

TRAINING A RACING WHIPPET (page 1 of 2)

by

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Success at the track depends in large measure on the amount of work and effort expended by the owner of a racing Whippet.

Indeed, given a worthy animal success is almost directly proportional to the amount of time spent by an owner in training and conditioning. All too often losing owners cluster after a major race meet to commensurate over their individual animals physical and spiritual deficiencies. More properly their dogs are the ones who have a right to complain if they have been presented at the track poorly trained, out of condition and lacking in racing experience.

Much of what I say here will be trite to those of you who have already been racing Whippets successfully for years. I hope, however, that those who are just beginning will derive some benefit from my short experience.

Training should begin when the Whippet puppy is about 4 months old. Most, if not all, puppies are fascinated by the movement of a small white rabbit skin lure. Teasing them with the lure is the beginning of the whole training process, designed to give the dog a certain keenness for the lure that will ultimately surpass his interest in other dogs with which he will be racing. Whether we realize it or not, early lure training and teasing are the best ways to ensure that your dog will not be a dreaded "bumper". Equally important, in my view, is the idea that your puppy should never be allowed to chase after the lure with other puppies, and most certainly not with adult dogs.

When the puppy has reached 6 months, you are ready to take him to the track to pursue the lure. Care should be taken to ensure that the lure is properly paced so that it is no more than 10 yards in front of your pursuing puppy. Initially your puppy should be slipped by hand and the chase should not last longer than 50 yards. When the chase is over the puppy should always be allowed to attack the lure and savor it for an uninterrupted few moments. Owners should be careful that they are not standing in the vicinity of where the lure is to be stopped. If this practice is followed, you may find that your puppy will start conscientiously running to you and will ignore the lure completely once you have come into his sight.

When your puppy has reached 8 months, it is time to start training him with a muzzle. Make sure that you find one that is a reasonable fit. All puppies resent the confinement that the muzzle brings and you won't help the problem if you have an ill fitting muzzle that pains the dog or interferes with his vision.

Thereafter, you are ready to start slipping the puppy with other dogs. Try to find a veteran adult racer who has consistently raced cleanly and whose speed is by now a memory. An ideal candidate would be a dog that your puppy can just defeat. In this way, the puppy is not likely to lose sight of the lure. Gradually, you should increase the level of competition with other faster adult dogs. If your puppy has gained enough experience, the presence of even a faster dog will not tempt your young racer to interfere with his competition. If you are unlucky and your puppy insists on trying to destroy his opposition before he turns his attention to the lure, go back to running him alone without the muzzle so that he can again savor the lure.

If your puppy is running cleanly you can start box training him. Begin by leaving the front of the box open with the lure resting just in front of the open box. While you have to be firm in helping your puppy to overcome a basic fear of the unknown boxes, don't be so firm that you wind up injuring him. Many promising puppies have suffered an early injury in the boxes and for the balance of their career they have lost valuable yards at the beginning of the race because they are left cowering inside the boxes. Care

should be taken to always give your puppy an especially good look at the lure when you have reached the stage where you are closing the front of the boxes.

Initially, your puppy should race against only one other dog out of the closed boxes. The 2 dogs should be spaced at least 3 stalls from each other so that there isn't a frightening speed jam toward the lure just as the boxes open

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Only after your puppy has proven that he can race against adult dogs out of the closed boxes should you chance allowing him to race against other puppies of his own experience. If other owners have not been so careful in their training, you can only hope that in the event of interference your Racing Secretary will insist that the offending puppy be withdrawn from competition until his bad habits have been overcome.

Assuming that you have reached the stage where you can proudly say that you have an accomplished racer, you must now turn your attention to keeping him in condition. Some dogs, at least in the first two years of their life, luckily seem to require very little conditioning to remain in hard condition. The great majority, however, do require some real effort by their owners to be turned out in good condition. In my experience, it is sufficient to race your dog twice a week with 4 heats of 200 yards each. In between racing sessions you have real work to do. I try to walk my dogs at least 6 miles a day for the 3 or 4 months of the racing season. Walking at a steady fast pace seems to be the single best method of developing your dog's physique. I usually split the day's exercise into a morning and early evening session of 3 miles each. You should be able to complete a 3-mile walk in less than 1 hour and the only real sacrifice this program demands is that you get up an hour earlier each morning. I have found my wife to be very cooperative in yanking me out of bed to walk "her" dogs. Such is the life of an exercise boy.

There are of course many other aspects of successful training. This publication has in the past printed considered articles on nutrition and general care. My short purpose in writing this piece has been to indicate that for the most part success in Whippet racing is not accidental. Usually, the owners accepting trophies at the end of a quality race meet deserve their reward -- they and their dogs have worked for it.

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