

The Livestock Report

By Kim Townsend

As an outsider to the IG world, I am delighted to have the opportunity to write for the IG Times. I've seen first hand the devastation that mill life can have on Italian Greyhounds. I have been amazed at the amount of torture their minds and bodies can take, but I have also been inspired by the resiliency of spirit I've seen many IGs demonstrate once they were freed from years of solitude and confinement.

While AKC registrations for 2001 ranked the Italian Greyhound #51 in breed popularity, the breed had actually moved up to #22 for the same period in the list of most popular puppy mill breeds. Those in the IG fancy who are accustomed to using the annual AKC registration statistics as the bellwether of breed well-being may find this discrepancy alarming. Below are the official AKC statistics for Italian Greyhounds from 1997-2001:

AKC registration statistics	2001 Litters	2001 Dogs	2000 Litters	2000 Dogs	1999 Litters	1999 Dogs	1998 Litters	1998 Dogs	1997 Litters	1997 Dogs
Italian Greyhound	1694	2892	1865	2984	1801	2688	1768	2896	1602	2788

At first glance, the steady decrease in the number of litters registered might seem an encouraging trend for the future of the breed. However, it is unlikely that this is a valid interpretation when the statistics are viewed within the context of the deteriorating rapport between the commercial kennels and the AKC.

In February of 2000, the American Kennel Club announced the implementation of its revolutionary and mandatory "Frequently Used Sire" program (FUS). Effective for all litters whelped on or after July 1, 2000, every stud dog

siring seven or more litters in a lifetime, or producing more than three litters in a calendar year, must be 'AKC DNA Certified'. At last the AKC seemed to be putting some muscle behind its claim that buyers of AKC registered puppies were receiving some assurance that their 'puppy matches its papers' with respect to breed identity and integrity of parentage. While the FUS Program was a major step forward for the AKC in re-establishing itself as a credible dog registry, the announcement angered the mills into immediate and forceful retaliation. In March of 2000, one month after the announcement and four months prior to the effective date of the FUS, the commercial dog industry voted overwhelmingly to boycott, en masse, the AKC as their registry.

This knee-jerk reaction from the breeders frightened the brokers (the middlemen who buy the puppies straight from

the mills and re-sell them to the pet stores), as well as the pet stores themselves. If the public were indeed sophisticated enough to realize that AKC papers provided more reassurance than XYZ papers did, this action by the mills would hurt the business of the brokers and pet stores as well as their own. Time would tell – specifically, the Christmas 2000 shopping season would provide the answer to this question. In response to the call to boycott AKC, for the balance of the calendar year 2000 brokers offered incentives to the mills to remain with that registry. Incentives took the

form of a two-tiered purchase price for puppies, one price was paid to mills for XYZ registered puppies and a higher price was paid to them for AKC puppies. Brokers even began offering to subsidize, and in many cases fully assume, the cost of furnishing the mandatory DNA samples to the AKC. The excerpt below was taken from one such broker's letter to all his mill clients.

Breeders have to send in a copy of the sire's DNA certificate with the pups as they come in. We will reimburse the DNA cost at the rate of \$5.00 per pup up to 8 pups. However, if you send 2 pups this week and 4 pups next week with the same sire, you still have to send a copy of the DNA certificate with each litter until the \$40.00 is paid.

Sending a copy of the DNA certificate to me before we buy the pups will not do any good. I have a huge file full of those and I do not have time to check each and every one when we are processing paperwork and getting your check out to you.

So please send in a copy with each litter until the \$40 00 has been sent to you.

Because of these broker incentives, many breeders did remain with AKC for the remainder of the year despite the call to boycott. This "wait and see" attitude is reflected in the sustained litter registration figures for 2000. By the end of the Christmas season, however, the issue had become moot. The sophistication of the pet store customer had been overestimated, and the fear that the public knew or cared about the 'quality' of dog registries had proven to be unfounded. The major brokers resumed paying full

price for XYZ litters as well as for AKC litters. The mills had received the tacit blessing of the puppy industry to switch from AKC to any other registry they chose. The entire industry breathed a huge sigh of relief and the ugly cycle of breeder to broker, broker to pet store, pet store to 'consumer', returned to business as usual.

While the future for Italian Greyhounds may appear brighter on the surface, we need to remember that they are still being bred in growing numbers in the mills to meet the increasing demand. Their ranking in the top 25 puppy mill breeds is the most persuasive evidence of a rising market, and provides us with a better barometer of what is going on with the breed than the AKC statistics would lead us to believe. The decrease in AKC litter numbers does not tell us that fewer IGs are being bred. It simply tells us that we are losing access to meaningful statistics because none of the registries except the AKC make their annual registration figures public.

XYZ registries cater to the commercial dog industry – they do not set standards, inspect kennels, or require DNA accountability for parentage or even breed authenticity. They furnish paperwork to their mill customers, which can easily be mixed and matched to puppies at random. Now, more than ever, let the pet store buyer beware. Perhaps it is poetic justice that those who were willing to buy those XYZ Christmas puppies anyway should have to pay the price for their own ignorance, but the mill dogs certainly did not deserve to pay along with them – and the dogs continue to receive no justice, poetic or otherwise.

In the next issue, The Livestock Report will take a look at what happened over Christmas 2002 – IG retail prices, broker prices, vigor of sales, and what any trends are likely to mean for this breed in the upcoming year. I commend The IG Times for caring to seek out the truth about the dark side of IG breeding and for attempting to raise consciousness and seek solutions to the growing problem of Italian Greyhounds in the mills. I am happy to be a part of this effort.



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