal welfare, but it is currently where GRNSW spend their time and resources. However, the functions of GRNSW require oversight, recognised in name only through the integrity auditor. For the sport of greyhound racing to thrive, GRNSW and the arrangements they have with the TAB, requires oversight more urgently than any of the participants.

My opinion is that an advisory body ought to be set up comprising of people from a wide cross-section of the community. Animal welfare groups such as the RSPCA, veterinarians, greyhound owners, breeders and trainer's representatives, animal welfare academics and a community representative could form such a group. This group could assist in making practical reforms similar to those that have been included in this submission, accelerating

reform in this aspect of greyhound racing. This body also should be responsible for appointing an integrity auditor. Undoubtedly the role of the integrity auditor will be scrutinized in this inquiry and their independence found to be non-existent. This body need not be specific to greyhound racing, and could also have responsibilities for other racing codes or domestic breeds and working animals.

**Key Recommendation: Set up an integrity and ethics advisory body including representatives from greyhound racing, animal welfare organisations such as the RSPCA, veterinarians and animal ethics experts. This body is to appoint an integrity commissioner and to advise GRNSW, veterinarians and participants in how to improve animal welfare standards much higher than currently the case. It can also lobby councils to have greyhound-friendly policies for residents that wish to keep retired greyhounds as pets. New money through the TAB distribution scheme must be distributed to greyhound racing, and some fraction of that increased money is to be distributed by this body for animal welfare initiatives, including setting up or tendering for facilities that home greyhounds during their retirement.**