

# From Whelping Box To Finish Line

By Gregg Gammie

Photos by Gregg Gammie

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Are you interested in training your Whippet to race or lure course? This article is designed as a guide in the training of a Whippet to do just that. I have used these techniques with many Whippets of my own and those owned by others for about 30 years and these techniques have worked well with most Whippets; however, since I have been doing this for only about 30 years, I am still learning and listen whenever the talk turns to new methods of training. These techniques have also worked well on most of the non-Whippet sighthounds and I.G.'s with which I have worked over the years.

As a member of the Midwest Coursing Club in the '60s and '70s, when they held 50-dog sighthound sprint meets along with 50- to 60- dog National Point Race meets for years before lure coursing moved into the Midwest, I had the opportunity to help in training many breeds of sighthounds. I have used these techniques in training dogs to lure course over the years, and they work very well in producing a dog which is very keen on the lure and uninterested in fooling around with the other hounds while running. Leave out the starting box training if you are interested in lure coursing rather than racing.

## RACE TRAINING

One thing I have found out about training for lure coursing is that I get better results when I fully train a dog to the lure before exposing it to turns.

When turns are introduced too early, it seems to lead to less intensity on the lure which can result in cutting (anticipating the path of the lure) sooner than with dogs that are fully race trained, especially those which have raced in competition.

When possible, start lure training as soon as the pups can stand and walk properly, about four weeks of age. This is a chase game using a piece of string and a bit of cloth or fur pulled along in front of the pup so it chases the lure for a few feet. Let the pup catch the lure and play tug for a bit. Praise the puppy lavishly, letting it know how good it was to chase that little lure.

As your pup gets older sit on the floor and drag the fur or a sock in a circle around your body a couple of times, then let it catch the lure. Always remember to praise your puppy when it is chasing the lure and praise it some more when it catches the lure.

If you have a pup that shows little interest, keep trying, because they will catch on eventually. As an alternative, you can try doing the same things using two pups, which may help the less-interested pup catch on. Only do this until the less interested pup starts to chase the lure on its own. Chasing each other while chasing the lure, or playing while chasing the lure, is something that must be discouraged.

When the pups get to be about 12 to 15 weeks, start using a larger lure. An old cotton sock with a knot in it works very well. Mine have found out very quickly that only socks with knots are toys.

Continue using the "around the body" game, using the sock and/or a piece of fur. Only do one pup at a time. If you have more than one puppy at home, let the other watch. This will make it want to play the same game with you. This lure-chasing game is a game played only with you, not one played with other dogs. Remember to always let the pup catch the lure after a few rounds. That is its reward. Some playing with you, some tug-of-war, some savaging of the lure, lots of praise for a good run and a lure well caught. Do not EVER run your pup 'til it is so tired that it loses interest and quits. This is true at all stages of training. Quitting the lure is something you DO NOT want to teach.

Make it fun, make them tired, but always leave them wanting more lure chasing than they receive. When the pups leave home, have the new owners continue playing with their pup this way. Bringing out the chase instinct helps, whether it is for lures, dumbbells, Frisbees or balls. If you bring home your pup at this stage and it has had none of the above training then, GET STARTED! Just start at the beginning and soon you will have a pup that is chasing the lure with the best. It is never too late to start a dog chasing the lure. Once they get the hang of it, they enjoy it at every age.

Somewhere between eight and 18 weeks, depending on the pups maturity and how it responds to the indoor lure-chasing games, take it out to the backyard. Using a fishing pole with about 6 feet of string and a lure attached (a buggy whip or lunge line works well too), let it chase this lure around in a circle, with you standing in the center, getting dizzy as you swing it around. I prefer to use a cloth or fur lure because I think the dogs learn to chase quicker and are more interested in that type of lure, though many have had plastic strips work well for them.

When I brought Laddie home at eight or nine weeks old, I tried this after three days. He made one full circle and then killed the lure most effectively. We did one more circle, then stopped. That was plenty for one so young. Doing this three times a week is fine and once a day is good too. Do not let the pup get bored or too tired. As the pup gets older, lengthen the amount of running and the time between catching the lure. Give the puppy lots of love when they catch the lure and let them chew on it for a while.



