

# Greyhound racing in Great Britain – is welfare really at its heart?

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The Greyhound Board of Great Britain (GBGB) launched the Greyhound Commitment in 2018<sup>1</sup>. Part of the reason for the emphasis on welfare arises because of concerns that have been expressed about the safety and conditions in the sport<sup>2</sup> as well as allegations around doping<sup>3</sup>. These issues have plagued the industry for some time and have to an extent been responsible for the decline in popularity of greyhound racing.

that set out their expectation of how the sport should be run “*with welfare at its heart*”

In recent years GBGB has acknowledged this and says it has made a concerted push to improve welfare standards in an effort to revive the industry<sup>4</sup>. Media exposes of conditions and practices in areas of the racing community have generated strong opposition from sectors of the public. A 2007

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<sup>1</sup> GBGB. (2018). The Greyhound Commitment. Retrieved from [www.gbgb.org.uk/about/the-greyhound-commitment](http://www.gbgb.org.uk/about/the-greyhound-commitment).

<sup>2</sup> Spencer, K. (2018, May 7). Greyhound deaths reveal dark side to dog racing. Retrieved November 8, 2019, from Sky News: <https://news.sky.com/story/greyhound-deaths-reveal-dark-side-to-dog-racing-11362388>

<sup>3</sup> Daly, M. (2017, September 21). Doped up dogs: Why greyhounds are being given cocaine. Retrieved November 8, 2019,

from Vice: [https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/8x8xak/doped-up-dogs-why-greyhounds-are-being-given-cocaine](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/8x8xak/doped-up-dogs-why-greyhounds-are-being-given-cocaine)

<sup>4</sup> Watson, J. (2019, June 15). How greyhound racing is improving welfare and integrity to attract new supporters. Retrieved November 8, 2019, from The Independent: <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/general/greyhound-racing-dogs-the-derby-nottingham-track-greyhound-board-of-great-britain-a8959656.html>

Panorama documentary revealed that in County Durham in the UK an estimated 10,000 former racing dogs had been shot because they were no longer required by their owners or trainers<sup>5</sup>. There was a strong public reaction to this expose and out of these events the British anti greyhound racing organisation CAGED Nationwide was established. Since this time there has been an improvement in the regulation of welfare, the care of retired greyhounds and the enforcement of anti-doping laws in Great Britain. Although it must be said the sport is by no means without controversy<sup>6</sup>. But no matter what steps GBGB take within the UK to address welfare concerns, it must address one of the biggest welfare issues inherent in this industry – where Great Britain sources the majority of its racing dogs from. GBGB registers show that most dogs racing on British tracks are reared in the Republic of Ireland<sup>7</sup>. The RTE documentary

*Greyhounds: Running for their lives* aired in June 2019<sup>8</sup> revealed the extent of the welfare issues in the Irish greyhound industry. This article will consider the issues raised in this programme and question whether the GBGB should have regard to these problems as part of its overall strategy to improve welfare.

The Irish Greyhound Board (“IGB”), otherwise known as Bord na gCon<sup>9</sup>, was created to regulate track racing, gambling and welfare. The IGB is a statutory body established under the Greyhound Industry Act 1958 and describes itself as a “commercial semi state body”. The IGB falls within the remit of the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (“DAFM”). The statutory powers afforded to the IGB are significant. Greyhound racing also receives a significant amount of funding from the government proportionate to other sports in the country<sup>10</sup>. This status and support

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<sup>5</sup> Foggo, D. (2014, November 3). Undercover reporter finds greyhounds 'drugged to rig bets'. Retrieved November 15, 2019, from BBC News: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29877665>

<sup>6</sup> Spencer, K. (2018, May 7).

<sup>7</sup> Preferred Results Limited. (September 2017). IGB Business Model Analysis

<sup>8</sup> Shouldice, F. (Director). (2019). RTE Investigates: Greyhounds running for their lives.

