

Heartbreak at 45 MPH

Scenes from the life of a racing greyhound.

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C. Stiles



Greyhounds race from 18 months old until they're 4 or 5. After that, the industry no longer needs them.



Michelle Weaver likes to deliver all the adopted greyhounds herself.

C. Stiles



Joe Trudden says he gives every dog a dip in the whirlpool after each race.



Tracks such as Mar di Gras are required to race dogs at least 100 days of the year in order to keep their

A deep, scratchy voice announces their presence over the loudspeaker. "Heeeere comes Hollywood!" The gates open, and eight muzzled greyhounds spring forth in a speedy, thundering mass of bobbing fur, each wearing a brightly colored, numbered jersey. Tiny puffs of dirt follow their sinewy legs. This is the seventh race of the night at Mardi Gras Racetrack and Gaming Center in Hallandale Beach, the highest-paying dog track in Florida. It's August 19, 2006. The race begins at 9:23 p.m. At 9:24, the audience will witness something horrid.

The dogs set off sprinting around an oval-shaped dirt track, chasing a loud, buzzing mechanical lure. The lure is attached to a metal arm speeding along the inside edge of the track. Like bulls who see the flick of a matador's cape, the dogs lunge madly after the lure. Greyhounds can hit 45 miles per hour in just two steps, but the lure always stays just out of their reach.

A sleek, shiny, black 2-year-old wearing a red jersey with a white "5" on it — his name is BB's Story Book, but in racing parlance, he is simply "the five" — is quick out of the box. A few strides into the race, however, the six dog nudges Story Book inside. Then the eight bumps him again. This time, Story Book struggles back, running neck and neck with the eight. As the dogs lean left into a turn, Story Book's hind legs slip. There's a cloud of dust. Story Book is sucked under the eight. The eight stumbles but recovers, hurrying off to catch the pack. Story Book, however, rolls out of the picture.

The announcer says matter-of-factly, "Going down, that was the five."

As the rest of the dogs continue around the track, Story Book rolls to a stop deep in the first turn. He stands back up, dizzy and weak. He can still hear the mechanical lure buzzing around the track. Then, with that amazing greyhound eyesight, he spots it.

The three dog is in the lead, just entering the final turn, when the announcer realizes what's about to happen. "Get the five!" he commands. Then again, with an added degree of disgust: "Get the *five!*"

lucrative slot machines and poker rooms.



Subject(s):

[racing greyhounds](#), [South Florida](#)

Still mixed up from his fall, Story Book sees the lure making its way back around the track. Now it's on the straightaway coming toward him. He takes off at full speed — in the wrong direction.

This is a no-win situation. If the lure operator stops the arm, the seven dogs following behind it will collide in a terrifying pile of snapped bones and broken necks; if he doesn't, it will drive right through the fragile body of the dazed, 73-pound black dog.

The lure doesn't stop.

The bar hits Story Book at the collarbone, shattering his chest and bending each leg in a new, unnatural direction. Knocked end over end, the dog lands on his back. He lies there

convulsing in front of the grandstand. The other dogs barely dodge Story Book's flailing body. The announcer lets out an abhorred grunt.

As I watch video of the tragic race, I notice that Story Book has a white belly and white feet, just like my newly adopted greyhound — who raced on the very same track just a few months after this incident. Jailamony (her racing name) is 4 years old. She is sweet and revels in human affection. But there are constant reminders of her racing life: missing teeth, patches of missing fur (called "kennel butt"), a tattoos in her ear, and a noticeable limp.

The longer Jailamony lives with me, the more questions I have: What were her racing days like? What happened to the other dogs from her litter? And what *really* happens to greyhounds that aren't adopted when they're done racing?

To answer my questions, I visited my dog's old track. I spoke with industry veterans and racing opponents. And I ventured where reporters rarely tread — inside the heavily secured compound known as the Florida Kennels.

Florida, with the majority of breeding farms and nearly half the tracks in the country, is the epicenter of dog racing. Although a well-organized antiracing lobby now has its sights set on the Sunshine State, it's hard to tell if legislative efforts are hastening or hindering the end of this moribund industry.