When the pup catches the lure, take it away with a command. I use "GIVE" though anything you choose will work. When it gets the lure at a race meet or lure trial this can help make it easier (nothing makes it easy) to retrieve the lure from those tightly clamped jaws. Changing the direction the lure travels makes it harder to catch and helps teach the pup to make quick turns, to watch the lure at all times and helps increase their concentration on the lure. When they get to be about five months old, I will even take it airborne over their heads to change direction when necessary to get a few longer runs in before they catch it. They will love this play all their lives. I have used it to play with 10- to 14-year olds. They love it and it is a short run which does not overstress an old dog.

When the pup is following the lure with intensity, introduce it to the regular lure machine, usually between four and six months. The runs are kept short due to the pup's immaturity. Many short runs will build desire and keenness faster than fewer long runs. When starting an older dog, one to eight years old, make lots of 50- to 75- yard runs, perhaps eight or 10 in a day, rather than two or three 200 yard runs. These dogs almost always progress faster than dogs in which the owner insists on making full track runs each time. Remember, at the end of each run, the dog is getting praised for the good job it is doing and many praises are much more effective than one.

When doing the following, try to get the barking and lunging dogs away from the track, or take the pup well down the track away from them, so they don't frighten a young or shy pup. When the puppy chases the lure, don't bring the lure all the way back to where the noisy, lunging dogs are standing; they might frighten it away from the lure. Thus the pup will have been taught to be afraid of the lure, or the end of the race, and leave the lure or slow down near the finish line. If you ever want to find out what frustration is, have a dog that routinely leads its races by lengths but slows down with 50 yards left and finishes last.

When starting to train the pup with a regular lure and lure machine, the pup will not know what is going to happen, and you don't want the lure to just jump away from it and disappear. This will happen if you point the pup down the track, set the lure in front of it and start the lure. The following method solves this problem quite well. Take the pup and lure down the track about 50 yards and drop the lure. Then walk the pup back toward the lure machine about 10 feet. Standing three or four feet to the side of the lure line, have the pup face the lure line and remove its collar and leash. When you have control of the pup and you are ready, let

the lure operator know to start the lure. I usually wave with my free hand. Only "bump" the lure at first, to get the pup's attention ("Bumping" means to make it move a foot or so at a time). The lure operator should bring the lure past the pup slowly and the handler should let the pup go just as the lure passes the pup. The lure should be kept close to the pup so it thinks it can catch it. You do not want the pup to get discouraged and quit. I try to keep it about five feet in front of the pup, and sometimes less.

If the pup is very young, make this about a 10-yard run. If all goes well, the pup will chase the lure to the end and savage it. The catcher will play tug for a bit and praise the pup before taking the lure away from the pup. This is a good time to give the pup a treat. If the pup does not leave the owner (this is common with older, untrained or unsure dogs), then have a stranger release the dog and the owner catch.

Whomever the dog likes better should catch, so the pup is running toward security, not away from it. Remember to praise the dog each time it does it even partly right. Your puppy wants to please you and will repeat the behavior to get praised again. Even dogs who would not chase a lure for several sessions eventually got the idea using this technique and went on to become honest, intense racers.

Dogs also learn by watching, so have your inexperienced dog watch the other dogs run, both in groups and singly. I had a Whippet who had some lure training but no enthusiasm. He watched one full day of lure coursing, while my other Whippet ran his courses. During the last couple of runs of the day he suddenly stood up and started barking at the lure. He had finally gotten it, even though he seemed to be resting curled up in the shade of a chair most of the day. From that day on, he was one of the most enthusiastic dogs after a lure I have ever seen. He gave it his all in every race he ever ran and barked and carried on during every race he was not in because he wanted to run in that one, too.

