

CHAPTER XIII

THE QUALITIES OF A GOOD GREYHOUND

ALTHOUGH it is not difficult to obtain general agreement as to the ideal *physical* conformation of the modern greyhound, it is by no means as easy to obtain unanimity on the important qualities and attributes which that frame should house.

There is little doubt that the majority of people today, if asked to enumerate the most important quality in a greyhound's repertoire, would plump unhesitatingly for speed. Certain it is, of course, that any greyhound worthy of the name must have pace, but if they seek to imply that pace pure and simple is the thing to which all breeders should direct their efforts, then I for one can never agree.

The trouble inherent in such an aim is that speed is not an isolated factor independent of the animal's other characteristics, both physical and mental. The greyhound—that breed older than our civilization itself—is above all others an animal of delicately balanced attributes and abilities. To over-emphasize one is almost certain to disturb the equilibrium of the other interdependent qualities, with results that might do anything but improve the mechanism as a whole.

No one, I think, would seriously urge that the modern greyhound is perfect and beyond improvement, but to attempt, even in the space of say twenty-five years, to mould the age-old attributes of an ancient breed into conformity with a particular pattern desired by a section of its present-day devotees is in my opinion an effort that is ill-considered and undesirable, and, what is more, one that may very well be attended by consequences in the shape of canine degeneration, the effects of which might be far-reaching and take infinitely longer to eradicate.

In an age that has become *speed* crazy, it may be worth while to examine more closely its relative value and importance in both of the spheres of the modern greyhound's activities. First and foremost, it is one of the basic principles of coursing in England that speed itself without subsequent work shall not decide a course, and if an analysis of most of the stakes run in recent years reveals that approximately 88% of the courses were won by dogs that led in the run-up, that is, by the dog endowed with the greater speed, it is also pertinent to point out that in the vast majority of these cases the speedier dogs were also endowed with the better working qualities. The number of courses, therefore, in England (I appreciate that the position is different in Ireland) won by fast dogs deficient in working qualities is probably very small indeed.

Another argument which may be evinced against those who consider that speed is an all-important factor, even in the coursing field, is the acknowledged fact that it is very seldom indeed that the commonly accepted "fastest dog" in the Waterloo wins the Cup. That even in recent years this has been the case is borne out by the fact that in the 1940 and 1941 Cups there would be few unbiased coursing men to deny that Mr. Hedley's red fawn dog "Haweswater" was the speediest greyhound in the stake, but this did not save him from elimination in the early rounds. The same may also be said of that brindle

son of "Danielli", "R.I.F.P.", in 1941 and 1942, and of "Lord Lieutenant" in 1943 and 1944, although in fairness to the latter one should add that he did run into the last four, although the degree to which this success was due to his superb pace or to his suddenly discovered killing powers it would be difficult indeed to say.

Phenomenal speed in the English coursing field has in fact often turned out to be no unmixed blessing if, as so frequently happens, it is an endowment at the expense of working qualities and ability to stand up to handicap.

That the modern emphasis placed on speed pure and simple is the outcome of greyhound racing no one will deny. Unfortunately, the speed, on which so great a premium is now set, is far too often not speed in the old coursing sense of the word, sustained pace, but rather an electrifying dash by means of which its generator can attain that coveted position which is best summed up in the terse race-reader's phrase, "quickly away, clear first bend". It is to the attainment of that object, then, that so many greyhound breeders of late have been directing their efforts.

Unfortunately, the craze for dash as an end in itself seems to have led to the evolution of greyhounds deficient in real pace and sustained speed. How often, I wonder, in the past six years have I seen one of these so-called champion longtails flash from the traps, dash to the first bend with breath-taking speed a good four to five lengths ahead of his rivals, only to see the margin cut down by a length in each subsequent 100 yards and ultimately to watch the "flier" with just enough left in him to fade across the winning line a bare half-length ahead of the field, a sorry picture of a greyhound distressed by a 500-yard course, exhausted by a 28-second trial of endurance! Shades of old "Dee Rock" and "Rotten Row". If this, then, be the price of early pace and acceleration, then I for one say, save my greyhounds from it!

Quite apart from the disastrous consequences that such breeding for "dash" must inevitably have upon the breed, one wonders whether such an emphasis is in fact justified by the results of greyhound racing itself. When we review its Honours List what are the names that strike the most thrilling chord in our memory? Am I so far wrong in suggesting just as a few: "Mick the Miller", "Future Cutlet", "Wild Woolley", "Brilliant Bob", "Border Mutton", "Quarter Day" and "Junior Classic"? Certain it is that in the Valhalla where all great dogs meet, I should expect to find all of them. But endowed as these stars were with a full measure of pace—"Future Cutlet" particularly so—who would say that it was to speed pure and simple that they owed their sequence of successes? Who would care to wager that over a straight course they could match paces with such as "Inler", "Shove Ha'penny" and "Tanist"? And yet it is the former who are the champions we remember today and not the latter, in spite of their endowment with pace enough to burn.