<sup>9</sup> The IGB is to be rebranded as Rasaiocht Con Eireann, upon the commencement of s8 of the Greyhound Racing Act 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Greyhound racing was given a government grant of 16 million euros in 2018. In contrast Sport Ireland that oversees 60 sports in the country gave out grants totalling 60 million euros



reflects the importance that this industry has traditionally held in Ireland<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, the country has developed a reputation for producing fast greyhounds. But what has never been considered publicly until now is how Ireland has been able to develop and sustain an industry that produces such a high number of well performing dogs. In June 2019 RTE aired a documentary that laid bare industry practices - it was a chilling expose into the racing

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(Preferred Results Limited, September 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, J. (2018, December 14). The legal status and difficult future of greyhound racing. Retrieved November 9, 2019, from Law in Sport:

and coursing industry. Central to the documentary was a report by Preferred Results Limited<sup>12</sup> who in 2017 had been engaged by the IGB to review its business model. The IGB withheld the report from the Dail (House of Parliament) under the Freedom of Information Act on the basis of commercial sensitivity. RTE requested the report under the FOIA and was also refused. It was only after the IGB learned that the report had been leaked to RTE that

<https://www.lawinsport.com/content/articles/item/the-legal-status-and-difficult-future-of-greyhound-racing>

<sup>12</sup> Preferred Results Limited. (September 2017).

it released a redacted version on its website. Preferred Results were highly critical of the IGB, and the industry as a whole, from both a welfare and economic perspective. What was revealed by the RTE programme and the Preferred Results report is that Ireland produces in the region of 1000% more greyhounds each year than is required to sustain it. In part it is this oversupply of dogs that leads to serious welfare issues on a huge scale. A review of the number of greyhounds that were active in the IGB system showed that most dogs only had a racing career of around 7 months, whereas greyhounds can generally race until the age of around 6 or 7 years. Given the number of dogs being born every year and the very short racing careers most dogs have, this raised questions about what was happening to these non-racers – where were they ending up? The movement of about half of these dogs was known, being accounted for by illness, injury, retirement or export. The UK is a key export market for Irish greyhounds that are exported for prices which are less than 50% of “their actual

production cost”<sup>13</sup>. This is evidently a boon for the industry in Great Britain which receives no government subsidies, nor subsidies from bookmakers<sup>14</sup>. But as the Preferred Results Report states *“exported dogs leave behind collateral pups which fail to make qualifying times, which places an unrecognised burden on the industry in both financial and welfare costs”*. So whilst the dogs exported to the UK may possibly face a slightly better fate<sup>15</sup>, they leave behind other dogs that face a very uncertain existence.

Of the dogs that face an uncertain future are the approximately 6000 dogs each year that are unaccounted for. Six thousand adult greyhounds that just disappear from the system<sup>16</sup>. The Preferred Results Report suggest that it is very likely that most of these dogs are killed: *“While not officially recognised there have been many reports in the media and elsewhere of the large-scale culling of underperforming dogs... the conclusion that large numbers of dogs are culled based on their performance would appear to be*

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> Staunton, D. (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Almost 1000 racing greyhounds died or were killed in the UK in 2018 (Busby, 2019)

<sup>16</sup> The IGB dispute these figures

*indisputable...".* The findings of this report were consistent with the evidence that RTE compiled. Greyhound owners and trainers were filmed taking their otherwise healthy looking greyhounds to knackeries to be killed at a cost of 10 euros a dog. The conversations that the RTE journalists had whilst undercover indicated that disposing of greyhounds in this way was a regular occurrence, to the extent that some knackeries appeared to be used to killing dogs in bulk. It seemed to be that some greyhound breeders, owners and trainers in Ireland were producing large numbers of dogs in order to select the fastest and were simply having those that did not meet the grade, destroyed. In itself this process of breeding and selecting individual in order to produce the fastest dogs to further the pursuit of a form of entertainment is highly unethical. But the situation was made so much worse when footage from the documentary showed the method by which these dogs were being killed. The greyhounds were shot,

but it was not clear that this was necessarily a quick and painless death. The programme shows one greyhound being dropped off at a knacker, a shot is heard, and there is a glimpse of a dog writhing in agony in the last moments of its life.