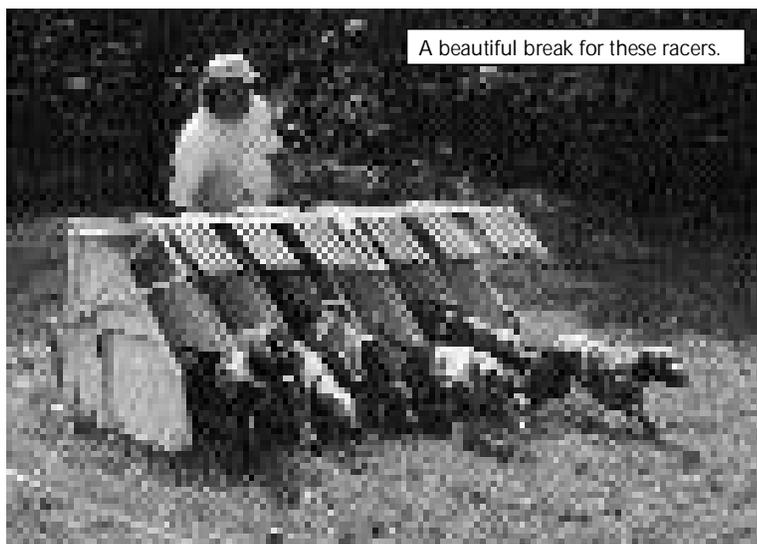
During this time, the pup is only run alone. Pups

frequently will want to play with other dogs, especially with other puppies. The track is not a place to play!

By the time a pup is six months old it should be able to make two 200-yard runs in one day and also two 50-yard runs. Sufficient rest is needed between the runs. During all this time, continue with the lunge line and indoor sock play. I never really stop with this, though its frequency does go down with age. Continue running the dog several short runs at each practice session with one full-length run at the end, so it learns that all runs are not ended in 50 yards. Once the pup is very intense on the lure, it is time to move on to the next phase of training.

### STARTING BOX

The starting box is a rather simple method of ensuring that all the dogs start at the same time. A starting box has six stalls a bit wider than the dogs,



though boxes used only for training may have less stalls. All starting boxes have a front door which will open all the stalls at once. The front door may be manually powered but most are spring powered. All doors are released manually after the lure is started by the lure operator. Each stall has a back door, which slides up and down, to let the dogs in and keep them from starting until the front door is opened.

Many pups are not mature enough at 6 months to start running with other dogs. To avoid the danger of introducing the pup to running with another dog before it is ready, choose this time to introduce a pup to the starting box. Many pups have been ruined for the track by running with another dog before they were ready, so play it safe.

When introducing any dog to the starting box, it

is best not to “stuff” them into the box. Shake the lure at them and open the gate. Though you may get a dog who breaks well from the box, it will be in spite of this type of training rather than because of it, and it is unlikely that your dog will go into the box willingly.

I think this is a better way: Leave the starting gate or front door open, and the back, loading side, door removed from the box. Place the dog at the back door and have the owner call the dog through the box.

After this is done several times and the dog is getting used to going through the box, introduce the lure to the procedure. Do this by holding the dog at the back of the box facing the hole with its head right at, or just inside the box. Have the lure shaken just on the other side of the box, then pulled by hand, and let the dog run through the box to catch the lure which is still moving. Play tug for a moment, give lots of praise and do it again. Repeat this several times.

Walk the dog into the box with the gate still open, and hold it by the collar. Pull the lure away from the front of the box and release the dog. When the puppy catches the lure, play tug for a moment, give lots of praise and do it again. Repeat this two or three times, then give the dog a rest and work with someone else for a while.

When you come back, repeat the last thing done once to refresh the dog’s memory. Then close the door (starting gate) on the box and have a handler walk the dog into the box. When the dog is all the way into the starting box, close the door behind it. At this point, the pup’s owner should already be down the track farther than the lure is going to travel. Have someone else shake the lure in front of the box to get the dog’s attention.

Pull the lure away from the box. Release the door while the lure is still moving. The dog will spring out of the box, usually look back at the starting box because of the noise it makes, then turn and chase the lure. With some dogs it may be necessary, the first time or two, for the owner to call the dog to get its attention away from the box and back on the lure. This is the reason the owner should be down the track a bit, not behind the box loading the dog.

Praise the dog when it catches the lure. Your pup did well! Much of the early “pass-through” training can be done at home with a cardboard box about the size of the starting box “hole” and your fishing pole with the lure attached. Placing a cardboard box in front of the door through which the Whippet must exit

and enter the house will help get it acclimated to going into the starting box. Thus they must go through it many times a day. This accustoms the dog to going into small closed spaces.

