

THE IRISH TIMES

Greyhound racing needs culture change to address dog cruelty

A culture is needed where dogs systemically receive the duty of care due to them

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Photograph: INPHO/Lorraine O'Sullivan

With such an Australian flavour to sport at the moment, I stumbled across an arresting headline: “Greyhound Racing – an appalling anachronism whose time has run out.” This wasn’t some lonely lentil-cudding blogger either but an editorial in one of Australia’s best-selling newspapers.

It came on the back of a TV programme that showed greyhounds being live-baited: the practice of giving them live animals to savage to encourage them to run faster after the mechanical bunny.

The footage is both disgusting and unsurprising. Fans argue generations of breeding mean greyhounds chase the mechanical hare instinctively: we know in Ireland, too, how morons are prepared to cruelly add feeding to breeding. Thankfully they are a tiny minority.

The editorial reported a [New South Wales Commission](#) claim that more than 13,000 young and healthy greyhounds are killed each year in Australia, a substantive welfare issue to make live-baiting a comparative sideshow, and one which, many argue, is the inevitable result of overproducing dogs for an entertainment industry worth millions and which employs thousands.

The ethical tightrope walked between welfare, entertainment and industry is a perennial one when it comes to all animal sports the world over. But the question of overproduction is a particular issue for greyhound racing.

A horse produces a single foal every year; a dog can produce a litter of pups every two months. It is much cheaper to maintain a dog until establishing if it can run fast, so the more produced, the more chance of a good runner.

However, you don't have to go to Australia to find disturbing evidence of what can happen to animals that don't run fast. Court reports in Ireland of animal cruelty aren't unusual, and those at the welfare coalface argue these are the tip of a gruesome iceberg drifting unchecked on the bare economics of a not uncommon reluctance to pay for an animal that doesn't pay for itself.

In 2013, according to last year's Indecon report, 15,576 greyhounds were registered in Ireland, slightly less than Australia. In 2006 at the height of the boom, 23,618 were registered here. They can't all run fast, and the slow ones, and old ones, aren't all rehomed. So where do they end up?

Some will tell you plenty of animals don't make it to registration in the first place. Of those that do, some are sold and exported, and some unwanted animals get rehomed. Others are, to use the anodyne phrase, "euthanised" in a proper and professional manner. But those involved in welfare still talk of thousands "disappearing" each year, with all the sinister connotations implicit in that word.

State funding

The greyhound industry has had a difficult time in recent years, although the semi-State [Irish Greyhound Board](#) received an extra €1.2 million from the Government in the last budget, bringing its State funding to €14.8 million. The industry is invariably vulnerable to negative

headlines in relation to the infractions of a minority. Sometimes, though, it hardly seems to help itself.

Greyhound racing is a minority sport. But the vast majority of us can recognise animal cruelty when we see it. Every sport and industry built on using animals for entertainment has a fundamental duty of care to those animals and has to be seen to take it seriously. Otherwise a mostly indifferent public can get very animated indeed.

You would think the self-interest involved in that is obvious, yet reports of significant numbers of unaccounted for animals is in disturbing contrast to official statements of welfare intent. Plenty will tell you that pious declarations about the rehoming of greyhounds past their racing sell-by date are simply a sop to appease suburban doggy-lovers. The numbers involved are too huge to make it practicable.

Proper standards

And there's no shame in acknowledging that. These are animals bred for a specific industry purpose. But proper industries have proper standards. Sentimentality may be a luxury, but that doesn't exclude treating animals with proper respect and professionalism. In fact it must be the most vital foundation to any animal industry if it is to maintain credibility.

Thoroughbreds are microchipped and traced throughout their lives. They don't disappear. That they often end up being "euthanised" isn't particularly pleasant but it is for the most part carried out properly and professionally in a controlled environment. Even cattle can be traced throughout their lives. It would be scandalous if they weren't.

Yet the same standards haven't applied to greyhounds, which is worrying for an industry that is being encouraged to increase its production levels even more. Only now is the microchipping of greyhounds becoming a reality.

The reality is that greyhounds are an industry animal, and no amount of anthropomorphism can alter that.

What is vital is creating a culture where dogs systemically receive the duty of care due to them. It's hardly desirable but if animals can't be properly maintained it is better to put them down professionally rather than in a context of amateur cruelty. That means insisting on a culture where fear of the consequences outweighs the temptation to take economic shortcuts – and developing such a culture costs.

Regrettable incidents will always occur since there will always be those who are cheap, ignorant and cruel. They will never vanish. Neither should their victims.

There's a self-evident self-interest here for the greyhound industry: if it doesn't prioritise animal welfare, the public it is so keen to attract may decide one Australian editorial might be on the money.