

The name of the game is "TO WIN!," but not everyone can have a winner. Certainly, not everyone will own a champion. But everyone wants their sighthound to be competitive. So, here are some general thoughts on acquiring, training, conditioning and putting the sighthound in competition on the track.

Because the show standard of the respective breeds do not emphasize enough the characteristic that generate speed, I am sure that some of my thoughts will prove controversial, but there are a few things that a person won't be too far wrong following:

First and foremost pick lines that have been proven to produce speed. There is no tried and true way of making choice, but this is certainly the biggest contributing factor: bloodlines! Do not pick a short-coupled animal, or one that is too well bent in the stifles, I have never seen a consistent winner that had either of these two faults.

A sighthound may have many other faults, however, and still possess great speed. There are many physical characteristics that contribute, but I will only cover a few obvious ones: The back should be long, covering a lot of ground; hindquarters long, with hocks close to the ground; thigh muscles broad; long shoulders with good angulation will contribute to greater reach and stride; pasterns should not be straight but should be flexible to give adaptability to the track surface; the feet should not be like a cats' feet but should be well-knuckled with thick pads.

A note regarding disposition: I always prefer an aggressive animal to a shy one. It is certainly helpful for it to show animation toward any moving object. Except for very timid animals, the handler can contribute greatly toward a useful disposition.

A large area is not necessary to train and condition the sighthound. I do not mean to say that it would not be helpful, only that one can make due with less. An area as small as twenty feet in radius would suffice, equipped with such inexpensive items as a ten-foot cane pole, a rag and a small ring.

Training should begin at the puppy level, as soon as interest is displayed, to savage the lure, play tug-of-war, catch, etc. This will save much work later on. As the next step, add the lure to a piece of string and drag it in front of the pup, enticing him to catch it. Do remember to use more than one type of lure, and always let it be caught. The pole with the lure attached to approximately six feet of cord is next. Sweep the lure in circles just ahead of the dog, being careful not to go too great a distance. You'll have to learn your dog's fatigue ratio. It is better to have them prop (put the brakes on) the lure than to outdistance them too greatly. And as always, let them catch it regularly! They should rapidly progress to the point of avidly chasing even the bare string. It is of great importance that they be on the lure by the time they are let out on the training track. Once you start using the pole, it is time to start pointing out to the young pups that there is time for business-like behavior and a time to play. Do not practice litter-mates together unless you are positive they will be fully attentive to the lure. I've seen a great many

sighthounds disqualified from activities learned while participating with a litter-mate. It is far more preferable to run them individually.

Teach your dog to adapt to strange things before you get it on the track. you can muzzle- (racing type) break him at home or in the car. Also, acquaint him with the warming blanket and racing jacket. Teach him to walk on a loose lead. Adapt him to anything that will teach him to conserve his efforts and energy for chasing the lure.

At the training track, there are a couple of things to keep in mind. It is better to run your dog frequently for shorter distances than for less frequent longer distances.. The first time you use a mechanical drag lure (hand operated or motor driven), do not just lay the lure in a dead heap directly in front. Take the lure past him, on down the track, and then run it past and release the dog just as it goes by. It is still greatly preferred that they catch the lure rather than have it run away from them. Another point that I consider important, although controversial, is: If the dog catches the lure and somehow gets his teeth into it and does not want to let go, DON'T discipline him in an effort to get him to release it.

Roadwork can be begun at an early age, but be careful not to develop muscle faster than the body developing. Do not run your dog for great distances; you must remember, the competition is sprinting a short distance. Actually I do not work even my adults at the 200-yard distance more than one day per week, but try to run them at shorter distances (125-150 yards) distances at least three times per week. Start your puppies (5-6 months) at seventy-five yards, and repeat with proper breather. You'll find the basic exercise needs will benefit you as well as the dog. A couple miles of roadwork (4-6 m.p.h.) every day is helpful. You have to vary the distance according to the needs of the dog. Keep in mind that you are trying to produce a top sprinter.

Breaking out of the starting boxes is essential training, and it is essential to get them started right. Be careful that there is neither chance of injury nor anything to distract them when you are training at any time. You don't want them to shy away from boxes (which is why I like well-lighted boxes, with a door that lifts up and away completely clear of the front); you want them to go into them eagerly. Remember, races are won and lost coming out of the starting box, so constant repetition will help.

Physical conditioning should be building up as you school them in the basics. This means proper diet and proper exercise. As far as diet is concerned, any major brand of dog meal will do well, with supplements to stimulate appetite or to fill a special needs of a particular dog. I feed Purina Meal (not the Chow), dry, in self feeders, and they do well regulating themselves. Occasionally I get a finicky eater and add things to stimulate appetite, or even Vitamin B12.

In conclusion, remember that the mental and physical requirements of a handler to put a top-flight racer on the track are greater than any other segment of the breed. Be willing to improvise according to each individual animal. Best of luck!