

On the Positive Side

Living with a legend: The rescue greyhound

By Sandra Movsesian / For the Sun-News

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Many years ago I decided either to get a new pug puppy - or, adopt a greyhound! There were no pug puppies available, and I began a long adventure with greyhounds.

The greyhound is an ancient breed. From the Middle East we find evidence of greyhound-type dogs going back 8,000 years. In medieval Europe, owning greyhounds was restricted to royalty and aristocracy. The English king James II kenneled his dogs on a small island in the Thames, still known as the Isle of Dogs. He took 20,000 greyhounds with him when he fled to France.

Of course, greyhounds have been used for hunting. Their speed and agility is without parallel. But they are also extremely decorative. In 1486 Dame Juliana Berners, abbess of Sopewell, described the greyhound in these terms (17th century spelling and all):

Head lyke a snake

Neck lyke a drake

Back lyke a beam

Foot lyke a catte

Tayl like a ratte.

I was lucky enough to adopt Emma, a lovely black female. She was 2 years old, about the age when they decide whether she will have a racing career or not. That means, can she reach the astonishing speed of 35 mph 40 miles per hour in three strides after the gate goes up?

Most dogs can't manage that explosive speed. The lucky ones are adopted; the rest are culled.

Prior to adoption, track dogs have spent their lives in crates 22 hours per day. Their feed is thrown on the gravel, and as a result many dogs have damaged teeth.

Greyhounds have to learn to be pets. They must learn about stairs, glass doors, and windows. They already know how to walk on a lead nicely, and they are crate trained. They do love to run - in a safe, fenced area. They are sprinters: after their run, they like to relax. Thus among their doting adopters they have earned the name "40 mph couch potatoes."

Greyhounds are born into large litters, and they remain with their littermates until they're old enough to begin training for the track, at 18 to 24 months. Perhaps this accounts for their sociability and tranquil temperament.

Sometimes adopted greyhounds miss the company of other greyhounds. My Emma had this problem, even though I had other dogs. So I adopted Maude. She and Emma bonded instantly. Over time I acquired another greyhound, and another. And another.

Emma, along with Amber, my last greyhound, became a therapy dog. They visited schools and nursing homes, to the delight of students and patients. Greyhounds are gently and elegant creatures, patient and unaggressive. Most greys will come up to a stranger and lean up against their thigh, confident of being petted; their heads are just the right height.

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With increasing popularity of greyhounds as pets, there are greyhound adoption groups all over the U.S. Many of the greyhounds you see in Las Cruces have been adopted from Albuquerque:

- Greyhound Companions of New Mexico, P.O. Box 22053, Albuquerque, N.M. 87154.
- A national greyhound rescue group is Greyhound Pets of America, (800) 366 1472.

In addition to adoptions, greyhound groups are always seeking households to foster dogs and teach them the fundamentals of living in houses. A worthwhile endeavor: you are living with a legend.

Sandra Movsesian is a longtime Las Cruces resident and dog lover. A military wife, she has lived in Japan and Germany before White Sands Missile Range.