When I answer the front door, I'm greeted by 60 pounds of twitchy curiosity waiting to come inside. Jailamony has a sleek, shiny, black coat with a white chest, what look like little white socks, and a matching white tip at the end of her wagging tail. She's all muscle, ribs, and light-stepping legs, like a pony. She wiggles through the door, eager to sniff every square foot of my small, two-story apartment.

When my girlfriend and I visited the Friends of Greyhounds (friendsofgreyhounds.org) adoption kennel in Hialeah, we saw Jailamony pressing her face against the inside of her cage. Workers told us black dogs don't get adopted as often because some people think they might be evil. Jailamony gave us big take-me-home eyes, and when kennel staff tried to put her back in her crate, she hid behind my girlfriend's legs.

We adopted her in March, on her fourth birthday.

Moments after being personally delivered to my house by Michelle Weaver, president of the adoption agency, Jailamony discovers the stuffed chipmunk we had waiting for her. She prances around the

furniture with it dangling from her mouth. Her tail whacks everything. She has never lived outside of a kennel. The stairs completely confound her — she figures out how to go up, but once at the top, she peers down, befuddled by the steep, carpeted obstacle before her.

"You're gonna change her name, right?" Weaver asks.

"We haven't really decided yet," I say. "Jailamony really is a horrible-sounding name, though."

Cute as she is, Jailamony bears inescapable remnants from her mysterious past as a racer. In addition to the missing teeth and fur, both ears are marked with faded, green tattoos. The left ear has a series of numbers, and the right reads: "ESV." Weaver explains that it was supposed to say 35A, since Jailamony was the first, or A, puppy tattooed in a litter "whelped" (born) in March 2005 (3/5). "Sometimes [trainers] get nice and drunk before they tattoo the dogs," she says, "and the first one gets screwed up like this."

Then there's Jailamony's right hind leg. It swings out awkwardly from her otherwise sleek, graceful gait. At the bottom of the hoc (the equivalent of a human calf) is a hard bulb of bone. In her last race, I learn, she broke her hoc and the bone had been set at the track. Jailamony never puts that foot straight down, and when she squats, her leg shakes.

Greyhounds are sight hounds; Jailamony can see a black cat in the dark at 300 yards. They were first brought to the United States in the mid-1800s to help farmers control the jackrabbit population. They've been bred for thousands of years for speed, beauty, and the gentle demeanor that makes them great pets. Ancient Egyptians considered them royalty. Arabs admired them so much that they were the only dog permitted to sleep in tents and ride atop camels. Greyhounds are the only breed mentioned by name in the Bible (Proverbs 30:29-31). In medieval England, the law permitted only noblemen to own greyhounds.

So seeing one of these magnificent creatures limping around my living room, I wonder about their lives as professional athletes. What did my dog go through before she came to me? The question haunts me, and the answer seems unknowable — like wondering about the past dalliances of someone you love.

Long before spring break — before professional football, basketball, baseball, or ice hockey; before slot machines, card rooms, and cruises to nowhere; before most of the cities in South Florida were even incorporated — there was dog racing. The dog tracks were as synonymous with Florida as fat men in floral print shirts.

The first track in the country opened in Hialeah in 1926. By the '30s and '40s, dog racing was South Florida's top tourist attraction. Every night, the grandstands were packed with young and old, rich and poor. Greyhound racing was the shared pastime in a land devoid of Babe Ruths and Joe DiMaggios.

And racing made a lot of people rich. After purchasing the Pittsburgh Steelers with money he won betting on horses, Art Rooney purchased the Palm Beach Kennel Club in 1970. His grandson, Pat Rooney Jr., remains managing director of the track, and Pat's brother Tom is a U.S. representative from nearby Tequesta.

Over time, however, the industry began to develop a backlash. Stories began trickling out about dogs being killed if they weren't fast enough. There were rumors that trainers dumped slow greyhounds in oceans and swamps to be eaten by sharks and gators. In the '80s and '90s, the debate was over the use of live lures, such as rabbits, which have since been banned.