Those dogs that have some agility training have an advantage because they are accustomed to going through the tunnel. Doing a tunnel with a 90 degree, or greater, turn in it will get the dog used to going into areas that seem to be closed off with no way out. I did this with Laddie in his puppy obedience class and he was the easiest of my dogs to box-train. On the other hand, with some dogs no matter how you train or what you do, they will fight tooth and toenail to stay out of the box.

Don’t ever remove a young, partially trained dog from the back of the starting box. If you want them out, open the front gate and remove them. The back door is used only as a way in. The way out is through the front. Instilling this will greatly minimize the chance that your pup will turn around in the starting box, which they can do. No matter how big they are, they can still turn around in a starting box if they desire. I have seen many dogs turn around in the starting box the first time both doors were closed on them. The box operator must get them turned around facing the front of the starting box before it is opened. This is not always possible if the first time the dog is put into a starting box is at a race meet. They then back out of the box and, hopefully, turn around and run down the track after the lure. Sometimes they run around the box to their handler.

Now it is time to load the pup into the box. Close the front door. Load the dog through the back, then close the back door. Shake the lure at the front of the box and call the dog. If the dog has turned around in the box, do your best to have them turn around and face the front when the starting gate opens. Drop the lure in front of the dog; when he’s ready have the box operator signal the lure operator. The lure operator immediately starts the lure, so the dog does not turn around again, and the box operator opens the starting gate as soon as the lure twitches. Run the lure down the track 20 to 50 yards, then stop it. Catch the dog, play tug for a moment, praise it, then repeat the process. Do this three or four times. On the last run out of the box,



A frenzy for the lure at the end.

for this session, run the dog all the way to the end of the track.

If the dog is quite young, perhaps six or seven months, only run it to the 150 yard mark. After all, he’s already run quite a bit that day and you don’t want to overstress a young body. The next time the pup comes to practice, pass it through the box once, then load it into the box and make three or four fifty-yard runs. Next run it the whole length of the track two times.

Remember, many short runs will build intensity faster than a couple of long runs. Several breaks from the box help a dog learn to come out of the box ahead of everyone else better than a couple of breaks from the box. One of the reasons that short runs build intensity so fast is the extra praise, the catching and the savaging of the lure when it is caught. Don’t eliminate this. The catch is the pup’s reward for the run: **Let them have it.**

#### **MUZZLE TRAINING**

Now it is time to train the pup to run with a muzzle. If the pup is really on the lure, the muzzle will make no difference to it at all. However, many will fight the muzzle to varying extents while going down the track to the starting box.

When introducing the pup to the muzzle, put the muzzle on the pup at the starting box. As soon as the muzzle is on, load the pup into the box and run it. This gives it less time to react to having the muzzle on and establishes a positive correlation between the muzzle and chasing the lure. After several runs, muzzle the pup before going to the box, and have it walk down to the box with the muzzle on; this is required at race meets. When the run is finished,

take off the muzzle as soon as you have a leash on the pup. With a rag that you brought with you, not the club's expensive lure, play some tug with the pup, give him his reward for the run and praise him for a good job. Then get off the track so the next people can go up the track.

An alternative method, which has many adherents, is to put the muzzle on at home and during walks 'til the pup ignores the muzzle when it is being worn. Both methods work. I use the first method and find that my dogs get excited when they see the muzzle because it means they are going to race! Some will even try to put their face in the muzzle they are so eager.

Three sources of muzzles are:

1. The National Greyhound Association, P.O. Box 543, Abeline, KS 67410, phone (913) 263-4460.

The number five muzzle fits most 20 to 22.5 inch Whippets. These are leather muzzles with a white plastic front. They are quite sturdy and allow sufficient air for racing. They are hotter because they are more closed in than the plastic basket type. However, some dogs will break a plastic basket type at every meet or every time they wear one.

2. Sam and Sue Banks, P.O. Box 419, Mattaponi, VA 23110. Phone (804) 785-7208. e-mail: [ssbanks@inna.net](mailto:ssbanks@inna.net).

