

The Coastal Star

Paws Up for Pets: From racetracks to homes: Lovable loungers recruited to aid veterans



Military veteran Frank Policastri walks with his service dog Buff alongside dog trainer Carolee Ellison at the Boynton Beach Mall.

Tim Stepien/The Coastal Star

By Arden Moore

When you think of a highly trained service dog, what breed quickly comes to mind? I'm betting you identify the Labrador retriever or perhaps, the golden retriever. But there is a breed now gaining acclaim for providing service to military veterans wrestling with post-traumatic stress disorder or mobility limitations.

Sit and stay, labs and goldens. The breed earning his stripes as a service dog for military veterans in Palm Beach County is the greyhound.

True, this lanky, tall dog is best known for being the supreme sprinter of the canine pack, capable of clocking more than 40 miles per hour before you can finish reading this sentence out loud. In fact, racing greyhounds can reach top speeds within six strides from a standing start and rank only second in speed to the cheetah (75 miles per hour).

Independent, gentle, noble. These three words best describe the greyhound, according to the official American Kennel Club website. And, I couldn't agree more. While greyhounds need the occasional mad dash to let out pent-up energy, they are smart, kind sofa loungers sporting a sensitive side, especially toward their favorite people.

These traits suit retired Army Sgt. 1st Class Frank Policastri, of West Palm Beach, just fine. A degenerative joint disease has left the bones on his 5-foot-10-inch frame brittle and mandated the need for a cane for steady footing.

Until now, that is. He has traded his cane for Buff, a greyhound service dog in training with the Awesome Greyhound Adoptions' Hound and Heroes Program.

"I am real fortunate to have Buff," says Policastri, who jokingly describes his age as "17 backwards."

"We're in training right now, but Buff is enabling me to walk a significant amount without

the use of my cane for the first time in 23 years. When we're out and I say, 'Let's go, Buff,' he immediately stands and comes to my side and braces himself to help me get up out of my chair. He is very perceptive and seems to know what my needs are and adjusts quickly to accommodate them."

Credit AGA's founder and president (and ardent greyhound fan) Barbara Masi of Boynton Beach for transforming retired racers from the Palm Beach Kennel Club into certified service dogs specifically trained for military veterans in need. Since May 2011, a total of 12 greyhounds have completed or are in training to be paired with military veterans.

The nonprofit group relies on donations to cover the cost of training that can exceed \$4,000 per greyhound. Training takes about six months per dog, with the final two months bringing the dog together with the veteran to ensure a proper match.

"Greyhounds seem ideal for military veterans who are usually tall and big and require a tall dog to lean on when getting up from a seated position or walking," says Masi. "And, they are in tune with their veterans' emotional needs, especially those coping with PTSD."

Carolee Ellison volunteers her time to train the greyhounds for the Hounds and Heroes Program. She has agreed to have the greyhounds in training to be with her 24/7, including when she is teaching students at South Veterinary Tech Assistant Academy.

"Greyhounds are fun to train and because of their long, lean bodies, they are perfect canine models to teach our students canine anatomy," says Ellison, of Lake Worth. "The dogs stand still while I place stickers on their bodies to help students learn bones like the tibia and femur and other body parts. It makes learning fun."

Currently, Ellison is conducting service dog training with Buff and Policastri and is delighted by how quickly the pair became friends. The trio spends time at public places like inside the Boynton Beach mall to hone their skills.

"When Frank shuffles, I'm amazed at how Buff will slow his pace to match Frank's and how well Buff locks his legs to enable Frank to use him to stand up," says Ellison. "Buff gives Frank such a sense of freedom. Buff can be a goofball, but when his service jacket comes on, he is all business."

Ellison doesn't mind sharing her home with two or three greyhounds weighing 60 pounds or more.

"I am blessed to be part of the Hounds and Heroes Program," she says. "I never got to serve in the military, but I have always been a patriot and this is a great way for me to give back to those who have served for our country."

To learn more about the Awesome Greyhound Adoption group, visit awesomegreyhoundadoptions.org.

Fun Greyhound Facts

The greyhound was officially recognized as a breed by the American Kennel Club way back in 1885.

Greyhounds come in 15 colors and four markings.

Greyhounds are members of the hound group and rank 147th in breed popularity.

Lounging is their preferred activity, earning the greyhound the nickname of "40-mile-per-hour couch potato."

Greyhounds are anatomically built better to lie down than to sit.

Win Arden's books!

Got pet? In celebration of the release of my newest pet books, I am giving away a personalized, autographed copy of Fit Cat and Fit Dog to a couple of readers of The Coastal Star.

How? Easy. Simply email me (Arden@fourleggedlife.com) and tell me, in 100 words or fewer, how your dog or your cat has made your life better. And, if you like, attach a photo. Deadline to submit is May 1, 2015. We will pick a cat and a dog winner and share the results in a future column.

Arden Moore, founder of FourLeggedLife.com, is an animal behavior consultant, editor, author, professional speaker and master certified pet first aid instructor. Each week, she hosts the popular Oh Behave! show on PetLifeRadio.com. Learn more by visiting fourleggedlife.com