

## GREYHOUND RACING IN TASMANIA – TIME FOR CHANGE

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### The Gittus incident

The head of Tasmania's greyhound adoption program was recently stood down from her role and suspended from racing dogs after pleading guilty to an animal doping related charge.

Susan Gittus is a licensed greyhound trainer and owner, as well as the co-ordinator of the state government-funded Greyhound Adoption Program. She pleaded guilty to racing her dog Fitzgerald Grant on August 13 while the prohibited substance *dehydronorketamine* was in its system. A stewards' inquiry heard evidence the positive urine test was a result of contaminated meat.

This incident raises a number of issues that have yet to be adequately addressed –by the industry, by the regulator, or by the government.

- The importance of comprehensive regulation of greyhound racing by an independent body with a formal and complete separation of the integrity and regulatory functions from the commercial functions.
- The need for transparent and readily-accessible information with respect to all aspects of the greyhound racing industry. This requires mandatory collection and publication of comprehensive lifecycle (birth to death records) and injury statistics, and the development of a life-long registration, identification, and traceability system for all greyhounds.
- Distressing revelations of live baiting through the 2017 ABC 4 Corners exposé focussed attention on widespread illegal behaviour across the industry nationally. At the time, we heard assurances from the Tasmanian industry that those things did not happen here. However, since then, repeated breaches of regulations by industry participants who should know better do not instil confidence in the industry's commitment to continuous improvement to improving standards of animal welfare or in the ability of the regulator to even enforce compliance with the rules as they exist now. (See notes below.)
- The need for meaningful penalties for breaches of regulations. The penalty awarded against Ms Gittus will not provide a deterrent to incentivise other trainers to do the right thing. An effective two month suspension for such egregious disregard of rules would be insufficient in deterrent in any case, let alone for offences committed by someone in such an important position of trust. Even worse, there are huge gaps in the regulatory framework that allow circumvention of even these inadequate penalties. (See notes below.)
- The need for transparent and arms-length management of the Greyhound Adoption Program. It is totally inappropriate for someone involved in the racing industry to be leading this important initiative. (See notes below.)

There has been no comment from the industry or the government about any intentions to address these issues – and that is simply unacceptable.

This incident also raises major questions about the industry's apparent acceptance of unregulated meat supplies. How can a leading industry figure seemingly turn a blind eye to the risks on multiple levels of using 'unregulated' (ie illegally processed) meat? What was the meat in question – is it illegally slaughtered horse meat? Where was this meat sourced? How was the meat contaminated by doping chemicals? What is the prevalence of use of such products in the industry? Who is being held accountable? The Minister for Primary Industries, Guy Barnett, as assured us that an inquiry into these matters is underway, and we'll await the outcome with interest.

RSPCA Tasmania believes that this latest scandal demonstrates beyond a reasonable doubt that attitudes in the industry are not reflective of expectations within the general community - and it

should be the catalyst to put a timeline at the very least of phasing out public funding for this industry.

### **The need for penalties with teeth**

Anthony Bullock is said to be Tasmania's leading greyhound trainer, and he has won the Tasmanian trainers' premiership 11 times in the past 12 seasons. However, in a textbook case of mixed messaging, in 2017 Bullock was convicted and fined for racing a dog that returned a positive arsenic swab.

In 2019, a well-known trainer became the first person in any Tasmanian racing code to receive a lifetime ban after he was convicted of using a wallaby skin to entice greyhounds to jump from the starting box during training. Also in 2019, another trainer was convicted of doping.

The recent Gittus incident simply reinforces the perception of continued poor behaviour.

As a result of this offence, Gittus was suspended from her role at the Greyhound Adoption Program. However, the scope and duration of this suspension is not clear. How long is the suspension? Is it without pay? What is the process for review of her suitability to hold this role following this breach of not just trust, but also the law?

Ms Gittus' racing licence was suspended by the Office of Racing Integrity for six months, with four months of the penalty suspended on condition she commits no further breach for 12 months. In other words, the effective extent of the penalty was a two month suspension from racing greyhounds in her care and control.

