Characteristics of ex-racing greyhounds in New Zealand and their impact on re-homing

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Abstract

A small proportion of greyhounds surplus to the racing industry are entered into specialist re-homing organisations to be re-purposed as pets. Records of 835 greyhounds, from New Zealand Greyhounds as Pets, were used to investigate whether pre-adoption characteristics (age, sex, racing record, reason entered) and management factors (temperament test result, foster and trainer effects) had a bearing on re-homing success, and comparisons were made with shelter studies. Re-homing greyhounds as pets is very successful with 85.5% ultimately successfully re-homed. Only 2.9% fail as a result of failed adoptions and 11.6% fail the initial temperament test and are therefore not considered for adoption. Greyhounds were more likely than shelter dogs to pass an initial temperament test and be adopted, and less likely to be returned after one month. However, adopted greyhounds were just as likely as shelter dogs to be returned after six months. Logistic regression revealed the youngest age group (< 25 months old) were more likely to pass the initial temperament test and be adopted, and less likely to be returned after one month. However, adopted greyhounds were just as likely as shelter dogs to be returned after six months. Logistic regression revealed the youngest age group (< 25 months old) were more likely to pass the initial temperament test than older greyhounds. The re-homing success of greyhounds subsequently made available for adoption was not affected by age, but a sex effect was evident with females more likely to be successfully re-homed than males. Whether or not a dog had raced had no significant effect on the likelihood of successful re-homing. Greyhounds passing the temperament test with a basic pass were less likely to be successfully re-homed than greyhounds scoring a higher pass indicative of lower prey drive. Further investigation of the validity and reliability of the temperament test is warranted.

Keywords: age, animal welfare, dog, greyhound racing, re-homing, temperament test

Introduction

The greyhound racing industry produces substantial numbers of dogs that are not needed or suitable for racing (Colgan et al 2013). Acceptance of the sport is changing as concern and awareness about the scale and method of destruction of surplus animals and the risk of injury arising from the sport, grow (Atkinson & Young 2005; as reported in Colgan et al 2013; p 28; Madden 2010). Greyhounds have a life expectancy of 10–12 years (Fogle 2000), but an average racing career spans just 1.5 years with the average age of retirement in New Zealand being 3.37 years (Colgan et al 2013). This potentially allows an ex-racing greyhound to spend more than eight years in another role, and the re-homing of retired and surplus racing greyhounds as pets has increased in popularity (Lord et al 2007). The New Zealand Greyhounds as Pets (GAP) charity was established by Greyhound Racing New Zealand (GRNZ) in 2006 and aims to re-home greyhounds put forward by trainers and owners in the industry. The success of greyhound adoptions through GAP programmes in Australia and New Zealand, was evaluated by Elliott et al (2010) one month post-adoption. Most adoptions were successful (237/245) with a high proportion of owners (91.1%) scoring ‘very satisfied’ in terms of the greyhound fulfilling their expectations as a pet. A significant association between ‘realistic owner expectations’ and decreased likelihood a dog would be returned after adoption, has been reported for dogs re-homed from shelters (Marston et al 2005). The primary reason dogs are returned to adoption agencies is reported to be problem behaviour, accounting for between 58.6 (Diesel et al 2008) and 89.7% (Wells & Hepper 2000) of returns to shelters. Although based on a small number of failed adoptions, Elliott et al (2010) similarly reported most greyhounds were returned due to behaviour-related problems. Behavioural problems most likely to put adoptions at risk are related to aggression, separation anxiety, hyperactivity, noisiness and incompatibility with other pets (Marston & Bennett 2003; Diesel et al 2008; Elliott et al 2010). Previous studies have shown associations between the development of particular behavioural problems and a dog’s