



- by GAC's Darren Rigg

(Reprinted from Offtrack Greyhound, GAC's official newsletter)

Part II

In the last issue of *Offtrack*, I addressed the issue of keeping greyhounds (or other adult dogs) in crates. I expressed my concern about this common practice and how, in my opinion, crating an adult dog should be a tool to be used only if necessary, in the short-term, and under special circumstances, but is not the great panacea some people would have you believe.

The response from our readers was overwhelmingly in favor of not using a crate as a permanent place to "keep" their adult canine family members, but many readers asked for individual advice on how to transition *their* greyhound from life in a box to life in the home.

Frankly, the numerous requests for help were overwhelming, so I decided to write this follow-up article in an attempt to assist those well-intentioned dog parents out there who want to help their dogs live "out of the box"!

It is impossible to cover every conceivable scenario, so I have to make some generalizations. However, I believe that there is a fundamental premise for eliciting any behavioral change in a dog's life, and thus the route to transitioning the dog from crate life to living room is relatively simple.

The premise is this -- it is important to quell ambiguity in the dog's mind. Dogs are derived from pack animals that evolved in a highly structured social environment. As a result, dogs are highly emotional creatures and are "hardwired" to follow any rules, as they perceive them. They make sense of their environment as they go along and quickly satiate their desire to know what to do and how to respond in any given situation by adhering to their sense of "what's expected" -- from a dog's point of view. Therefore, causing a sudden major change in a dog's established pattern of behavior can be a huge mistake. Change has to be done gradually so that ambiguity (and thus anxiety) is minimized and new routines and behaviors become normative.

Phasing Out the Crate

The first step is to bring the crate into the center of the living area where you eventually want the dog to be when you are not at home. The absolute best place for this is in YOUR main living area -- where the family members (pack members) hang out the most. If you are using an open wire crate, versus an airline crate, place towels or blankets over its top and about one-third down the long sides of the crate. When all family members leave for long periods, continue using the crate as before,

but be sure to make it a positive experience for the dog when going in the crate. Give him a chewy or pressed rawhide and equip the crate with a removable, comfortable pad. At night when you go to bed (and after the dog has had a final potty break outdoors), bring the dog and the pad from the crate into the bedroom with you. Close the door so that your dog can't leave the room; show him his pad beside the bed and encourage him to settle on it for the night. Ignore him when he tries to elicit play or attention. Be sure to put the sleeping pad back in the crate in the morning.

Start Building a Routine

The next step, perhaps five or six days following the first step, is to get the dog used to being in the crate while its door is open. You can do this in two stages. First, send the dog into the crate as you do when you are leaving the house. Once inside the crate, give him a cookie or other quickly eaten reward and walk away as though you forgot to close the crate door. Of course when the dog has finished his treat he is likely to come out of the crate right away. Ignore him for awhile. (He's already somewhat relaxed now because he was expecting a longer period of confinement). Second, make a habit of including the open crate in any indoor play interaction you have with the dog. When playing retrieval games with your dog indoors, toss a toy around the room, but be sure to toss the toy into the crate a few times, too. When you are relaxing at home, give your dog a treat that takes a while to eat, or a toy that is designed so that you can stuff food or treats inside it (such as a Kong stuffed with peanut butter).

Leave the crate door partially open while your dog enjoys the treat inside the crate. While he's busy, leave the house for a few minutes so that he is home alone for a short time, and when you come back, refrain from making a fuss. In fact, you should ignore the dog for a few minutes if possible, taking him out to potty after he's started to settle. Repeat this routine a few times, gradually increasing your time away until you can leave for about 25 minutes and not find the dog in a frantic state upon your return. After a few days of this routine, most dogs get the idea that being left alone inside the house is to be expected and not a cue for arousal or anxiety. At this point remove the crate door entirely (or fasten it open if it is not an airline crate).

Dog-Proofing the Room

Continue with the routine of putting the dog in the open crate when you leave, and practice coming and going more and more and for longer periods of time. Vary the length of time you are away, and always leave the dog with something to occupy his mind for the first few minutes when you leave. It often helps if you leave lots of dog toys and one or two larger rawhides littered around the floor of the room. Be sure to keep window sills clear of objects that the dog could accidentally knock to the floor while looking out the window. Fully open the blinds and curtains, and close the doors to other rooms in the home. If needed, block off access to hallways or other open rooms. Take small objects that you handle a lot, such as books, pens and TV remote controls, and put them in a safe place. Buy Nylabone-type items that dogs like to chew, handle them a lot and leave them in places around the room.



Look for Signs of Ambiguity

When you come home, notice what's been played with, chewed on, or moved. This will give you a sense of the dog's level of activity while you are away. Most greyhounds, once accustomed to your coming and going routine, settle quickly and hardly move or play much, but having things to chew on and play with will give the dog an allowable outlet for its energy or anxiety. Destructive behavior, or stress-induced soiling in the home, indicates a state of ambiguity in the dog's mind. If you find pillows shredded or doorframes chewed, etc. then go back to the point before removal of the crate door, and try to establish the new routine again. Don't punish the dog in any way for actions done in your absence. Contrary to popular belief, dogs don't do things out of spite. They simply have no choice than to try to quell stress-causing ambiguity.

After two weeks, assuming all is going well, it is time to remove the top half of the crate or take the towels and blankets from the crate. For a day or two, come and go frequently.

By this stage you should notice your greyhound sleeping by choice in his open, half-disassembled crate (usually upside down in the "dead cockroach" position). You should be able to go in and out of the house for short periods without the dog reacting. If this is the case, remove the crate entirely, leaving just the padded bed. While keeping the bed in the same general area, move it to the side of a sofa or wall so that your dog still has something to lean on while asleep in that famous greyhound-pose. While you are at home, be sure to spend time with the dog in the parts of the house that you had previously cordoned off. Take his bed with you and use it as the indicator (along with verbal commands that you have by now established) that you want him to settle in these other areas. By now you have most likely established in the dog's mind that he's part of the family pack -- not excluded from it by being relegated to a cage or kept apart from everyone else, and you've established new behaviors without causing ambiguity and its corresponding increase in anxiety. What's more, you'll be well on your way to discovering the true joy of sharing your life with a wonderful dog who loves you.

Darren Rigg is GAC's Director of Development and a dog behavior expert. Among his many responsibilities, Darren creates "profiles" of the greyhounds in GAC's care to help ensure the best match for both the greyhounds and their adopters.

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