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Heartbreak at 45 MPH

Scenes from the life of a racing greyhound.

By Michael J. Mooney Thursday, May 21 2009

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A deep, scratchy voice announces their presence over the loudspeaker. "Heeere 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.



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.

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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!*"

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

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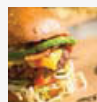
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to come inside. Jailamony has a sleek, shiny, black coat with a white chest, what look like little white socks, and a matching white tip at the end of her wagging tail. She's all muscle, ribs, and light-stepping legs, like a pony. She wiggles through 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.

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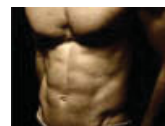


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