In determining Ms Gittus' penalty, the racing stewards took into account her guilty plea, co-operation, her "clean offence record", and the "possibility that the positive sample was due to a contamination in meat supplies" and "the purchase of unregulated meat".

Further investigation into these official penalties show that these are the equivalent of a slap on the wrist with a limp lettuce leaf.

Penalties for these breaches were made public on October 18. At that time, according to information available on the Tasracing website, Susan Gittus was registered as the trainer (and, in most cases, the owner) of seventeen dogs. On October 19, she transferred responsibility for these dogs to a family member (Nathan Gittus).

In other words, it is business as usual for the Gittus kennel operation – and the only penalty suffered by Ms Gittus was the need to fill in some forms.

On further investigation, it becomes clear that even this slap on the wrist was of no import.

According to the Tasracing website, many of these dogs were listed to race at Hobart on October 29. When entries for dogs registered for these events are checked, Nathan Gittus is shown as the owner. However, if the records for individual dogs are inspected, Susan Gittus is still recorded as the owner/trainer.

This is how the industry has always operated. If an individual is convicted of an offence and subject to a racing ban, they simply go through a charade of transferring any dogs registered in their names. The dogs continue to run. Nothing changes.

As it stands, under current regulations, this is perfectly legal. However, it is not acceptable under any standards of ethical behaviour.

### **The Greyhound Adoption Program**

The Greyhound Adoption Program (GAP) is a non-profit program operated by Tasracing with considerable funding from the state government. The aim of the program is to find loving for-ever homes for these beautiful dogs if they don't make the grade as racers, or when they retire from racing.

Sounds like a great outcome, doesn't it?

However, the manager of the GAP is a greyhound owner and trainer, with many of her own dogs in the program.

What could possibly go wrong?

The analogy of poacher and gamekeeper is what comes to mind. So it came as little surprise to many when the manager of the GAP was suspended when some of her racing dogs were found to be doped.

These close ties between industry and the GAP simply don't pass the pub test.

If the program is to have any credibility, it must be run at arm's length from the industry, ideally by an organisation experienced in contemporary animal welfare, with a state-wide presence, and a network of volunteers and foster carers.

There also needs to be greater transparency around both the operation of the program and the actual metrics of the industry itself.

According to recent media reports, the GAP received a record \$467,000 in government funding last financial year. However, the period of this funding grant is not readily apparent – is the funding provided annually, over a 3 year period, or on some other basis?

There is little readily accessible data about the number and life cycle of dogs in the industry. From the information available in the public arena, it is hard to identify how many dogs are registered but not currently racing, how many retire each year, and how many are not deemed suitable for racing.

According to government reports, during 2018/19 there were 790 active registered racing dogs and 330 puppies were added to the stock. Ninety greyhounds were euthanised in Tasmania, down from 678 in 2015/16.

Those same media reports indicate that 137 greyhounds were rehomed in the last financial year, up from 89 the previous year. However, earlier this year, Racing Minister Jane Howlett cited figures which look different. She said 18 greyhounds had found new homes in a month through GAP, which was double the monthly average. She said GAP had a goal of re-homing more than 150 greyhounds annually. Yet, according to other official figures, 224 greyhounds were rehomed in 2018/19, 212 in 2017/18, and 272 in 2016/17.

Why is there no official set of figures to show how much funding this program received, what the agreed KPIs are, and how it is performing? On what basis could a reduced adoption target be justified? And where are the missing dogs?

Some animal welfare commentators believe that owners handpick dogs with the traits required for racing and dispose of those who do not. Where are the unwanted puppies? It was only very recently that the Tasmanian government paid the industry to breed puppies, with no tracking of what happened to the dogs.

Without comprehensive and consistent information, it is not possible to develop a clear picture of the number of greyhounds in the Tasmanian racing industry and therefore understand the number of greyhounds that might be eligible for GAP and whether or not the program is meeting either its targets or community expectations.

