

Greyhounds graduate from prison program

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Photo Caption: Handler Daniel Shaver shows off Scottie and his newly acquired skills during a graduation program Tuesday afternoon at the Correctional Industrial Facility for eight greyhounds that completed the 10 week course.

Story by: Shawn McGrath/The Herald Bulletin

PENDLETON — Eight "inmates" of sorts will be leaving the Indiana Correctional Industrial Facility following a short ceremony on Tuesday.

The Pendleton prison held its third Greyhound Graduation — a pairing of inmates with the abandoned racing dogs over a several-month period.

But, of course, only the dogs get to leave.

For many of the inmates, training the dogs and getting them acclimated to people is a privilege.

"I was brought up around dogs and love training them," said inmate Anthony McCracklin, 44, from Indianapolis.

McCracklin, who is scheduled to be released in September 2014 on burglary and theft charges, is one of the few inmates to have been involved in each of the three greyhound programs so far at the prison.

"I wanted to give them a second chance on life," he said of his dog in the program, Tango. "It's not right that they get used up and then put to sleep."

Each inmate partners with his cellmate in training the dogs and getting them used to being away from the racetrack. All of the dogs are originally from Florida, said Maleah Stringer, who runs the CIF program and is involved with the Second Chance at Life Greyhound Prison Program.

"This session has run like a dream," Stringer told the inmates in the program. "And I think that has a lot to do with you."

About 20 dogs have gone through the program so far, according to Ann Hummel, unit manager at CIF. The dogs stay in the cells with the inmates, and the prisoners are allowed onto the grounds for exercise. The recent graduates arrived at the CIF in mid-January. Officials expected to get another eight dogs later this week.

All of the dogs that have been enrolled in the program have been adopted, but there have been some bumps in the road.

"We did have one parole violator and he had to be brought back — something about cats," Hummel said. "We haven't worked with any dog that wasn't placed one way or another."

Along with helping the dogs adjust to life away from the racetrack, the inmates involved in the program are generally less likely to have behavioral problems behind bars. If they do act up, they risk being kicked out of the program.

"Most of these guys don't want to lose their dog," Hummel said. "You really miss that critter when it's not in your room."

One of the best trained dogs at the graduation was Fang, a sleek, black greyhound that weighed around 60 pounds. Fang was able to shake hands, sit, stay and heel on the command of one of his trainers, Robert E. Mullins Jr., 46, of Richmond. And the secret to training a greyhound?

"Just a lot of love and affection," said Mullins, who's slated to be released in January 2009 on charges of operating a vehicle while intoxicated and being a habitual substance offender.

Mullins' partner in training Fang, 27-year-old Michael Jekel of Indianapolis, also agreed that showing the dogs affection is key.

"Just showing them love and care," said Jekel, who's scheduled to be released in 2010 on charges of aiding arson. "Plus we're able to share them with the other guys.

"We bring out the good heart in them."

The greyhound program is active at several Indiana prisons, including Rockville and Branchville correctional facilities. The Indiana Department of Correction has plans to expand it to other prisons.

"This is a special breed of dog," McCracklin said. "They need the love they didn't get at the racetrack. They crave it and I love giving it to them."

About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.