



Wrong side of the track

Every year thousands of greyhounds are abandoned or destroyed, by-products of the dog racing industry. Now, thanks to the internet, many of them are getting a second chance at life, explains Brad Jackson

For many people a visit to a greyhound track is a fun experience. There's deciding which track to bet on, the anticipation as the dogs are placed in the traps and the tension as they are released. Some spectators win and some lose but all go home happier, if not richer.

The same cannot be said for the dogs themselves. Of the estimated 25,000 greyhounds born each year, approximately 10,000 will be retired due to injury or a lack of chase instinct - and some of these dogs are no older than 18 months.

There are racing owners who will find these failed runners a new home. But there are those who dump their dogs on the streets or have them put to sleep. Due to the huge numbers of greyhounds involved, rescue centres have been set up all over the country to take in these animals and find them new homes. But there is often a shortfall between the rescue centre's catchment area and potential homes. Enter Greyhound Gap.

In early 2003 Lisa Cartwright was working as a volunteer for a greyhound rescue centre near Manchester, sorting enquiries and new owners. She noticed that a great deal of the rehoming offers were from people outside the rescue's operational area. No one could be spared to travel the distance and make home checks before placing the dogs, while smaller rescue centres lacked intercommunication and were unaware of willing rehoming in their area.

Lisa soon realised that an organisation was needed to liaise between rescue centres and would-be adopters, as well as helping with the transportation of dogs around the country and temporarily taking in dogs in an emergency situation. So Lisa decided to set up such an organisation - a mammoth task, and one she couldn't tackle alone.

"That is where the idea of the internet crept in," she says. "It started first with an online forum where sighthound dog owners could gather together and offer their services. At the start there were five or six of us who were

totally committed to the fact that we wanted this to work. As the word has spread we have been amazed at the take-off and the offers of help."

Easy does it

It is perhaps testament to the power of the modern computer that Greyhound Gap is based around the home PC of member Veronica Merryfield. She created the website's pages using Notepad and then edited them with Microsoft Developer Studio. "We have gone for the simple approach," says Veronica, "and it is working for us."

The website hosting is provided by EasySpace at an initial cost of £85, which was privately donated, and the forums are courtesy of ProBoards. Current traffic hovers at around 50 hits per day, with the weekends predictably being the busiest times.

Maintaining a popular website is made all the harder by the need for good security. Many charity sites have recently been hacked and had a great deal of their hard work wiped out. But for Greyhound Gap there are none of these worries, as their web host provides security. "EasySpace

is pretty good," comments Veronica, "the page directories aren't public or scannable."

Greyhound Gap has now grown from a handful of members to over 130, with new members joining at a rate of around 20 per month. They can now not only provide home checks before a dog is rehoused, but also regularly transport dogs to and from rescue centres, collect those that need rescuing as soon as possible, as well as providing emergency fostering for many dogs that are in danger countrywide.

Bridging the gap

One such dog that Greyhound Gap and its members have helped is Tyler, a deerhound cross puppy who, along with his littermates, was born into squalid conditions and at eight weeks old had never seen daylight. Lisa had already rescued Tyler's brother and found him a loving home when she received a call telling her that Tyler had been returned to the breeder. So then Lisa took Tyler to an emergency foster home provided by a Greyhound Gap member.

Tyler's story and photographs were featured on Greyhound Gap's forum and one member, Angela Evans, along with her partner Gerry, realised that Tyler could be just what they were looking for. "When we saw Tyler on Greyhound Gap I just knew he was destined to come and live with us," says Angela. "But Gerry wasn't sure. Lisa was always available at the end of the phone for us to talk things through. She was able to put our minds at rest about everything and she decided that we could offer Tyler the best possible home," she continues.

Tyler now lives in Surrey with Angela, Gerry and their three-year-old lurcher Georgie. But that doesn't mean the work ends for Lisa, who provides plenty of follow-up help and advice for new adoptees. "Lisa has always been there to help with any queries I have had," adds Angela, "and everyone on the Greyhound Gap

forum is quick to respond to questions or just to share in the good times, laugh over photographs and be a tower of support."

Water off a dog's back

At the moment Greyhound Gap is still working towards becoming a registered charity and acquiring a patron. Any funds that the organisation needs are raised solely from private donations and its members, who regularly sell items on Greyhound Gap's eBay shop as well as holding many online competitions.

Jonathan is a greyhound who was helped through one such competition. Found as a stray and taken into the care of Phoenix Animal Refuge, Jonathan was discovered to have a broken front leg. Sadly the leg had to be amputated and Jonathan needed a course of hydrotherapy to strengthen his remaining front leg.

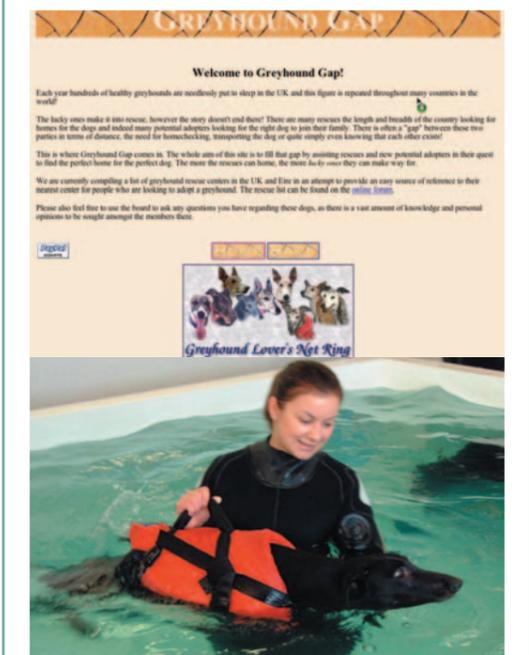
Jules, who runs Phoenix Animal Refuge and is a member of Greyhound Gap, placed Jonathan's story on the forum and an online photo competition was organised to help raise the much-needed hydrotherapy funds. When the winners had been announced and all funds collected, Greyhound Gap members had managed to raise the £120 needed to set Jonathan on the road to recovery.

Tyler and Jonathan are just two of the many dogs that Greyhound Gap has been able to help in its relatively short internet existence. It's an enormous achievement when you consider that it's a welfare organisation, based solely on the web, and the majority of its members keep in touch only through Greyhound Gap's forum and emails.

There is no Greyhound Gap rescue centre, charity shop or reality TV show. But with Lisa Cartwright at the helm this may one day change. As Angela told me, "Lisa is totally dedicated. Her enthusiasm and commitment is an inspiration for the rest of us and something we can only aspire to." ☒

Greyhound Gap

- Founder Lisa Cartwright
- Email greyhoundgap@yahoo.co.uk
- Web host www.easyspace.co.uk
- Forum host www.proboards.com
- Hardware 1.8GHz Pentium 4-based PC with 512MB RAM; 40GB and 80GB hard drives; 120GB streamer tape backup; 600K broadband connection; AGP 3D graphics card; Casio Exilim EX-Z3 3.2Mp digital camera
- Software Windows OS; CorelDraw; Notepad; Microsoft Developer Studio; WS_FTP Pro
- Website www.greyhoundgap.com



top: www.greyhoundgap.com website

above: Jonathan's first hydrotherapy session

left: the founder of Greyhound Gap, Lisa Cartwright, with her son Jack and her dogs Dizzy and Maisy

below left: one of the stars of the article, Tyler, who was rescued, fostered and rehomed by Greyhound Gap