Sam & Sue sell the plastic basket type of muzzle. These supply lots of air, are cooler than leather types, and most dogs seem to resist wearing them less than the leather muzzles. Many dogs who fight the leather muzzles wear these without protest. Sam & Sue also sell leashes, collars and racing blankets.

3. Janet Stigum Trowbridge, 18105 NW 11th Ave., Ridgefield, WA. 98624. Phone (360) 887-4912. Janet carries both the plastic basket type of muzzle and the wire basket type. She also carries leashes, collars and artwork.

### **RUNNING WITH OTHER DOGS**

By this time, when your dog is on the track it should have its mind only on racing. The pup should be trained to the lure, muzzle trained and ready for the next phase of his training – running with another dog. The dog you start your pup running with must have certain characteristics which, in my mind, are absolutely not negotiable. These are: running absolutely clean with other dogs, NEVER interfering with another dog intentionally and dead keen on the lure. Nothing else matters when it is running. The dog should be about the same speed as the pup. This gives the pup maximum exposure to running with

another dog. If the other dog is much faster or slower, it is much like running alone.

This is a very important time in the pup's training. If it is run with a dog that interferes with the pup, one of four things will happen. At best, the pup will ignore the bump and continue after the lure. Worse, it will get spooked and hang back from the lure when other dogs are around. Sometimes you can retrain the dog but sometimes this behavior persists for life. The third thing possible is that the pup will retaliate and learn to intentionally interfere with the other dogs with whom it runs. This is very hard to train out of the dog. Number four is that it will figure that "IT'S PLAY TIME," and interfere with the other dogs in the race.

This is easier to correct with more running alone, but it slows down the pup's progress and leaves a question about whether the pup will run clean for many race meets. Some people have found that the first time a pup runs with another dog it can be startled if they are run from the starting box since the pup does not know the other dog is there. Make the first run with another dog from a hand slip rather than the starting box. One time is enough. After that, subsequent work should be done from the starting box. Run from the starting box several times the full 150, or 200 yards of the puppy distance, depending on the sponsoring organization. Assuming the pup runs clean with one competitor, run it with two dogs. Again, these must be absolutely honest dogs. Put one on each side of the pup, with an empty stall in between, and run them twice. Next, move up to three other dogs, again keeping an empty stall between the pup and the others. Run them two times.

Next, move the other dogs so there is no empty stall between the pup and the other dogs. When this has worked out satisfactorily, you can progress up to a full starting box. During this time it will prove harder and harder to find dogs the same speed as your pup. It is all right to mix faster and slower dogs with your pup at this time. This more closely resembles a real race and you can see how your pup handles the situation when dogs are in front of it and when it is passed.

At this point, I like to test my pups to be sure they will run clean when passed. I choose another dog which is faster than mine and hand slip them, with the faster dog slipped late so it has to catch up and pass. Watch very closely for head turning; this is OK if that is all the pup does. Moving over to bump the other dog, whether contact is made or not, must be corrected before the pup can run in competition. At this time you are not being a foul judge and applying the rules for disqualification, you are attempting to see if your pup is TRYING to commit a foul. Ask someone experienced to help you with this; it is very important. I also like to be sure that my pup will pass another dog and will set it up with



a dog that is slower and late slip the puppy so that it has a chance to pass the slower dog. If the pup does not pass, then we run alone and try again with a smaller head start for the slower dog. Eventually it will learn to pass the slower dog because it wants the lure too badly to hang back.

### **WHAT TO DO IF YOUR PUP FAILS AT ANY OF THESE STAGES**

Frequently a pup fails because it has been moved along too fast and was not ready to progress to the next step; i.e., it was not sufficiently on the lure. Return to running alone and work to increase intensity on the lure. This usually corrects the problem. There are some lines that seem to be genetically predisposed toward intentional interference; I had two dogs with this problem in years past.

