

Greyhound Vet on A Mission

Alessandro Piras: Vet On A Mission

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Written by Floyd Amphlett of the Greyhound Star

"I remember one greyhound whose hock just about exploded. It was in a thousand pieces, I have never seen a worse injury. The owner took the greyhound to Alessandro to have it put to sleep. Alessandro refused to do it. He said: 'This greyhound will race again'. The owner looked at me. It was obvious he thought the vet was a complete nutcase."

"After the operation I saw the X-ray. It looked as though someone had pulled out a handful of hair and dropped it on the X-ray plate. There were wires, hundreds of them, all inter-weaving. Sure enough the dog raced again. He wasn't as fast, but it was the greatest feat of surgery I have ever seen. In my book, Alessandro is the best in the business."

Six times champion trainer John McGee doesn't shower praise lightly. But he positively beams when describing the work of specialist greyhound vet Dr Alessandro Piras.

Current champion greyhound trainer Linda Jones is another Piras fan. She has been known to sedate an injured dog and send it all the way to Northern Ireland to have Piras perform career saving surgery.

By his own admission, no one has done more than those two trainers to ring Piras to widespread attention.

Nick Savva is another outstanding judge with glowing praise for the 40 year old Italian who arrived in Ireland four years ago with a burning desire to enhance the careers of racing greyhounds.

Piras qualified as a vet in Italy in 1989 but then took a two year course in surgery to gain his doctorate. Still thirsting for knowledge he travelled to the USA to work alongside the USA's leading greyhound vet Dr John Dee (the Guru to quote Piras) at the Hollywood Animal Hospital in Miami.

He also had a spell with another internationally acknowledged greyhound specialist, the late Dr Mark Bloomberg at the Canine Sports Medicine Centre at the University College of Florida. Piras gained further knowledge on the Continental greyhound racing circuit but realised that to really extend his education, he needed to deal with a greater number of greyhounds.

He duly moved to Newry in Northern Ireland in 1998 and was soon building a formidable reputation. Even now, he continues to expand his knowledge by attending veterinary symposiums around the world. He regularly lectures on orthopedics at the annual Canine Sports Medicine Symposium - part of the North American Veterinary Conference - the biggest meeting of vets in the world.

From what the reader has learned thus far, it is perhaps obvious that Dr Piras is not a man

driven on for monetary gain - he could have achieved that back in Italy more than a decade ago. No - this is a man with a love of animals and a hunger to learn and educate others.

He admits that his greatest surprise on his arrival in Ireland was the general ignorance of many greyhound trainers.

He said: "I was shocked at how little some trainers knew - though clearly the level of knowledge varied greatly. "Some of their ideas about injuries and diet must be a hundred years out of date. It was incredible. "I kept hearing about traditional ways of doing things. I have always believed that 'tradition' is just a way of making the same mistakes over hundreds of years."

For example. . .

Fractured bones 1 - "I was appalled at the number of times I heard that a dog had fractured a bone and automatically had to be put to sleep. All bones mend. "The only cases where a fractured bones need result in a greyhound being put in sleep is for a broken spine - and even then, not in all cases."

Kidney problems- "I heard all sorts of tales of kidney problems - in many cases the symptoms were clinical signs, in the different stages, of dehydration and water diabetes syndrome; almost certainly brought about by incorrect feeding and improper training."

Vomiting- "There is absolutely no scientific basis for the vomiting of dogs. If they need to vomit, they eat grass. "There is a lot of what I call 'yellow tale' syndrome in greyhound training. If a dog won the Derby with his tail painted yellow, by the next day half the dogs in training would have their tails painted yellow.

Cramping- "Most greyhounds cramp because of incorrect feeding - often carbohydrate overloading or electrolyte imbalance."

Feeding 1...

"I was telling trainers three years ago to increase the fat content in their feeds and take care of the electrolyte balance - long before Australian Formula came on the market.

"I also advised trainers to add bananas to the diet. Bananas, with rice, are one of the staple diets in many parts of the world.

"Most athletes include bananas as part of their diet. They also use them on racehorses.

"The reason is the high level of vitamins and the electrolyte potassium plus the right type of carbohydrates and fibres that are beneficial to the gut.

"To begin with, many trainers made fun of me. But gradually, some of the more enlightened ones tried bananas and now by word of mouth many trainers are feeding them."

Feeding 2...

"Why do trainers insist on such a small feed in a morning when the greyhound needs energy. But then when he is to go to sleep, he has an extended stomach.

"I would like to know how many trainers would do a day's work after one slice of bread."

Lasers ...

"I hear of trainers using lasers that are completely ineffective. They don't shave the dog and the beam wouldn't even penetrate the fur.

"I often hear that they are giving one treatment per week - what a waste of time

"I am not criticising lasers as a whole. They can be of benefit for things like split webs and

other superficial injuries.

"But the majority of lasers used by trainers are simply not powerful enough for more deep seated problems."

Fractured bones 2...

"Trainers can't work out why they get so many injuries, particularly metacarpal and metatarsal fractures and hock fractures, when their dogs return to racing.

"So often it is because they have galloped the dogs repeatedly on a straight gallop.

"They then trial the dogs on a track and get fractures at the second bend. This is because there has been incorrect bone remodelling.

"It is the same scenario when a dog arrives in England from Ireland. He sits on the bed for a couple of weeks and then is asked to tackle a track that he has not been adapted to run on.

"How often do you hear of dogs breaking hocks in their first or second trial and then they try to claim that the dog must have been injured when they bought it?

"I would always advise trainers to gallop dogs around a bend, starting midway around the bend and gradually extending the run.