Surely, then, in the light of this it is pertinent to enquire just what qualities these champions possessed, that enabled them time and time again to defeat their speedier fellows in racing competition? Would I be so far wrong, I wonder, if I venture to suggest that the factor that distinguished these two groups was *the ability to avoid trouble*? It is true, of course, that "Inler" and his group sometimes escaped trouble, but it was always by the exercise of their early dash which afforded them a clear run round the vital first bend. Just what happened whenever they failed to trap ahead and get clear of the field nearly every punter knows to his cost.

“Mick the Miller” and his fellow champions, denied the gifts of early pace, were dependent upon their more skilful and versatile racing technique for avoiding trouble. Just as there are dogs in the coursing field that can stretch out in first-class pace to the hare and steadying themselves, are able to come off their first turn beautifully balanced as if on a sixpence, and then proceed to dust “puss” about in beautiful close working style—so too are there longtails on the track similarly gifted that race round the first bend perfectly balanced and maintain their pace on the first bend by sheer control and nimble footedness.

If then we term the former *clever* dogs—as indeed they are—then why should we demur at similarly attributing the faculty of cleverness to the latter? Certainly to my mind it is this craft—call control, balance and modulation of pace what you will—that was the quality that elevated the former above their speedier fellows and was responsible for their long *sequence* of successes, just as its absence was responsible for the latter’s erratic and spasmodic efforts of brilliance.

Such, then, is a general indication of what I for one would term the pre-eminent quality in the racing greyhound’s make-up—track sense. For such as that, how many owners and trainers today would not trade a few yards of the terrific speed of an “Inler”, the powerful pace of a “Shove Ha’penny”, the electric dash of a “Tanist”?

Ranking high above speed in those prerequisite qualities of a good greyhound, there are few trainers who would not place Courage. For my part, no matter how perfect a conformation a greyhound might possess, it would be an empty shell if it did not house such a vital characteristic; in fact, I doubt whether it is worth while attempting to train any greyhound for either field or track that is lacking in courage, stoutness or genuineness, call the element what you will.

It is in the coursing field that the extent and merit of such a fundamental quality can best be judged. The arduous nature of the trials there make the presence of soft spots inescapably obvious. Incidentally, it is for this very reason that I for one am opposed to the prevalent attitude of regarding racing greyhounds as a separate “strain” to be bred among themselves. Rather should their more successful performers be regularly put back to dogs that have distinguished themselves in the field. Only by that method will the track greyhound be able to refortify itself with those qualities of stamina and stoutness which the field sport inexorably demands in all its successful performers. Without recourse to this stouter line, and by breeding from generations that have never done more than contest 500-700-yard events, the track greyhound would be inevitably condemned to ultimate degeneration.

The most obvious manifestations of courage and stoutness in the field are, of course, displayed when a dog, which has been run to a standstill by some stag of a hare and which has been picked up in a state of exhaustion far out in the country, is still willing to come up to slips in the second round perhaps three hours later and, in spite of handicap, is able to summon up sufficient resources to contest and win the course. And, what is more, to come up *to* slips next day—in spite of having risen as stiff as a board from his bench that morning—ready to contest a further two rounds. That we still have dogs capable of doing all that, dogs whose spirit and blood would never allow any capitulation to either handicap or injury, dogs like “Dee Rock”, “Rotten Row”, “Joint Command”, and “Holystone Snowlight”, is at once the glory and justification of British coursing. It is

a tribute to the success with which those lovers of the sport have so carefully bred and preserved the breed's fundamental qualities.

That pluck or courage is just as essential on the track it would be idle to deny. If, however, the comparative lighness of the track test does not reveal the white feather so patently, at least its presence, if less flagrant, is concealed in a greater number of varying forms.

What track man does not know the dog that, provided he can make all the running, is a brilliant performer indeed, but once let him be challenged and headed and he will "turn it up" and be content to romp home among the also rans. There is, too, the dog that runs well provided everything goes his way; but let him be drawn in an unaccustomed trap, be badly bumped or unable to get his favourite position on the rails, and he will not try an inch.

For the most frequent exhibitions of lack of heart, stoutness and courage, however, one has but to consider those races in excess of the standard 525 yards. As stamina is as much a mental as a physical factor, the obvious reluctance of some of our trackers to carry on beyond the standard mark is as much an indication of a deficiency of courage as of anything else. A greyhound in the field does not stop trying when he has run a course of average length. Why, then, should his track brother ease up at the 550-yard mark?