An Arizona woman named Joan Eidinger has tried to collect every published report of greyhound abuse over the past 15 years. In the *Greyhound Network News* — a quarterly newsletter she

publishes — the headlines are horrifying: Three racing dogs found dead at a Daytona Kennel, seven greyhounds die from extreme heat in Arkansas, Iowa hauler accident kills five greyhounds, 17 dogs die of smoke inhalation in Naples. There are stories of respiratory infections and equine influenza. One article tells of a thousand Wisconsin racing greyhounds sold to a cardiac research lab. Using industry breeding numbers, Eidinger estimates that between 1986 and 2006, about 600,000 greyhounds were killed — about 80 every day.

Antiracing groups like Massachusetts-based Grey2K USA point to these sorts of atrocities when they call for states like Florida to ban greyhound racing. Working with local organizations like the Fort Lauderdale-based Animal Rights Foundation of Florida, activists lobby legislators, take out antiracing ads in newspapers near tracks, and post videos of incidents like Story Book's on the Internet.

The campaign seems to be working. A ballot measure in the 2008 election will end greyhound racing in Massachusetts. In the past five years, 15 tracks nationwide have either shut down completely or ended live racing.

Bring on the industry's demise, says Grey2K President Christine Dorchak. When I call to get her perspective on the industry, Dorchak rattles off a litany of greyhound racing's alleged offenses: "[Trainers] feed them grade-D meat. The dogs don't have access to dental work. They get the bare minimum medicine and medical treatment, if they're lucky. And they suffer industrialized confinement in these standardized cages for up to 22 hours a day. "One thing about greyhounds, they aren't likely to die of old age."

When dogs turn 4 or 5 and are finished racing, she claims, "It's more cost-efficient for trainers and owners to kill a dog than to house and feed it."

Pro-racing folks balk at that claim, saying that today, most greyhounds are humanely retired, not killed. But in 2002, Alabama investigators found the bodies of thousands of dead greyhounds on the property of 68-year-old Robert Rhodes, a part-time security guard at a track in Pensacola. Rhodes admitted using a .22 caliber rifle to shoot more than 2,000 dogs from all over Florida during the 20 years he worked at the track. He was paid \$10 per dog, which he said covered the cost of digging the holes across his 18-acre property. Investigators called the graveyard "a Dachau for dogs."

All across the open room, grown men are shouting at television sets. "Come on, Two! Move your ass, Two!" The betting parlor at the Mardi Gras racetrack consists of a long line of TV screens simulcasting races from most of the 13 tracks in the state, plus a row of betting machines and cashier windows. Quiet, white-haired men in polyester pants and mismatched jackets from the '70s sit at Formica tables, clenching handfuls of betting tickets. A group of men in their 40s — the youngest in the room — prefer to stand. A few businessmen, still donning the shiny shoes and pressed slacks they wore to the office, wait impatiently as the dogs they've bet on are loaded into starting boxes in Daytona, Jacksonville, West Palm Beach. Collectively, these men — or the soft, folded American bills they're handing over — are the lifeblood of the industry.

The scene is a far cry from the racing's heyday. Even now, on a "busy" Friday night, only about 200 men (and virtually no women) are here to watch the greyhounds. The throngs of humanity around the slot machines and poker tables dwarf the dog-betting crowd.

By the time I march up to the offices to interview the director of dog racing at Mardi Gras, I've heard so many horrific details about the industry, I'm wondering how these people can sleep at night.

But when I meet Aldo Leone, he is no monster. He's a mild, friendly man with short hair, an easy smile, and a slight New England accent. His office is small, and the wood-paneled walls are covered with paintings of greyhounds. He tells me he got into the business as a lead-out (the track employee

who walks the dog from the paddock to the gate) in Hollywood when he was 16. He's 46 now. It was just a job when he started, but he fell in love with the dogs.

Leone says "radical animal rights groups" like Grey2K take rare incidents out of context and sensationalize them to scare people away from a family-friendly industry. "They'll tell you the dogs don't like it, that they're being abused. They want to shut these tracks down, but they don't realize they'll just be putting more dogs out on the street." If not for racing, he says, the breed probably would have died out centuries ago.

"But aren't thousands of dogs euthanized every year?" I ask.

