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Los Galgos Guapos (The Handsome Hounds)

By [Erin Siegel](#) | MARCH 7, 2012



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By Erin Siegal

I'd never really known a galgo, or greyhound. To me, they were simply those weirdly skinny creatures in the NYC dog runs that looked like yawning alligators when panting, so rail-thin that they practically disappeared unless they turned sideways.

But now?

Well, let's just say that I think Dreamboat's name is pretty accurate.



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"Dreamboat," a.k.a. U.S.S. Dreamboat, enjoys a bath.

In Tijuana, Mexico, the Caliente racetrack is famous. In the city's heyday, high-end thoroughbreds charged past glamorous crowds of onlookers; photos of the horses still adorn the walls in the casino's basement administrative offices. Today, however, a different kind of animal bursts from the starting gates each day: American greyhounds.



Greyhounds race at Tijuana's Caliente racetrack

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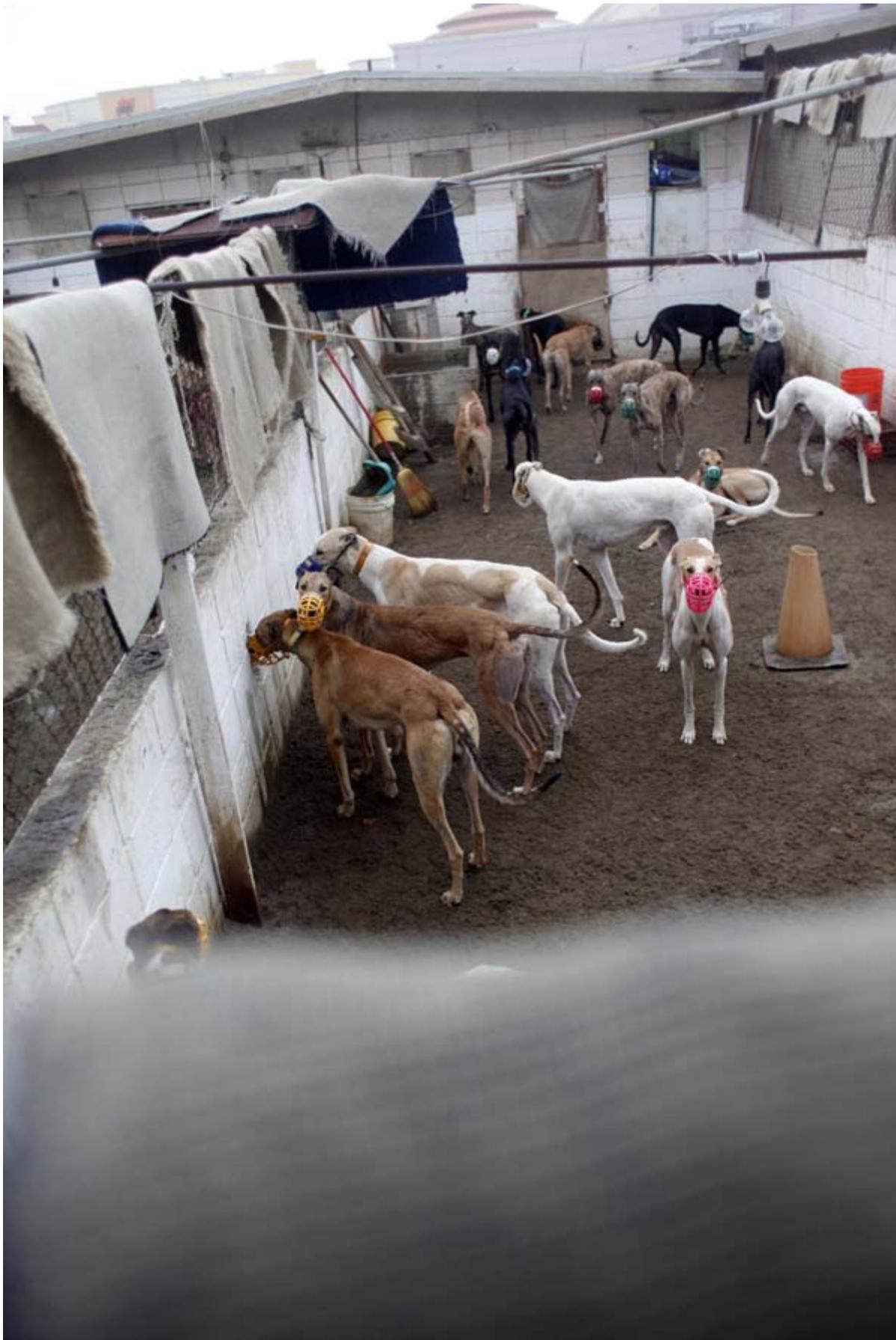


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Naim Lejud, the track manager, told me that Caliente's kennels hold more than 700 galgos, or greyhounds. The majority of dogs race multiple times per week; races are held daily. Every single dog, Lejud says, has been imported from the United States. Most hail from Abilene, Kansas, home of the National Greyhound Association. Caliente is what's known as a "last stop" track: the place where slow, aging, or otherwise unwanted dogs are brought for their final hurrahs.