That this, in my view, is one of the results of breeders pandering to the present-day premium on speed pure and simple, I have mentioned earlier in this chapter. The matter, however, is serious enough to stand repetition, and in any case it does not make the matter any the less deplorable or such breeding practices any the less pernicious.

The fact that the stamina limitations of our modern longtails have had some form of official recognition is all the more serious because, instead of taking a lead against a tendency that can only have detrimental effects to the breed, the authorities have, perhaps unwittingly, gone out of their way to condone it. I refer, of course, to the decision of the West Ham Stadium to stage its Classic, the Cesarewitch, for the past three years over a 550-yard course instead of the 600, on the grounds—and I quote the popular Press—"that entries could not be found for the longer distance". In such a way, then, do we pander to the fainthearts, the soft spots of the most noble and ancient breed of dog!

What, I wonder, would the guardians of the British Thoroughbred have had to say if it were proposed to run the St. Leger this year over twelve furlongs at Newmarket because the entries found Doncaster's fourteen furlongs too far and the Yorkshire Moor too cold for their comfort? How many letters would appear in *The Times* next day from the gentlemen of the Cavalry Club protesting at this indignity, at this flagrant contribution to the degeneration of British bloodstock?

And how justified every single one would be!

Why, then, in the greyhound sphere should we today seek to lighten the severity of those tests which were deliberately designed years ago to foster and develop those characteristics of stoutness and stamina which the average Englishman has come to expect in his country's bloodstock?

But of all the greyhound's various qualities and instincts one must surely attribute primary importance to that fundamental impulse which prompts it to engage in the chase. In the days before greyhound racing, this desire, this impulse, if you will, was considered to be deep-rooted in the dog's primitive instinct of destructiveness, in its natural desire to

take its quarry, the hare. To such primitive instinct, then, was attributed the keen urge to make those graceful exertions of speed and agility which even before the dawn of history have won for his kind the favour and esteem of Man.

The advent of greyhound racing with its ever-elusive tin rabbit, however, has given us cause to reconsider whether this really is the underlying factor prompting his exertions. After all, several hundreds of the longtails racing today have probably never even seen a hare and never had the natural satisfaction of bringing their teeth into play. One might even go so far as *to* say that, unfortunately for the breed, in very many cases even the parents of the dogs themselves have never seen “puss” in the field. Consequently it is *difficult to* believe that a destructiveness and passion they have never experienced or expressed is the factor which, week after week, impels them to chase a quarry that hardly bears any resemblance to *lepus timidus*.

It may well be, however, that the clue to this natural impulse which finds expression in the chase is to be found in the coursing parlance of yesterday. I still recall the old-time trainers of twenty-five years ago referring probably to some keen and fiery charge as a *very jealous* dog. By the epithet was to be understood that almost selfish desire and keenness of a dog to take his hare before his rival could do so. **It was** that possessive instinct which drove it to make the most violent exertions to achieve that end, straining every nerve and sinew rather than allow his rival to thwart him. That such a quality **was** the hallmark of a genuine greyhound goes without saying, for the absence of such **an** impulse meant that a dog would be inclined *to* wait for his chance to kill, and would take short cuts instead of keeping on the line of his hare; in other words, to indulge in all those malpractices stigmatized as cunning.

That it is this jealousy, this keenness *to* dominate the hare, this selfish passion to do so without let or hindrance from his rivals, that is instrumental in impelling track greyhounds *to* headlong pursuit of a quarry which they have never been allowed to catch or kill, seems reasonably certain. Nor, of course, can one rule out that playful desire, that curiosity innate in most of Nature's children, to follow nearly anything that moves across their sphere of vision. No one who has spun a minnow or phantom through a salmon pool and watched five or six dark shapes emerge from the deep and chase it right across the pool almost to one's very toes need be reminded of the natural attraction of the elusive unknown.

If this jealous urge to outdo and outstrip his rival is an absolute essential in any honest dog in the field, no less vital is it in the repertoire of his track counterpart. Without this urge, this keenness to excel, even the fastest dog will degenerate into “a chaser” the type that will race stoutheartedly enough provided he is led, but which will never take the lead himself. It is greyhounds such as these that will run a storming race to finish within half a length of the winner in, say, 29.50 secs. for 525 yards and the following week, under similar conditions, will occupy just the same position to a winner in 30.50 secs.! The selfish impulse to take the hare before his fellows is absent and, consequently, the race for him is no form of competition but a mere gambol among his kennel mates.

A deficiency of this vital quality, unfortunately, has other and even more serious consequences, for it is to this lack of keenness and enthusiasm that the bugbear of track racing today *can* be attributed—fighting. The fact that such a vice is unknown in the field probably gives the clue to the problem. There the two contestants are keyed up with

excitement and are brimming over with zest and enthusiasm for the opportunity to take their quarry. To prove this one has but to put the glasses on any brace in the slipper's shy. There is nothing of the bored and dull longtail there, but rather two with limbs aquiver, tongues aslaver, spirits afire and eyes as keenly alive for the hare as the slipper's himself!