Leone says that the antiracing groups' breeding figures are "ridiculous." He says that 98 percent of racing dogs are adopted out and that the other 2 percent return to breeding farms. "Retired greyhounds are very popular. As you probably know, they make great pets." Then, without a hint of irony, he adds, "They're becoming a commodity."

Leone says that because Mardi Gras is the top track in the state, the dogs who can't make it here "grade off" to other tracks, like being sent down from the big leagues to a farm team. Although I'd spoken to a former track veterinarian who told me he treated about one broken bone per week, Leone says that injuries occur at a rate of "less than one a month" and that most are "minor, one dog stepping on another's foot, that sort of thing."

And that incident with BB's Story Book? Leone says that night was the only time he's seen an accident with the lure. "That was a terrible thing," he says. He stares out his office window. The sun is setting on the track. "Nobody ever wants to see that."

Before leaving the track, I walk through the trainer's area behind the paddock. There are at least a dozen pickup trucks, each with a load of barking dogs waiting to go back to the kennel, 15 miles away in Hialeah.

A thin man with a mustache and dark-brown hair parted on the side — the old-fashioned way — walks a panting, exhausted brindled dog. The dog has just come in third, earning roughly \$80 that will be split between the trainer and owner. The man hoses him off and walks him through a cooling pool.

This is Joe Trudden, a trainer and the owner of Tru-Paws Kennels. He wears a polo tucked into his unbelted Levi's. He tells me that if I want the truth about racing, I can go to the compound to see his kennel.

"Come see for yourself if you think these dogs are being abused," he says.

I show up unannounced on a Sunday morning at the massive, gated compound called the Florida Kennels, which includes Tru-Paws. The 70-acre plot consists of about 50 buildings able to house 50 to 100 dogs each (there are around 2,000 dogs total), a full-sized practice track, and several fenced sprinting runs.

All the dogs running at Flagler Dog Track and Entertainment Center or Mardi Gras are kept here. Outsiders — especially reporters — are not welcome on the compound, but Trudden gets me past the security guards at the gate.

Trudden is just finishing preparation of the dogs' food. He starts with 75 pounds of raw meat, which comes in giant blocks labeled: NOT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION. Trudden adds the contents of a tall, industrial pot that's been simmering on the small stove at the front of his building. It's got chicken broth, some carrots, a few different kinds of pasta, and rice. He mixes it all together with his bare

hands.

To the food concoction, he adds a few small scoops of powdered Gatorade "to build their electrolytes." He scoops the mixture into silver bowls and weighs them. Then he adds a large scoop of a standard grain dog food. Before he hands out the bowls to the dogs in their crates, he squirts some with pancake syrup, "in case they have low glucose." He has a bottle of Tums handy in case he suspects one of the dogs has a bellyache.

"There's nobody who loves these dogs more than we do," he tells me. "I feel like I have 60 pets."

Trudden asks me how often I've taken my dog to the vet since I've had her.

Once.

"Well, these dogs each see a vet twice a week." He points out: "It behooves us to take good care of the dogs. If they're not in good shape, they're not going to win."

In the back of Trudden's kennel, the Rolling Stones play from a stereo to 62 dogs in individual crates stacked two high along both walls; each standardized crate measures 26 inches wide by 30 inches high and is 42 inches deep. The females are on top. "They jump better," Trudden says. Females receive hormones so they can race with males without fear of "accidental breeding." The dogs all look healthy. Most wag their tails when they see us. The few I look at closely have good teeth and soft fur. Trudden knows each dog by name and kisses some of the females' heads, calling each "mama."

There's a large industrial scale — each dog must weigh within one pound of what it weighed in the previous race, per track rules — and near the front door is a chart detailing each dog's racing schedule and special needs. On the walls are photos of Trudden and his family with past champions.

Trudden was introduced to greyhounds by his grandpa Joe, who played the dogs every day. He fondly remembers studying the program together every afternoon and waiting anxiously to learn whether the dogs they picked had won. When his grandfather died, Trudden scraped together \$1,200, bought a dog, and named it Joe's Unicorn. The dog won early and often, and by the early '90s, Trudden was able quit his job at the telephone company to become a full-time trainer. Not long after that, he bought his own kennel.

One of the dogs he trained was BB's Story Book. I ask him about the incident with the lure.