Sometimes more work will help, and sometimes it will not. It is the first thing to try and should not be rejected until tried very thoroughly over a rather long period of time. With dogs that never seem to learn not to intentionally interfere, sometimes it will work to teach them that the price of interference is high by running them with a late slipped Greyhound. When it

tries to interfere, it will either bounce off or get run over. This can be a powerful deterrent. However, it will also spook some dogs so they never run a race again. Be very careful and aware of your dog's temperament before you try this one.

Also, it is much too extreme for any dog under one and one half or two years old, in my opinion. Shock collars can be used if the operator's timing is perfect. If timing is not perfect, then you may very well be punishing the dog for running clean. Generally the opinion of people I respect is that shock collars have ruined more dogs than they have saved. Another thing is that dogs learn rather quickly which collar gives it shocks and which do not and you cannot run a dog in a race meet with a shock collar, or a dummy shock collar. This may defeat the whole purpose of using it in the first place. Would I try it as a last resort? Yes, but only then. After all, the dog will not be able to race if it does not work and cannot race if it is not tried.

### GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

By now your pup will be about a year old and is ready to run with other puppies in the regular race meets.

Puppy "class" is eight-14 months old in the Whippet Racing Association (WRA) and may not enter a meet until eight months old. A Whippet can enter as an adult before it is 14 months old but it may never enter as a puppy again. When to enter a pup in its first meet will be dependent on its training and maturity. I have seen pups that were ready for meets at 8 months and others that were not ready at 14 months. Don't push a pup into a meet before it is ready. This can lead to an intimidated pup that does not pass or run near others, or one that interferes with the other dogs on the track.

WRA puppy races are four heats run at 150 yards (a heat or program is a set of races in which each entry runs one time). NAWRA runs pups three heats of 200 yards. Some owners prefer that the lure not be stopped until after the 200 yard line, so the pups do not get used to stopping at the 150 yard line. Unfortunately, this defeats the purpose of having the puppy finish line at 150 yards. Young pups are not mature enough yet to run the full 200-yard distance for four heats, though the 13- and 14-month old Whippets are.

Also, we do not want to overstress their bodies while they are still growing.

Run as many puppy meets as possible. Do not forget to praise your dog at the end of each race. It did well. Let it know! The pup will learn to break against others and to compete against its peers without getting blown away by more mature dogs. It will learn the program and build stamina while learning to run in traffic with meet stress, which is much different from practice days when everyone is more relaxed.

At the time a pup seems to have learned all it can from running with other pups (its speed has developed, its box-breaking ability has improved with the competition or it has reached 14 months old and you have no choice), it is time to move up to the adult races. However, if your puppy is not ready for adult races at 14 months then do not enter it. Only harm can come from that course of action.

Continue to practice with adults of all grades available and to run in meets. The pup will continue to learn how to come out of the box faster and to run with unknown dogs, with different running techniques, as it runs in various meets. It will get better at running in traffic as it gets more practice. It will learn to give just a bit extra as it comes to the finish line in order to stay ahead of the other dogs that are closing in on it. Yes, I really do believe they know the difference between winning and losing.

You should have seen my perpetual last-place dog prance the few times he actually crossed the line first. Everyone around could tell that he was

proud of himself. Always running with the same dogs in practice eventually stops teaching. They get used to each other and how they run together. You don't want your dog to get used to always being behind a certain dog. It may not pass the dog in a meet even if it can. I saw this with two grade A litter mates once. They always trained together as pups and the one always finished behind the other one. It was not until the bitch was retired that the dog showed his full potential; his times actually went down, and he became a meet winner.

There is no substitute for running in meets to bring a dog to its full potential. It is the only way to learn what is needed to run smart as well as fast. Fast and smart will almost always beat fast and not smart.

You will notice I have said nothing about conditioning. That is another topic. However, if your dog runs as much as this article indicates, it will be in pretty good shape, though maybe not perfect meet-winning shape.

Have fun training your puppy to run. You will both have a ball doing it, and there is nothing more fun than watching your well-trained dog chase a lure for all it is worth, win or lose.

And, DON'T FORGET TO PRAISE YOUR DOG EVERY TIME HE DOES WHAT YOU ASK!!!! This makes it more fun for both of you, and he will learn it more quickly and with more enthusiasm. Racing is supposed to be fun for both of you. **Be sure it is!**

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