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Paws Up for Pets: International greyhound protection group to meet in Delray

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*Kathy Pelton, Florida director for GREY2K USA, with her pair of lovable greyhound rescues named Jack and Jill.
Tim Stepien/The Coastal Star*

By Arden Moore

The first time I met a greyhound, it was a blur. Chipper, my husky-golden retriever mix, and I were at a spacious, local dog park. Chipper, at the time, was in her prime and prided herself on being able to outsprint any other dog in any park.

Then entered a tall, sleek greyhound named Stella. Their eyes playfully met and the race was on.

Chipper matched Stella's strides at first, but then displayed a perplexed look as if to convey, "I don't seem to be moving," as Stella turned on what seemed like turbo power, charging far ahead and becoming a speedy blur.

That's OK, Chipper. You never really had a chance.

After all, this sighthound breed grabs honors as the fastest canine, capable of speeds up to 45 miles per hour, and earning the nickname, "Ferraris of the dog world."

The controversy surrounding the sport of greyhound racing will take center stage in Delray Beach at the Seagate Hotel on Oct. 15.

That's the site for the first International Conference on Greyhound Advocacy, being hosted by GREY2K USA Worldwide.

The world's largest nonprofit greyhound protection organization is committed to getting laws passed to end the sport of dog racing as well as to promote the rescue and adoption of greyhounds.

Registration to attend this conference ends Sept. 13 (details at www.grey2kusa.org). It will include an international lineup of speakers led by keynote speaker Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States.

This group of 100,000-plus volunteers has played key roles in the enactment of stronger state laws designed to protect racing greyhounds and even establish greyhound adoption trust funds in some states.

It is not a coincidence that the conference takes place in the same county that is home to one of the country's oldest and biggest greyhound racing tracks, the Palm Beach Kennel Club in West Palm Beach.

The PBKC has been hosting greyhound races since 1932, with its races now airing on its simulcast network televised at more than 2,000 locations in this country and abroad.

When it comes to the greyhound sport, there are no views that fall in the "gray" area. You are either totally against or a fan of this sport, which features a pack of greyhounds racing around a track in pursuit of a fast-moving lure just out of their reach.

"We are confident that greyhound racing will end at the PB Kennel Club," declares Kathy Pelton, Florida director of GREY2K USA Worldwide. "Change takes time and right now, greyhound racing is being propped up by a state mandate that forces these gambling facilities to hold dog races even though there is little to no interest."

Carey Theil, executive director of GREY2K USA Worldwide, is more blunt.

"Greyhound racing is cruel and inhumane. In every place where dog racing exists, grass-roots advocates and animal protection groups are fighting for change. This has become a worldwide effort to reform and phase out greyhound racing."

His group's website posts incidents of racing greyhounds that have been injured or died at tracks. Since its inception in 2001, the group has helped shut down more than two dozen dog tracks and is now expanding its mission worldwide to include preventing the legalization of dog racing in India and South Africa.

Countering these comments is Theresa Hume, publicity director for the Palm Beach Kennel Club. She confirmed that no PBKC officials plan to attend this international greyhound conference in Delray Beach.

"Palm Beach Kennel Club takes very seriously its responsibilities to ensure the proper care of greyhounds at our track," says Hume. "PBKC has made significant progress in attempting to reduce greyhound injuries at the track through various measures, including improvements to the track surface, new safer lure technologies, safer fencing, widening of turns and other techniques. In addition, our track veterinarian closely monitors the condition of all greyhounds so that any illnesses or injuries are quickly detected and treated."

Hume adds that PBKC works closely with five adoption groups to find homes for retired greyhound racers. These groups are Awesome Greyhounds/Hounds & Heroes, Elite Greyhound Adoptions, Forever Greyhounds, Greyhound Pet Adoptions and Greyed A Adoptions.

For Pelton, the fate of greyhounds is made more personal by a pair of retired racers she adopted and named Jack and Jill.

Based in Cooper City, she often tries to reach the next generation by giving presentations at middle schools and humane shelter summer camps for kids.

"I begin my classes with a PowerPoint presentation with the cruelty of dog racing and always end the class with the need for adoption," she says. "The children are shocked to learn that it takes approximately 8,000 dogs for the 12 tracks in Florida. That is a lot of dogs needing homes. Jack and Jill are with me and they make great ambassadors for the greyhounds."

And she has become a major ambassador herself for greyhounds: "They are gentle, clean, rarely bark, don't need much exercise. In fact, they just lay around all the time. I always say that everyone should have at least one grey."

Greyhound Fun Facts

- Meet the ultimate canine couch loungeur. Other than a need for a 20-minute daily walk, the typical greyhound is quite content stretching out on your couch and may even train you to fetch the television remote.
 - They are ideal dogs for tiny houses or one-bedroom apartments because they don't take up or require much living space.
 - They put the 'G' in gentle and 'L' in love. They thrive on unleashing affection and attention to their favorite people.
 - They have been around for centuries, tracing their roots to ancient Egypt circa 2900 B.C.
- Their musculature makes it feel unnatural for this breed to plop and hold a sit. But greyhounds will happily lie down on cue.

Arden Moore, founder of www.FourLeggedLife.com, is an animal behavior consultant, editor, author, professional speaker and master certified pet first aid instructor. Each week, she hosts the popular Oh Behave! show on www.PetLifeRadio.com. Learn more by visiting www.fourleggedlife.com.