"I was here that night," he says. "It's one of the worst things I've ever seen. I scooped him up with my own arms." His voice gets softer and his eyes become glassy as he describes speeding to the animal hospital. He kicks a rock. "There's nothing they could do," he says. BB's Story Book was euthanized.

As Trudden works, he defends his beloved industry. He says he has never had a healthy dog euthanized and has even kept dogs in his kennel for more than a year — at an average cost of \$5 per day — before a spot in an adoption kennel opened up. Trudden estimates that the industry employs 20,000 people in Florida alone. "That's not counting the people who sell the trucks and the tires and the gas and the food."

Still, Trudden acknowledges that public opinion has swayed and that the end of dog racing is inevitable. "I just hope it's not in my lifetime," he says.

We walk out back to the two fenced runs where the dogs are "turned out" at least twice a day. Alongside the kennel is a small, metal whirlpool for the dogs, on the day after they race. It's a greyhound Jacuzzi. After the "hydrotherapy," he says, each dog gets a hand massage.

Trudden turns to me: "Do these dogs look abused?"

Joe Trudden might be a conscientious guy — but not every trainer is. In December 2007, state investigators from the Department of Business and Professional Regulation, Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering — the state agency overseeing greyhound racing in Florida — discovered a gruesome scene. In building four, just a few hundred yards from Trudden's kennel, 74 dogs were left in dirty cages with almost no food or medicine for months.

According to the DBPR's report, the owner, David Dasenbrock, lived in Oregon and had stopped sending money for food or flea and tick medication. The dogs were found emaciated, lying in piles of their own waste. Many had gnawed themselves bloody and raw. The floor was covered with blood, ticks, and rodent droppings. There was a dead rat in the corner. There was no edible food on site, and the dogs had no water. "The smell of urine in the kennel was unbearable," an investigator wrote.

But the DBPR has only limited power, and all it could do was issue a warning. Four months passed and conditions only got worse. When they returned, investigators found a trainer dipping greyhounds into a bucket of Malathion, a cheap insecticide that's highly toxic to dogs. It was the cheapest way to take care of the flea and tick problem. The trainer had also been cleaning the building — with diesel fuel.

In May 2008, Dasenbrock's pari-mutuel license was suspended and the trainer was charged with animal cruelty, a misdemeanor. A year later, all 74 dogs have either been adopted or are in the hands of adoption agencies. The worst part: Nobody really knows how often this happens.

There are whispers at the track of a veterinarian nearby who will put down any greyhound, healthy or not, for \$75, no questions asked, but obtaining reliable statistics about casualties is impossible. Florida tracks have no legal obligation to report injuries, deaths, or cases of neglect and abuse to the state. Breeders, owners, and trainers never have to report how many dogs are culled, euthanized, or killed during transport. The vast majority of regulation in Florida relates not to the welfare of the animals but to how profits are divided.

Meanwhile, in November of last year, there were two more horrific incidents two days apart. On November 17, a 3-year old brindled greyhound named Birthday Toy was electrocuted after being bumped into the lure line at Sanford Orlando Kennel Club. Then on November 19, Jawa Spock, a 2-year-old fawn, was euthanized at Palm Beach Kennel Club after breaking both back legs during a race.

This is why Grey2K USA is targeting Florida's greyhound racing industry. The group has video footage of both incidents on its website (grey2kusa.org), and this April, Christine Dorchak traveled to Tallahassee to oppose new legislation that would expand gambling and subsidize greyhound racing. She held a news conference on the back steps of the Old Capitol Building in Tallahassee with the help of Scooby and Molly, two retired greyhounds.

Whether it's pressure from groups like Dorchak's or because people have vast entertainment options these days, the dog racing industry is indisputably in decline. In fact, it might have died out already if it weren't subsidized by tax breaks and other forms of gambling.

In 2000, the Florida Legislature approved a \$20 million tax break for the struggling pari-mutuel industry (horse tracks, dog tracks, and jai-alai frontons). Then, the pari-mutuels lobbied for the right to offer slot machines and high-stakes poker. Since South Florida voters approved them in 2005, slots and card rooms have become so profitable that most track owners would probably be willing to drop dog racing entirely. (In 2007, the state collected less than \$6 million in taxes from the greyhound industry, compared to \$125 million from slot machines.) But the way the law stands, in order to keep a pari-mutuel license and have access to that juicy income flow from slots and poker, dog tracks are required to race at least 100 days a year.

