

Canine training and potential implications for racing greyhounds

The behaviour interest group of the Australian Veterinary Association (AVBIG) has been asked to provide information regarding training techniques and the influence this may have on a dog's behaviour.

This will be provided in point format, highlighting the issues we consider most pertinent to the issues currently facing the greyhound racing industry. These points apply equally to dogs of any breed, and greyhounds are not a unique case by virtue of being bred and trained for racing.

- All dogs are individuals and it is very difficult to generalise how one dog may respond to and cope with environmental influences during its life.
- A dog's behaviour will be influenced by both genetics and its environment (and this includes immediate environment, past experiences and learning)
- Predatory drive is not the same as affective (emotional) aggression. It involves activation of different parts of the brain. The presence of one type of aggression does not correlate to the presence of the other. A dog with a strong prey drive will not necessarily have any more predisposition than another dog to be aggressive in other situations that might involve fear or frustration.
- Predatory drive is instinctive in dogs. Some breeds are inherently more driven to chase and herd animals. In some dogs, the predatory instinct is so strong that it cannot be suppressed, regardless of training technique. (1) These dogs will need to be prevented from being able to chase animals, so confinement, use of muzzles and outdoor supervision under full control is essential.
- Training a dog using positive reinforcement will increase the likelihood of the behaviour occurring again. If a dog receives a high value reward, this further reinforces the behaviour. If the reward is given intermittently, the behaviour may be strengthened to the level that it is resistant to extinction (i.e. removal of that learnt behaviour is less likely). If the behaviour does decrease, it can take very little encouragement for the behaviour to resurface.
- Running performance is enhanced by practice and ensuing motor skill acquisition (changes in the central nervous system). Increased skill is related to increased experience. (2)
- The combination of high motivation (predatory drive in racing dogs), intermittent use of a high value reward and skill acquisition would positively influence how a dog would perform.(3)
- Dogs are often re-homed successfully from shelters and adoption centres, but they do have a higher rate of relinquishment than dogs acquired from breeders or pet shops. There is no evidence that greyhounds are less adoptable than other breeds once they have passed temperament assessment (4), although we are unaware of any statistics as to the percentage of greyhounds, versus other breeds, that pass or fail these assessments. All dogs that are expected to live in a domestic environment will cope better if they receive good early socialisation to people and other animals.
- If racing dogs are to be retired, they should be retired to a home in which the owners have a high respect for animal welfare for animals in their care.

References

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