"This will gradually build up the strength in the bones and help prevent injury.

"Remember, bone remodelling is an on-going condition - nature's way of helping a dog to adapt.

"Within about a month without stress, the bones will revert back to normal and that makes them vulnerable - it is called reverse re-modelling.

Track leg...

"How many trainers put vaseline on a track leg - but we all know that if you rub vaseline the friction makes it sticky. Shaving gel is a much better idea."

Ultrasound...

"Ultrasound is a very powerful tool but so many trainers use machines without knowing what they are doing.

"I have seen many cases where dogs have been quite badly burned by its incorrect use.

"I have also seen cases where it has caused further bleeding to a muscle injury because it has been used too soon and at an improper setting."

Faradic therapy...

"This has very good benefits for recovery from injury but it needs to be expertly carried out if the condition isn't to be made worse.

"I would only recommend it to be used by a qualified physiotherapists and vets."

Swimming...

"Swimming can be an aid in helping a dog recover from injury but a greyhound in full training should not be swimming too often. It is the wrong type of exercise and can cause further problems."

Physio...

"I believe physiotherapy is very important and the best type is not by machine, but good hands. It should be in every trainer's interests to understand massage and stretching.

"The benefits of physio is that it can reduce the period of injury recovery and help suppleness to help prevent further injury.

"It is also very beneficial after exercise in relieving lactic acid build up."

Muscle injuries...

"What happens in most kennels when a greyhound gets a muscle injury? He gets left on the bed for a month and then re-trialled. How sensible is that? Okay, the dog may need to be

confined, even super-confined for up to three weeks. But then he needs to exercise himself. That is nature's way. The body is like an engine, it needs to be kept ticking over almost all of the time.

"There is one trainer in England who was sometimes criticised for racing her dogs too often. But she kept them running. She had an instinctive understanding of how nature worked.

"If I was training, my dogs would never get a complete rest, even if they weren't racing.

"I would allow them freedom to exercise themselves - which is something that they intuitively understand."

Galloping: "Apart from galloping dogs on a straight, which I would keep to a minimum, I do not agree with galloping a dog uphill.

"It puts a greater strain on the pelvis than is necessary and can lead to groin injuries.

"Nor do I agree with extended straight gallops - sometimes up to 400m. This enables a dog to reach a speed that he would never reach on the track and increases the risk of injury.

"It is unnecessary. The ideal speed to exercise a dog is between walking and trotting.

"Unfortunately, we do not have the perfect type of treadmills to do this, so it has to be galloping.

"But you certainly cannot get a greyhound fit just by walking it as some trainers believe.

"You are simply not using many of the correct muscles or stimulating the correct muscle fibres. You have to remember that there are different types of muscle fibres. For example a weight lifter and a boxer might both have strong muscles but they react very differently.

"Nor with walking are you extending the cardiovascular system."

Schooling...

"I can understand how many years ago it was acceptable to school young dogs at 12 months of age. But the modern greyhound is bigger - perhaps even more so since the introduction of Australian breeding.

"At 12 months of age, the musculo skeletal system and ligaments are not strong enough and properly adapted to the type of exercise.

"So what happens? In Ireland in particular they put the pup who has never seen a track, straight into the traps and hope he qualifies.

"His body is not prepared for the rigours of the bends. Is it any surprise that you get so many metacarpal and hock injuries.

"What is so obscene is that it is only done for the sake of a gamble? Can you believe it?

"If I was schooling pups I wouldn't think of putting them on a track until they are at least 14 months of age and then they would be started gradually from half way around the bend."

Quack remedies...

"I get so irritated by some of the rubbish that I hear about injuries that are just not possible.

"Probably the biggest concerns trapped nerves. Please print this clearly - unless the body has an unusual bone growth - it is impossible to get a trapped nerve.

"Nature has designed us all over millions of years and would not allow something so badly designed to take place.

"In almost all cases, supposed 'trapped nerves' are actually sore or inflamed tendons and ligaments.

"What happens is that when somebody says they are 'putting it back' they are simply massaging an inflamed area.

"Think of it like this. If you wash the car on Sunday, you might have a sore back and shoulder on Monday.

"So what do you do? You massage it with your hands and relieve the pressure of the

surrounding muscles which have contracted and are protecting the sore area.

"I also keep hearing of 'cracked L7' injuries. This refers to the seventh lumbar vertebrae in the back.

"It is almost impossible to happen and would need X-rays to diagnose. In my career, I have never yet encountered a legitimate L7 or S1 (first sacral vertebrae) injury.

"If they really do exist they are to be proven scientifically"

"I hear of back bones being 'cemented' or 'sclerosed' as a form of treatment.

"Absolute rubbish. You might cement an extremity - the last joint on the toe for example, but never something as flexible as a spine."

Despite his success and growing reputation, Alessandro has one burning ambition that he intends to see come to fruition.

He says: "It would be my dream to open a centre of excellence where specialist greyhound vets could get together and pool ideas. There has been so much research done that could save the racing careers of so many greyhounds.

"Australia already has such a centre - so does the USA. There are many such places for racehorses including one in Newmarket.

"My greatest wish is to educate people. We could advise young vets in the most modern surgical techniques.

"We could run seminars to help trainers understand injuries, rehabilitation and even nutrition.

"I have great respect for trainers - even those novices who haven't been training very long.

"There is a great desire to learn and become better at handling their dogs - so far they have had limited opportunities to do so.

"From what I have seen, this education is vital.

"The only thing that is needed is the will of the greyhound authorities to make it happen."

Written by Floyd Amphlet

Posted by Russell Savige

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