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Built to race, greyhounds trained to serve as friends

Greyhounds might not be the first dog you'd think of if you were looking for candidates for service dogs for U.S. war veterans.

They're bred for explosive bursts of speed. No other breed is better equipped for sprinting than the greyhound. They have chests, lungs and hearts larger than other breeds and even their blood is different — greyhounds have more red blood cells to deliver more oxygen to muscles for running. They have a higher percentage of "fast twitch" muscles than any other breed.

So how well do they do with veterans who need a companion to steady them when they stand, help them pick up dropped keys, go with them in crowded places and help them make it up and down stairs? Very well, says a West Palm Beach, Florida organization that places greyhounds retired from racetracks into private homes as pets. Barbara Masi, the founder and president of Awesome Greyhound Adoptions, was approached in 2011 with the idea of an even higher calling for a select few of the majestic dogs — could they be trained as service dogs for U.S. war veterans?

She helped found the Hounds and Heroes program to find out. It works to forge that rare bond between a dedicated canine and a disabled vet, restoring dignity and purpose and honoring both for their service.

With America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down, soldiers are coming home, some with wounds that don't show. They suffer from anxiety, a fear of crowded places and other effects of post-traumatic stress.

Older vets also need help with physical disabilities, said Masi, who helped create Hounds and Heroes to screen, train and place greyhounds with select veterans.

Training an assistance dog can cost between \$15,000 and \$20,000. Because it uses volunteers, the expense for Hounds and Heroes is \$4,000 per dog and it covers that through donations. Hounds and Heroes provides a highly-skilled companion at no cost to the vet.

Golden retrievers and Labradors are the more typical choices for service dog training. Greyhounds are bred for speed. But it's a misconception to think that greyhounds are hyper. Like most sighthounds, they're happy to sleep and lie on the couch most of the day, with brief breaks of high activity to stretch their muscles.

Furthermore, greyhounds are keenly intelligent and sensitive dogs. People who open their home to greyhounds say the breed is addictive. They're sweet-natured, loyal and highly attuned to their owners.

"They're wonderful for helping someone afraid to do simple things, such as leaving the house alone or being in large crowds. They are gentle. They are sweet. They are clean and do not bark," said Masi, who for 14 years has helped home greyhounds when their demanding careers in professional dog racing come to an end.

Awesome Greyhound Adoptions, which works with the Palm Beach Kennel Club to find homes for retiring racers, is one of several such groups around the country working to match greyhounds with families. But life as a service dog is something few dogs in any breed are suited for. And greyhounds have special characteristics that must be addressed in service dog training.

For one thing, greyhounds have exceptionally high prey drives. After a lifetime of giving it their all chasing a "rabbit" at the racetrack, they have to be trained not to react to squirrels, cats, other dogs and distractions. Their track careers also didn't prepare the dogs for life in the human world, so they have to be thoroughly socialized to be comfortable in a variety of settings. Stairs are a novelty to greyhounds. They're trained not only to navigate them, but in some cases, to pause to help a veteran keep his balance.

Masi said that they're paired with a trainer for four to six months, living in their home and undergoing intensive coaching.

"They are specifically trained to do what the veteran needs. Some are for PTSD, in addition to other medical issues. Some are trained to recognize when the veteran is in times of stress. They need to block people from coming near the veteran when he or she is out shopping or in a group. They protect the back or side or front so that people don't come right up to the veteran.

"They are used for mobility assistance — bracing so the veteran can get up from a kneeling position — or to come to the veteran if he or she has fallen. We have one out there with a veteran who has MS and are currently getting ready to train another for a wheelchair-bound veteran."

The training is strictly force-free and reward-based. Greyhounds are so sensitive that raising your voice or harsh leash snaps could cause them to simply shut down. Positive training encourages the dog to think in order to offer the correct response to get a reward. It helps create confident partners, not fearful subordinates.

Trainer Carolee Ellison is one who volunteers her skills and home to Hounds and Heroes candidates. "Greyhounds are unlike other breeds I've trained. They are very unique in how they process things and what they need to be taught."

Masi said, "Trainers commit to taking the dogs in their home for six months. They train with the trainer for the first four of the six months — live with the family and their other pets — and go everywhere as a service dog in training. So the trainer is making quite a commitment with this program.

"The final two months the grey is paired up with a veteran and we train for the specific needs of that person. We work with trainer, dog and veteran so the transition will be smooth when it comes time for the veteran to take ownership of the dog."

Ellison said seeing veterans with their new greyhounds makes the effort worthwhile. "To see them with these dogs,

it gives them new life and brings new life to the veterans. And these dogs are so happy to be able to have a job to do. I love that we can partner this together. These wonderful, loyal dogs partner with these veterans for a better life."

She described what a Vietnam veteran with mobility problems did when he first met his greyhound. "He became like a child. His mouth dropped open and he (carefully and slowly) lowered himself to the floor to be able to connect with his dog. "After a few moment of happy introduction, he got very still, laid his hands on the dog and just absorbed the peace from him. This was the first of many moments that I said, 'This is why.'"

For more information or to help the Hounds and Heroes program, visit its website at awsomegreyhoundadoptions.org or call (561) 737-1941.

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