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Greyhound tracks in Iowa are hurting, which worries breeders

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Jon Stidham breeds and raises greyhounds in a 30-dog kennel in McClelland, Iowa. The dog track at Bluffs Run helps keep him in business.

COUNCIL BLUFFS — Most afternoons you can find Meyer “Mickey” Coren in front of a simulcast TV at Bluffs Run, sipping Diet Coke from a plastic cup, smoking a cigar as dogs scramble around the track outside.

He usually bets \$100, mostly on simulcast dog races but also on the greyhounds that race here every afternoon except Mondays.

“It gives me a nice place to go, where if I don’t win, I don’t lose too much,” he said. “I can smoke a cigar and drink pop and shoot the breeze with the other degenerates,” said Coren, jokingly.

Coren, 71, a semi-retired Omaha attorney, has been into dog racing since he was a teenager, when he and his friends would drive to Sodrac Park in North Sioux City, S.D., to watch the greyhounds run.

But those days could be ending in Iowa. He and the roughly 200 others who gathered at Bluffs Run on a recent Friday may soon need to look for a new pastime.

Efforts to end dog racing in Iowa have won the support of community leaders in Council Bluffs and Dubuque, the two cities that still have dog tracks in the state, and have picked up support in the Iowa Legislature.

A measure was introduced this year to allow Horseshoe Casino in Council Bluffs and Mystique Casino in Dubuque to drop greyhound racing at their properties but continue casino gambling.

The bill, which would require the two casinos to pay \$70 million over several years to the state’s greyhound industry, passed out of committee in the Iowa House. There’s still time for the measure to be considered before the scheduled end of the 2014 session on April 22, though lawmakers are waiting for the greyhound industry and casinos to reach an agreement before moving ahead with the measure.

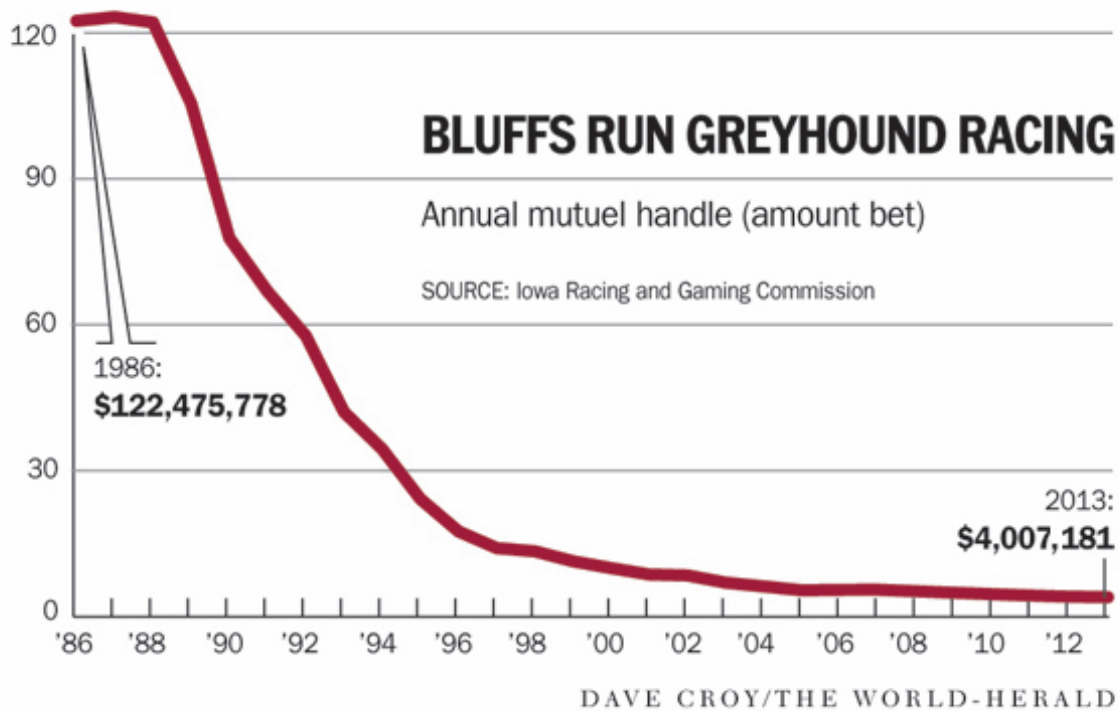
The reason for the proposal is simple: The popularity of greyhound racing has plummeted, in Iowa and elsewhere.

