

PE1758: End greyhound racing In Scotland

Written Submission from Michael Connolly, GBGB-Licensed Trainer

1. What is the scale and nature of your involvement in greyhound racing e.g. how many dogs do you have? Where are your dogs kennelled? Where do you race your dogs and how often?

I have four racing dogs plus one brood bitch. My kennels are at the side of my house. I race at various tracks in England.

2. Did you previously race your dogs at Shawfield and, when that track closed, did it have an impact on what you did? Did you then start to travel more? Yes, I raced at Shawfield.

I now travel to England to race.

3. Do you train and kennel dogs for other people or do you own them all yourself?

I own all of my dogs. I don't train dogs on behalf of anyone else.

4. Do you think there's any demand, need or support for another GBGB track in Scotland? And can you see that ever happening in the future?

It's a crying shame that we do not have a GBGB-licensed track in Scotland. We either need a businessperson to come in and build a new track or for Thornton to be licensed under GBGB.

5. How do you make a living from the sport?

I retired two years ago from Customs and Excise where I was in charge of 600 staff in Scotland, Northern Ireland, North East and North West England, including the dog sections. I am not in this sport for financial gain. Walking the dogs keeps me fit and going racing keeps me mentally active.

6. Can you explain to us physically how your kennels are set out and what sort of regulations you need to abide by to be able to race at GBGB tracks? Do GBGB come in and check that you are abiding by their standards and conditions and that the kennels are kept in a certain way and the dogs are given enough exercise?

I spent £12,000 building my kennels. There are four individual kennels, three double glazed windows and a door. My kennels each year are inspected by a GBGB vet and stipendiary steward (unannounced). They are also inspected by an independent company who started a yearly audit two/three years ago.

7. When you go and race, how many greyhounds do you normally take and how do you transport them?

I transport up to four dogs in my van. They have large individual cages. The van is also air conditioned with roof vents.

8. In the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission's report it says that a dog bred for racing in Scotland currently has poorer welfare than the average dog in the population. What do you think of that?

I breed my own dogs. Up to 13 weeks, they are fed five times a day. Their welfare is our main priority.

As I said I was previously in charge of the Customs and Excise dog sections and my greyhounds are looked after as well as, if not better, than those dogs.

9. Do you have any experience of the track at Thornton? Do you have any views about the standards there?

No, I don't race at Thornton.

10. Do you think that there is any more risk of dogs running on an unlicensed track such as Thornton than there would be on a GBGB track?

I cannot comment without examining their facilities.

11. Have you had experience of GBGB's long-term welfare strategy 'A Good Life for Every Greyhound' and do you have any views on it? Do you think that it would lead to any change in practices?

'A Good Life for Every Greyhound' is part of the overall strategy to improve a dog's life, especially after racing. This is the only way greyhound racing will continue in the UK and Ireland – with welfare as the main priority.

12. [For various groups to be concerned about this, there must be something that needs to be improved. Your experience that you're sharing with us is a positive one and I'm so pleased to hear that I'm a dog lover too.] But can you explain to us why the public and some of the welfare organisations might think otherwise?

If any greyhound is found in poor condition, the various anti-racing groups latch onto this and label our GBGB registered dogs in the same category. There are very rare circumstances when a GBGB licensed trainer suffers from health or mental health issues and their dogs might not be in perfect condition. However they are quickly identified through the various inspections GBGB undertakes.

They lose their licence and face prosecution.

13. What would be the outcome if your greyhounds weren't kept in good welfare?

My wife would divorce me. The dogs are part of our family. In addition, the vets at the track wouldn't allow me to race my greyhounds and I would face increased unannounced visits.

14. What more needs to be done to ensure that the general public are aware of the good conditions and the happiness of the dogs?

We need to go on the offensive and advertise our strategy and encourage the detractors to visit our kennels and tracks.

15. The Scottish Animal Welfare Commission suggested that there should be a scheme that is independent of GBGB in Scotland. The Scottish Government has recently consulted on licensing. What are your views on an additional licence in Scotland that would be independent of GBGB, potentially for tracks and kennels?

We already have an independent company audit but I would welcome visits from any agency.

16. Where do you source your dogs from?

I breed them myself. Prior to breeding myself, I bought dogs largely from Ireland.

17. We have talked about a compatible microchip system where Irish dogs that are microchipped in Ireland will be transferable so that we will be able to trace dogs more. Is that something that you think should be pursued?

All GBGB registered dogs are microchipped and earmarked. There is a clear audit from birth to rehoming.

18. How do you know your dog is coming from a good home?

I would only ever buy a dog from a reputable breeder e.g. Dunphys.

19. Would you welcome an assured breeder's scheme?

We have the British Breeding Stud who maintain the stud book.

20. One of the key welfare concerns that's been raised with the committee is the risk of injury and fatalities when dogs are racing. Could you give us a sense of how often dogs you train are injured during racing, what kinds of injuries they sustain and what the risk factors are?