In the United States, greyhound racing is controversial. Over the past five years the industry's demise has been expedited as more and more states outlaw the practice. Today, dog tracks operate in just seven states. The Tijuana track is located a few miles south of California, where greyhound racing is banned. Despite its location, the Tijuana track is considered part of the American racing circuit.



Race dogs in the Caliente kennels in Tijuana

Circuit rules demand that all race dogs retire at the age of five, though some run well into their sixth year. Others break a leg, almost always the left hind, since it's their pushing leg when racing

on the counter-clockwise racetrack.

[Fast Friends](#), a greyhound adoption group based outside Los Angeles, is committed to finding homes for every “retired” Caliente greyhound. Every few months, between ten and forty volunteers orchestrate an event called “Retirement Day,” where “broken,” older, and slow dogs officially leave their racing days behind.

For Tom McRorie, who helps his wife Joyce run the organization, Retirement Day starts at the crack of dawn. He leaves La Habra at 4:30 in the morning to arrive in Mexico around 7:30, depending on traffic. Tom usually brings one or two volunteers along, more for company than anything else. He has crossed the border hundreds of times to pick-up dogs over the last two decades.

Manuel Pérez, who works with the track, meets Tom and the Fast Friends volunteers in the parking lot behind Caliente’s kennels. Over the years, the group’s relationship with the casino has evolved into one of mutual respect and friendliness, to the point where Americans now rent two dog runs where “broken” and retired greyhounds live until being picked up. On the day I accompanied the group, Manuel cheerfully met Tom with a brown bag full of canine pharmaceuticals: as with human prescriptions, it’s cheaper to purchase medication at one of Tijuana’s numerous pop-up pharmacies.



Tom McRorie (L) and Manuel Pérez (R) load dogs into the Hound Hauler

One by one, the dogs are loaded into a professional trailer, custom made for greyhound transport. Fast Friends used to haul retirees in a regular cargo van, but it was stressful: the dogs were packed together, and it was easy to become distracted while driving, especially if a dog altercation were to take place. Tom’s an expert driver, and navigates the Tijuana streets with the precision and skill of a cabbie.

Crossing the border into the United States is surprisingly easy if you're a greyhound. Many border patrol agents already know about Fast Friends, Tom says, and wave him through. Once in awhile, an agent will ask to inspect the "Hound Hauler." Either way, the process is simple.



A load of thirteen dogs arrives in La Habra, a suburb of Los Angeles

In LA, a gaggle of adoring fans await the greyhounds. Most of the volunteers at Retirement Day have already adopted a dog or two. The youngest volunteer was six, and the oldest looked at least seventy. They watched with baited breath as thirteen dogs were taken, one by one, from the Hound Hauler. When a dog with a broken leg emerged, the crowd gasped in unison.



Fast Friends founder Joyce McRorie helps "Bowtie Man" out of the Hound Hauler

The dogs were taken into a paddock filled with an obstacle course of sorts. At one station, they had their feet dipped into a large rectangular container filled with flea-dip. At another, every inch of their body was checked for ticks. Yet another station was for attaching homemade paper tags to their collar, signifying whether the dog had any visible scrapes, wounds, or signs of illness. Afterwards, each greyhound was carefully bathed, towel-dried by hand, vaccinated, and manicured.



Life at the racetrack means constant handling, and the greyhounds took their new Retirement Day experiences in stride. They're surprisingly docile creatures: at the very worst, a hesitant dog would simply be lifted into a bathtub. Not a single greyhound made a peep of protest. In fact, many seemed to bask in the attention, and I caught at least one dog trying to sit on a human's lap. They did, however, look a bit baffled at times.



"Sam" sniffs my camera while getting a massage

Next, the greyhounds are subjected to two tests that help determine their foster placements. Each is brought face to face with a small dog and a cat. Since greyhounds are natural hunters, and racing dogs are trained to chase furry lures, it would make sense for them to want to “catch” other dogs or cats.

Instead, the greyhounds at Retirement Day took one look at Kinko the cat and made a hasty retreat. Every single dog was afraid of him. Apparently, this happens a lot on Retirement Day.



Courtney Williams introduces her cat, Kinko, to Robin the greyhound

Afterwards, each dog is paired with a foster family. Greyhounds remain in foster care for a few weeks before being placed in a permanent adoptive home. With foster parents, the dogs learn how to be pets, doing things they’ve never done before like catching a tennis ball and walking up stairs. They’re also housebroken. Most adjust rather quickly.



Two adopted greyhounds relax in their new home with Marcia Hall and Günther Hansel in Whittier, California

Since their start, the nonprofit [Fast Friends](#) has found homes for over 3,000 retired greyhounds. Their next “Retirement Day” is on March 10, 2012, and is open to the public. A few times a year, the organization holds bus trips to Tijuana, Mexico to watch the dog races at the Caliente casino.

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