

HISTORY OF THE HEALESVILLE GREYHOUND RACING CLUB

The Healesville Greyhound Association (HGA) was established in 1979 after a public meeting organised by the Shire of Healesville and some local greyhound enthusiasts.

The HGA had developed following the failure of the Yarra Valley and Districts Association to gain a licence to race at the established racing and harness venue at Yarra Glen.

Healesville, like Mildura, had been unsuccessful in gaining one of the four available licences following the Board's study in the late 1960s. The failure of Healesville was put down to a lack of facilities to complement the 70-acre site purchased on Don Road through a most supportive Shire President, Gary Cooper.

The HGA had originally wanted to put a grass track inside the Yarra Glen Racecourse after the Yarra Glen Shire gave the HGA the land. The opportunity to build the straight track they had always wanted was too good to turn down.



With the assistance of Des Lindsay, Harold Brown, Tony Marraffa, Rod Parnell, Peter Wishart and members of the Patterson, Thorneycroft, Duddy and Cowman families, funds were raised through street stalls and bingo to enable work to start on the track. The Sandown Greyhound Racing Club donated assorted pieces of plant and equipment, including their old broadcasters' box and timing device, which assisted the fledgling Club immensely.

A grass track with an uphill climb was constructed with the help of the Shire of Healesville and expertise of the Commonwealth Scientific Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO). To make viewing easier, an electric Bramich lure was installed on the right-hand side of the track. This was a source of constant irritation to local identity Des Lindsay who was frequently in conflict with club, especially over the Bramich lure and which side of the track it should be on.

The lure has now been positioned on the left-hand side of the track. Former Chairman Gary Thorneycroft believed that that set-up was the right way to go as it makes the greyhounds fan across the track as distinct from going to the left as with all other tracks.

Like many clubs, Healesville was built with volunteer labour supplied by the Committee and club members.

The Thorneycroft family has a long history with the Club. Gary has been a long serving member of the club first joining the committee in 1982 and was President for stints on two separate occasions. Both his father, Ron, and his late brother, Rod, had been involved since 1982 when his mother, Margaret running the canteen from a caravan.

After conducting a number of picnic meetings the Club was granted permission to hold official coursing meetings during 1988. In 1989 the GRCB issued a licence for the Healesville Greyhound Association to conduct eight non-TAB meetings per year.

The late Ken Carr and the Mayor of Healesville officially opened the track in November 1989 and Eureka Man won the first Cup, which was held in 1990. With financial support from GRV, the Bramich Lure was updated, and a new rail was located on the left-hand side of the track in 2000. During 2002 some major drainage works were undertaken which was to enable Healesville to offer great racing all year round.



The decision to restrict Healesville providing a constant greyhound racing facility in what was known as "the North East Quadrant" did not faze the Healesville administration. With the assistance of fund raising organised by Pauline Patterson the Club was able to prove its viability without Development Board or GRCB contributions and was granted a restricted licence of fifteen meetings, which like Robinvale (now closed) was later increased to 26. This figure has now grown to the present-day fixtures of Sunday's, Friday's, and alternate Monday's. The club is in good shape being able to field 10 - 12 races at each of their meetings, often with more greyhounds nominating than can be raced. Before the emphasis was on "picnic races", the track had operated as a trial track on Friday nights often running as many as 80 - 90 trials each week. Picnic races were designed to increase opportunities for lower class greyhounds and for the smaller greyhound trainer.

To begin with, it was bingo nights and the trial fees that generated income to build the toilet block, the kennels and the canteen. Soon the GRCB began putting money in for track upgrades and lures.

Healesville is unique in the Victorian track racing scene in that it was the only track racing on grass and for a while, the only one at which the greyhounds pursued a Bramich lure which started from the front of the boxes. By perfecting the "in front" start (Healesville returned the animal to his natural law of chasing by vision, which had been the greyhound's predilection for many thousands of years.)

It is also the only straight racing track in Victoria. Straight racing on grass and later loam (2011) not only produces clean injury-free competition but also provides a facility for better betting confidence.

The track has always aimed at the small owner's, but a lot of bigger trainers will sometimes use the track to trial a greyhound.

Many owners would race at Healesville on Saturday and then at Warragul mid-week and owners will travel from Bendigo, Geelong and even from Sydney for the Healesville Cup.



Coursing greyhounds also come to race on the straight before the coursing season. In addition, the afternoon picnic format had proved popular with 10 - 12 races with 6 - 8 greyhounds attracting crowds of around 200. The club was entirely run on volunteer labour, except on race days when they were paid.