Whilst it is illegal for knackeries to kill and dispose of dogs in this way, there is presently nothing preventing an owner having a dog that has not met qualification times being euthanised by a vet. In principle the legislation does not in any way prevent this oversupply and killing. Following the RTE programme, the IGB have produced a number of statements stating that they were appalled by the footage, condemned the actions of those filmed and hoped that this would spur on reform of the industry<sup>17</sup>. Part of this has involved the introduction of the Greyhound Racing Act 2019. The 2019 law was drafted in response to concerns that had been raised in relation to welfare, traceability and doping within the Irish industry<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Lavery, C. (2019, June 27). Irish Greyhound Board condemns the deplorable actions shown in last night's RTE Investigates. Retrieved from Irish independent:

<https://www.independent.ie/incoming/irish-greyhound-board-condemn-the-deplorable-actions-shown-in-last-nights->

[rte-investigates-programme-38259525.html](https://www.independent.ie/incoming/rte-investigates-programme-38259525.html)

<sup>18</sup> Aodha, G. N. (2019, June 27). Irish Greyhound Board 'strongly condemns actions of minority in industry'. Retrieved November 8, 2019, from thejournal.ie: <https://www.thejournal.ie/irish-greyhound-board-cull-4699206->

Yet what cannot be ignored is that despite these overtures of change and an alleged focus on welfare, the IGB have been aware of the culling of dogs on a large scale since late 2017<sup>19</sup>, and until the matter became public did not see fit to tackle the issue. In response to the Preferred Results reports the IGB Board minutes recorded that addressing the issue of overpopulation is “impractical”<sup>20</sup>. For the IGB to say that reducing the unnecessary breeding and subsequent killing of thousands of dogs as being “impractical” entirely undermines their subsequent assurances that they take welfare seriously. Because it is this issue of oversupply that goes directly to how the industry perceives animals within it. The fundamental problem underlying this sport is the value that is ascribed to the lives of these greyhounds by the organisation that is tasked with protecting their welfare.

It appears that for a very long time some in the industry have

considered the dogs at the heart of it as being expendable. To compound this the 2019 Act which could be used to address many of the problems created by the oversupply of greyhounds has only partially been enacted as the Minister for Food Agriculture and the Marine advises that the IGB are still engaged in an analysis of the transitional arrangements<sup>21</sup>.

In the context of the welfare abuses documented by RTE, the failure by the IGB to deal with these issues expeditiously perhaps suggests that the IGB’s priorities in fact lie elsewhere. This makes it difficult to have confidence that this self-regulating industry can be trusted to robustly enforce welfare legislation. Herein lies the problem for GBGB because this is the backdrop to the greyhound racing industry in Great Britain. Between 2014 and May 2017 on average 83% of registrations with the GBGB were Irish reared greyhounds. Therefore irrespective of how well cared for these dogs may be, and how

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Jun2019/; Dail Eireann Debate: Greyhound Industry. (2019, July 3). PQ by TD Brid Smith; Dail Eireann debate: Greyhound Racing Bill 2018. (2019, May 15). Greyhound Racing Bill 2018 [Seanad]: Report Stage (Resumed) and Final Stage; Preferred Results Limited. (September 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Preferred Results Limited. (September 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Shouldice, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> The main provisions are not operational as ss 1- 58 have not yet commenced; Cahill, J. PQ 30261/19 to Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

rigorously GBGB may be enforcing welfare legislation here, the more insidious problem is that the industry in Great Britain is in part facilitating the industry in Ireland. It would seem that of all the pressing issues facing greyhound racing here, this must surely be one of the most significant. Unless GBGB

acknowledges this issue and takes steps to address it, all that has actually been achieved since the 2007 expose of the British greyhound industry, is that the cruelty behind the sport has simply been outsourced across the Irish Sea.