Experienced shelter managers also have many questions about the credibility of the GAP as a rehoming program, because it has some very peculiar processes. Dogs that are still racing are listed on the site, even though they are clearly unavailable for rehoming. This takes up places for dogs that could be rehomed after rehabilitation from illness or injury. Dogs are awaiting assessment for too long, with no clarity around either the basis of the assessment or the qualifications or experience of those undertaking the assessments. There are still hundreds of dogs dying from illness or injury or being euthanised for behavioural reasons.

We've been advised by some greyhound owners that they have been unable to place dogs in the program. Yet there seem to be very few dogs making it through the program to adoption. Over the past few weeks, there have been only two dogs available.

And rehoming these dogs seems to be inordinately expensive in comparison to the costs incurred for adoption programs in other reputable organisations – even taking into account the special needs of transitioning and socialising these dogs.

The government must firmly demonstrate its commitment to the independence of the GAP program by immediately appointing RSPCA Tasmania as managers.

RSPCA Tasmania is already contracted to deliver services to the Tasmanian government through the animal welfare Inspectorate. We respond to thousands of calls a year and prosecute animal cruelty cases; we are at arm's length from the Office of Racing Integrity and Tasracing; we have experienced, trained staff; and we have a state-wide network of experienced foster carers, with a foster care/volunteer manager overseeing this program.

This means that we have capacity to move immediately to restore community support for the Greyhound Adoption Program.

### **Public funding for racing in Tasmania**

The RSPCA does not support public funding for the racing industry.

More than \$30 million a year is funnelled from Tasmanian taxpayers to support what is supposedly a sport.

We understand the commitments made by the Tasmanian government under the 20-year funding arrangements put in place after the sale of the TOTE. We also note that the agreement sets the annual rate of increase in funding to the racing industry at half the rate of CPI, which is currently c2% pa. There would thus seem no justification for the recently announced annual increase of 6%.

It is hard to understand how such increases can be justified in a time when essential public services are facing funding freezes and even cutbacks. This of course begs the question as to why the racing industry benefits from such generous levels of government support at all.

Racing supporters claim the industry provides employment for hundreds of people, but it is more than reasonable to question why it cannot stand on its own feet. Taxpayers have every right to be concerned at the apparent lack of any plan to make the industry sustainable. They also have the right to expect improved animal welfare outcomes and increasing standards of industry accountability and transparency in return for these levels of public funding. Yet evidence would seem to indicate that poor attitudes to animal welfare remain entrenched in the racing industry.

Our world is changing – and community attitudes to acceptable behaviours are also changing. Activities involving human-animal relationships, especially when animals are used for entertainment, will have to move with these changes.

It is our view that public funding of the racing industry should sunset with the expiry of the TOTE agreement in 2029, and the racing industry needs to be planning for an orderly transition to self-sufficiency at that time.

### **RSPCA position on greyhound racing**

The RSPCA believes that there are significant and entrenched animal welfare problems inherent in the greyhound racing industry. These include problems with over-supply, injuries, physical overexertion, inadequate housing, lack of socialisation and environmental enrichment, training,

illegal live baiting, administration of banned or unregistered substances, export and the fate of unwanted greyhounds (high wastage and high euthanasia rates).

Until all of these problems are recognised and effectively resolved, the RSPCA does not support greyhound racing.

And we're not alone in this view.

Greyhound racing for gambling is legal in only 7 of the world's 195 countries, and professional greyhound racing is only legal in five American states.

Where greyhound racing continues to be conducted, the RSPCA advocates the following:

- The comprehensive regulation of greyhound racing by an independent body with a formal and complete separation of the integrity and regulatory functions from the commercial functions.
- The adoption of compulsory and enforced animal welfare standards for greyhounds at all life stages to eliminate practices that cause injury, pain, suffering or distress and ensure all greyhounds have a good quality of life.
- The adoption of formal processes to address over-supply and wastage rates, including should be an expectation and formal processes in place within the industry to ensure that greyhounds will be rehomed as a companion animals on retirement and that provisions are made to ensure their welfare at all stages of their lives.
- The mandatory collection and publication of comprehensive lifecycle (birth to death records) and injury statistics and the development of a national identification and traceability system for all greyhounds to ensure each greyhound born is accounted for.