It seems reasonable, then, that the prevalence of the vice on the track can be attributed to a general lack of interest in their task rather than to any deep-rooted vice in the animals themselves. A lack of interest perhaps not altogether unassociated with the unattractive and stereotyped behaviour of the mechanical hare.

Whether a dyed-in-the-wool fighter can ever be cured is a debatable point. Personally I have my doubts, for presumably there are dogs imbued with vice just as there are some humans, but I have no doubts whatsoever that with a little patience and intelligent application a dog which has done no more than show "interfering tendencies" can generally be persuaded to adopt more decorous manners. I have been approached by owners in this matter and invariably have advised them, as a prime essential, to endeavour to rekindle the dog's interest in the chase. If the tin rabbit cannot retain the dog's selfish and jealous attention, it seems but reasonable to let it have a trial or two behind his natural quarry.

Behind a bouncing, twisting hare on the stubbles the malefactor will find more than enough to keep him busy, more than enough to absorb his attention to the exclusion of his rival. If the first hare is too good for him, so much the better. His spirits and primitive destructiveness will be all the keener next time out. By the time he has had the satisfaction of a kill or two his keenness may very well have had the stimulus required and he will be more than interested in that oddly running tin rabbit. It is, incidentally, no bad plan, on his return to the track, to afford him an opportunity behind a different style of dummy hare.

In addition to coursing there is yet another method by which the malefactor's interest in racing may be rekindled and maintained—a course of hurdling. The comparative uneventful nature of the flat, the monotony of the lure's stereotyped running, the eternal elusiveness and escape of the quarry, these may very well engender that boredom in the whole business that prompts a greyhound to turn his head more out of curiosity than vice, and then to have a playful "peck" at his neighbour as an invitation to brighten such a dull affair with a gambol and frolic. In cases such as these, the very presence of hurdles in his path will provide a novelty that will both rouse his interest and at the same time call for the exercise of care and attention if they are to be negotiated safely, all of which will serve to absorb his interest to the exclusion of his rivals.

In this connection, it is not generally known that both "Long Hop" and "Scapegoat", the National winners of 1932 and 1933, had shown interfering tendencies on the flat—the latter, I believe, even incurring the displeasure of the Stewards.

Certainly any owner of a dog showing a tendency to turn its head would be very well advised to give it a trial at the jumping game. After all, he has everything to gain by its possible reformation, and it is an encouraging thought that the history of hurdling is largely one of disappointments on the flat that found their true *métier* and became champions over the timber—to mention but a few: "Tact", "Gipsy Win", "Derryboy Jubilee", and "Wandering Lad".

Incidentally, puppies reared together with free range and with liberty seem much

less prone to develop head-turning tendencies than those reared on their own or in comparatively restricted spaces. It may be that the romping and galloping together of several whelps and saplings enables them to give vent to the playful mischief in their make-up and to get it out of their system before serious training begins. If this be so, then many of the head-turning cases that we see today may very well be attributed not to any vicious or pugnacious intent but rather as a playful invitation to romp and chase, by a lonely and thwarted puppy anxious to make up for a puppyhood lived but not enjoyed!

More important and practical still in the prevention of fighting is the early puppyhood training of the dog itself. If lack of interest is the predisposing cause of the tendency to interfere—as is generally agreed—it seems but reasonable that it is in the earliest and most impressionable months of a sapling's life that we should endeavour to nurture and develop that innate keenness and enthusiasm for the chase that is every longtail's natural inheritance. In what better manner can this be done than by allowing the puppy to chase the most attractive of all lures, the real hare, rather than bringing him up on the tin rabbit? In this respect I consider that breeders and owners here are far behind their counterparts in Ireland, for it has long been almost a tradition over there to give their longtails a good spell of coursing in their puppy season before sending them for their track trials.

I am, of course, quite aware that there are still a few trainers who consider that a few courses behind "puss" will ruin any track dog. With the greatest respect, however, I can only say that Mr. T. A. Morris, of the Irish Coursing Club—a man with an unrivalled knowledge of both coursing and racing—has on more than one occasion expressed his confidence and reliance on the beneficial effects of such a policy and practice.

To argue that a greyhound that has coursed his natural quarry will be at a loss to know how to deal with the straighter-running lure, is to underestimate the greyhound's natural versatility and love of the chase, and to ignore the early coursing careers of such track stars as "Beef Cutlet", "Brilliant Bob", "Monologue", "Guideless Joe", "Tanist", "Ballynennan Moon", "Train" and "Lights o' London".