However, there was a great need for a new judging box and lure driver as the old box was a present from Sandown when the club first started.

Gary Thorneycroft recognizes the great support that Geoff "Smokey" Dawson, the Sandown President and John Stephens, the GRV CEO, provided to Healesville in those early days. The facilities including the 2009 upgrade of the judging box and lure driving facility have improved over time.



From the latter part of 2007 there was an on-course TAB facility for 6 - 8 meetings a year. Bookie numbers have dropped to zero from the original four with Gary Thomas the last to field at Healesville and he did so for over 20 years.

The major advancement for the club was when after many years of lobbying Healesville was granted off-course TAB and SKY Channel coverage on

Sunday the 10th of October 2010. SKY brought strong cash flows to the club in a betting slot on Sundays once vacant. The club had taken the risk some years before of losing its Saturday afternoon timeslot. While Sunday mornings brought the club an interesting new opportunity of reaching the early bird punters.

The club has an interesting demographic with many of the staff being very young, some of whom own greyhounds or have parents who do. Many of the staff started out catching greyhounds after the races. Most trainers will only bring one greyhound and the big trainers will not be there adding to the hobby owner family atmosphere of the club.



Gary Thorneycroft and the committee had a strong sense of the need to establish the club within the local community and to build links to other sporting clubs. They held a rodeo in conjunction with the pony club, the local football club has used the ground to train juniors and there is an annual cricket match between the Greyhound Club and the Healesville cricket club.

Being located in a multi- purpose complex has advantages for the club. Spectators and players alike often come over at half time or after a match for a bet when the races are on.

The HGA also holds social events like bucks and hen's parties and begun approaching local retirement villages and giving them free passes for the seniors and carers. Family members of the senior citizens tend to come along as well, as a day at the greyhounds adds interest to a visit to an aging relative. The club is also part of the Great Chase events, the state-wide competition for greyhounds racing for local disability groups.

The strong community focus is also combined with a strong tourism focus on combined event with wineries, the Healesville Sanctuary, horse races and the development of weekend packages supported by strong word of mouth. One interesting development is the growing popularity of the club with tourists from Ireland where coursing has a huge following.



A regular voice we hear calling races at Healesville is Australia's only female racecaller Victoria Shaw. A trailblazer in the unique area of expertise Victoria loves Greyhound Racing and the opportunity's it has afforded her in the pursuit of the craft. Likewise, Victoria's current leading Greyhound caller James Van de Maat got his start at Healesville calling one or two races on a Saturday afternoon as a 14-year-old. A local resident Van de Maat and his wife Chloe also enjoy breeding and training the long tails. His passion, talent, and popularity within the ranks of the sport has served him well in becoming one of the best callers in the nation.

The Healesville club has not been without its administration problems over the recent years and although it has had successful full-time managers since 2007 it was forced into voluntary administration in 2016. That function was carried out by the GRV until mid-2017, when the Sandown club took over the management of the club, the arrangement was for a two-year period and will cease at the end of June 2020. Healesville will continue to hold an important place on the Greyhound Racing scene in Victoria particularly nowadays with a greater emphasis on safe track racing.

Club Presidents: Andrew Brown 1984-1985, John Smolling 1985-1987, Geoff Duddy 1987-1990, Tony Marraffa 1990-1994, John Murphy 2002-2004, Greg Hyde 2005, Gary Thorneycroft 2005-2008, Matthew Clark 2008, Gary Thorneycroft 2009, Matthew Clark 2010, Michelle Labahn 2011-1012 and Paul Jones 2013-2015. 2016 onwards the club has been under Administration.



Fun Facts.

Healesville is the only track in Australia to have raced with the lure on the left-hand side of the track, and on the right-side of the track also for a period of time the lure started from in front of the boxes and didn't come from behind. The club has raced on Grass and Loam and is one of few clubs in Australia that has had race meetings cancelled due ice formed on the lure rail.

The first Healesville Cup held in 1990 was won by superstar performer Eureka Man. Raced by local club identity the late Ken Patterson and his wife Pauline the couple were tireless workers for their local club over many, many years. There would be no doubt Eureka Man is the best greyhound in history to race from the Healesville area. He was judged the Victorian Greyhound of the Year in 1990 and won the Maturity, Cranbourne Cup and a Grafton Cup. He won in four states and made 19 feature finals. From 87 starts he won 44 times and was placed on 20 occasions, winning \$103,000 in prizemoney. Patterson paid \$1500 for him from the back of a Caravan at the Grafton Carnival, he had only raced the once for a second. His only visual fault was a crooked tail.