Most dogs pick up niggles similar to athletes and footballers. They very rarely suffer career-ending injuries. I have been in the sport for over eight years and only one of my dogs has broken its leg. I paid £1,500 for the operation and she now lives at home with us. GBGB has also introduced a scheme – the Injury Recovery Scheme – to assist with vet bills.

21. What do you think about the proposals for straight tracks and how that could work in practice?

There is evidence to suggest that straight tracks might reduce muscle injuries. It could work but is there an appetite from businesses?

22. The GBGB tracks have a vet on site and there are informal arrangements at the Thornton independent track. It would be good to know a bit more about vets at tracks and whether you've had to use them before?

All GBGB tracks have vets that examine your dog prior to racing and afterwards. They watch every race and attend immediately should a dog be injured.

23. Over the course of a day, how many injuries might you see? Have you ever had the experience of a fatality in a race?

At an average race meeting of 10 races there is on average one minor injury every 20 races (a cramp, cut or muscle strain). I fortunately have never seen a fatality on a track and I watch hundreds of races at tracks or on TV. I have seen dogs break their leg, similar to my bitch, however this is a very, very rare occurrence. They are cared for immediately by the vet and, after an operation, they can return to racing or are rehomed.

24. I wonder whether you feel satisfied that the dogs under your care, whom you clearly love, are being exposed to these fatalities and injuries?

They are part of our family and if I thought they were going to be seriously injured I wouldn't run them.

25. One of the issues that has been raised is that there have been accusations of the use of cocaine, amphetamines and steroids, which are banned substances for greyhounds. Do you think this is an issue in the sport?

Definitely not. Dogs have been found positive by the strict GBGB unannounced sampling procedures. However, contamination can be caused by Class C meat or by someone clapping the dog. In my previous job, we were well aware that 99% of all £20 notes are contaminated with cocaine.

26. How would you respond to the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission suggestion that the fact that greyhounds are kept in kennels for so much of their lives does not appear compatible with giving dogs a good quality of life?

Nonsense. GBGB dogs are walked, galloped and raced each week. Once retired and neutered they make great pets.

27. How do you facilitate giving dogs access to paddocks or open areas in order to roam?

My dogs are walked four times a day, galloped twice a week and swim once a month.

28. What is your view on the Scottish Government extending boarding kennel legislation to greyhound kennels? Do you think that there would be any disadvantage to Scotland bringing in its own regulation?

We are extremely well controlled but I would welcome any other agency involvement.

29. If the Government takes the above forward, what could you see that you're doing that's different to what a boarding kennel's doing?

I don't know boarding kennels regulations but my friend tells me my dogs are better looked after than his pets in boarding.

30. Do all retired dogs go to a rehoming charity? Which dogs do you decide to keep and which do you decide to rehome? What's the process and what does the rehoming centre do?

All of my dogs that are rehomed go to Homes for Hounds in Coatbridge run by an ex Shawfield trainer Scott Kennedy. He sends me a picture of them in their new homes, even after two/three years.

31. I suppose, like athletes, greyhounds will probably have more complex issues when they retire with muscles and bones and things like that. Are they more expensive to keep as a dog?

They are possibly more affected by arthritis – but that is similar to any pet that runs about.

32. Do they adapt easily, or does the rehoming centre have to do things to help them to adapt, from coming in from kennels to going out to a home?

They have a system to acclimatise greyhound to their new home. Once retired they make great, lazy pets.

33. When a greyhound has a litter of puppies, how many puppies are normally in a litter? How many of those puppies become racing greyhounds? Is there too many that need to be rehomed after racing?

Average litter is six or seven pups. All of my pups have gone on to race have done so at varying categories. They don't all have to be very fast.

34. Do you accept that there are still inherent risks to greyhound racing that you put the dogs through?

See reply to question 25.

35. Would you consider that level of injuries and deaths to be acceptable? Is that an acceptable risk for the dogs?

There is always a risk as there is in any sport e.g. boxing, motorsport, football and horse racing. But there isn't a campaign to stop any of these sports. I can't recall a fatality at any dog track I have visited or race I have watched in the last eight years.

36. How many dogs come through the kennels from year to year? How many have come through in the last five years of your kennels?

I only have four kennels and my turnover is small in comparison to others. In eight years, I have had 15 dogs.

37. How many of those have got injuries? Have some of them got injuries and some of them are just too old so aren't fast enough anymore?

They all picked up small injuries that were treated either with rest and ultra sound i.e. laser or magnetic pulse. I have only had one leg break as I have mentioned and the greyhound now lives with me.

38. What is the life of a racing greyhound in terms of its career?

A greyhound can race from 16 months to six years. On average they race until they are three-four years old.

39. Is there a decline in the number of people who are involved in the sport?

Yes. Since Shawfield closed, the numbers in Scotland have definitely decreased.