At Bluffs Run, \$122.5 million was wagered in 1986 on live racing, the year the track opened. Wagering peaked at \$123.3 million the next year but has been on a downward slide ever since, according to the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission.



Meyer ‘Mickey’ Coren

In 2013, only \$4 million was wagered on live racing.



Bo Guidry, general manager of Horseshoe, said the casino loses about \$9 million per year on dog racing.

“People just choose where they want to spend their entertainment dollar. Twenty years ago ... there weren't that many options, and now there are plenty of options. One happens to be casino gambling.”

For their part, greyhound supporters argue that the racetrack

is the reason the casinos opened in the first place. Bluffs Run added the casino in 1995 after a change in Iowa law allowed racetracks to open casinos.

It's not right for the casinos to pull out now, they say.

“It's a relationship. We need them, and they need us,” said Darren Flahive, 47, of Council Bluffs, a 25-year dog trainer.

They say getting rid of the tracks will put 1,200 people out of work statewide and maybe 200 people locally.

And when casino operator Harrah's bought Horseshoe and Bluffs Run in 2001, the decline in popularity of dog racing was already underway. “They knew what they were getting into. They knew dog racing was not a profitable business,” said Jon Stidham, 49, who raises greyhounds in McClelland, Iowa, and provides dogs for Bluffs Run.

Harrah's later changed its name to Caesars Entertainment, after completing a buyout of the company. Greyhound supporters also argue that Caesars isn't doing enough to promote dog racing or to provide a good experience for customers.

The bay windows separating the grandstand and the fans from the racetrack appeared dirty during a recent visit. The blue carpet was stained.

Coren said that if Horseshoe invested more in maintenance and advertising, the company might be able to stem the losses.

“They would have to do a lot to make a profit,” he said. “But they could honor their commitments and not give out a whole lot and break even.”

To Guidry, the argument is ludicrous. “How can it be 'break even' when we are losing \$9 million a year?”

Guidry said Caesars has invested plenty in the track, including purchasing a new outdoor odds board.

He said the company focuses on the profitable parts of its business, such as casino gambling. Minor maintenance problems are not what's keeping people away.

“My question to them is 'What have they done to advertise?’” he said.

Jim Quilty of Des Moines, an attorney representing the Iowa Greyhound Association, said most of the money that the industry scrapes together for advertising is going toward the fight to keep dog racing alive.

But the greyhound association has funded some low-budget promotions at Bluffs Run, such as a Harley-Davidson giveaway.

The city and Caesars would like to redevelop the roughly 10 acres where the dog track is located. Officials have lauded its development potential. But racing supporters point to the nearby Mid-America Center, where an adjacent office park largely sits empty.

Bluffs Mayor Matt Walsh acknowledged that the office park isn't doing well but said that isn't the kind of development that's needed. Hotels and

restaurants would be ideal for that spot, he said.

He's sympathetic to those who work in the industry but said its time is coming to an end.

"I understand that they have been in a position where they have earned a living in the dog racing business, but business has changed. Businesses have life cycles, and the life cycle for dog racing is over," he said.

He also doubts that the end of dog racing in Iowa would put as many people out of work as racing supporters contend.

If Bluffs Run closes, the 35 full- and part-time employees who work there would be reassigned elsewhere in the company, Guidry said. "We are going to find homes for all those employees ... and we are not going to cut their pay."

And the bill in the Legislature, a measure backed by Caesars, gives those involved in the greyhound industry a chance to make the transition to a new life by providing a buyout, he said.

That doesn't cut it for Stidham, who operates a 30-dog kennel behind his home in McClelland, northeast of Council Bluffs. He also runs a feed and supply business for greyhounds, providing the nutrients the animals need: Vitamin E and Vitamin B-12 tablets and ground hamburger.

"The dogs, they are athletes, and they have to be in the best possible condition to compete at the highest level," he said.

Like Coren, Stidham got hooked on the greyhounds by driving to Sodrac as a teenager to watch the races. He was attending the University of Wyoming when Bluffs Run opened in 1986.

"When I got out, that's when I got started," he said. "So it's been my whole working life."

The end of dog racing would cut short a career with animals that he loves and destroy a business that he had hoped to pass on to his children.

"Not many people have a career that they love. My career goals would be terminated," he said, adding that he's nearly 50 years old and has two young children to support.

"It would be devastating to my family," he said.

Stidham wears a Wyoming Cowboys baseball cap as he shows visitors his facility. Brown greyhounds jump on a shoulder-high fence to greet people, licking arms that stretch out to pet the dogs.

"When they know it's race time, they are all business," he said. "But they can turn into a pet just like that."