Greyhound racing won't end unless that law is changed.

Dorchak says her group would support any bills that would rid pari-mutuels of the racing requirements. Every year, such bills are introduced in the state Legislature, but they never make it out of committee. In her quest, she's found an odd ally. Mardi Gras CEO Dan Adkins showed up at the capitol. Dorchak says Adkins even jokingly wore an "End Greyhound Racing" button.

"He might not be able to say it as publicly, but he hates giving that money to breeders too," she says. "Racing is a losing game he has to play to get the cards and slots. They could take or leave the dogs. It's all about money."

Still, the more I learn about the industry, the more I want to know about *my* dog. The longer I have her, the more I see that she really does love to run, even if it means she's hopping on the hurt leg. Most of the time, though, she likes to lie around the apartment looking adorable. We also decided to keep her name. Although *Jailamony* evokes something dark and degenerate, her past is part of who she is and what brought her to us.

The truth is, the world of greyhound racing can be just as heartbreaking and complicated as that twisted black leg with the little white sock. It hurts to think of the toll this industry has taken on that sweet dog. If she hadn't raced, she wouldn't have a limp, a bald ass, and grey hair at 4 years old. Then again, if she didn't race, I wouldn't have her now.

Through the adoption group, I learn that Jailamony was trained by the delightfully titled company Bad Boy Racing. At the kennel, I see a smashed-up dog truck with those words blasted across the top of the windshield. But I don't find the truck owner, and I later learn the company has been sold.

In hopes of finding someone who might remember my dog, I make another trip to the track.

A funny thing about racetracks: There are always a few old handicappers who remember every horse or dog in every race they've ever seen, going back decades. In another life, these men could have been great mathematicians or literature scholars; in places like Mardi Gras, where the floor is littered with beer-drenched stubs of daily heartbreak, they are the revered wise men.

During short breaks in the action at Mardi Gras, I ask around to see whether anyone remembers betting on Jailamony. I get a lot of "that name sounds familiar" and "if I could see the books, I'd know the dog." Then someone directs me to Norman Grant.

A fidgeting, wiry black man in a ski cap, Grant recognizes the name immediately. "A black dog," he says. "Your dog's a black dog. I remember."

I nod.

"Your dog don't break. Don't break worth a damn. But she's a closer. She's a strong, strong closer."

Indeed, most of the races in which she placed, Jailamony came from behind. Through a website called greyhound-data.com, I find Jailamony's racing history and trace her heritage back 34 generations, to 1820 — about 32 generations more than I know about myself. Her sire's sire was Molotov, a member of the Greyhound Racing Hall of Fame who set track records in Colorado that still stand today.

The site says there were two other dogs from Jailamony's litter registered as racers: a female named Jam It Up and a male named Speed Bump Brent. Brent never made it past the schooling races, and like the dogs from the litter that weren't registered racers, there is no record of where he is now. Jam It Up is still racing in Naples.

Each dog's racing history includes racing notes written in a cryptic, handicapper code. If a dog broke

away from the pack on the back stretch and won, for example, the note might say: "Pulled Away Mid Trk."

Jailamony dominated her practice races (to qualify at a track, a dog must finish in the top four). She won her second race at Mardi Gras. She worked her way up the ranks and earned nearly \$2,000 in all. But then, her firsts and seconds turned into sixths and sevenths.

The handicapping notes tell the story. Over and over, Jailamony was "bumped 1st turn mid trk" or "crowded early." In race after race, the notes say she "stumbled, fell" or "broke to outside, collided" or "bounced around early." After 25 races at Mardi Gras, she was downgraded to Flagler in Miami.

It was there, on June 13, 2008, that she had her final race, the 32nd of her career. She was wearing the 6 jersey the day she broke her leg. The note is short. It says: "Dropped Back 1st Turn, DNF."

Like so many greyhounds, my dog's life as a racer ended with those three ominous letters, DNF: Did Not Finish.