

Greyhound Races Face Extinction at the Hands of Casinos They Fostered



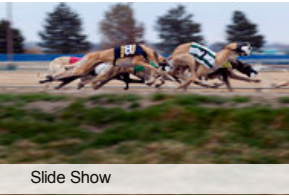
Steve Hebert for The New York Times

Faced with declining profits, owners of greyhound tracks are now pushing for legislation to cut the number of races while maintaining their other gambling operations. [More Photos »](#)

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COUNCIL BLUFFS, Iowa — Not many people attend the races here at [Bluffs Run Greyhound Park](#) anymore. Aside from a few dozen aging diehards cheering the dogs from the shabby grandstand, the gambling-inclined prefer to take their chances amid the bright lights and constant action of the casino downstairs.

Multimedia



Slide Show

[For a Declining Sport, a New Fight](#)

But even though the races are losing millions of dollars each year, the owners are required to keep the greyhounds running six days a week.

After a decade in which more than half the greyhound tracks in the country have closed, many of the remaining operations have survived thanks to the model used at Bluffs Run. Over the years, the tracks, which were there first, won permission from states to add slot machines and poker tables under the condition that a chunk of the profits go to the dog races — essentially subsidizing one form of gambling with another.

Now, after years defending greyhound racing against attacks that it is inhumane, a growing number of track owners are, to the astonishment of opponents and the dismay of fans, joining the critics among the animal rights



The track in Council Bluffs loses millions of dollars a year. [More Photos](#)

groups. Complaining that they are being forced to spend millions of dollars a year to subsidize a pastime that the public has all but abandoned, greyhound track owners in Iowa, Florida and Arizona have been lobbying for changes in the law that would allow them to cut the number of races, or even shut down their tracks, while keeping their far more lucrative gambling operations.

Though the legislative outcome is in doubt in the short term, the effort has intensified the concern that the end may be near for a century-old pastime.

“There is no reason to continue spending money on a dying sport,” said Bo Guidry, general manager at the [Horseshoe Council Bluffs casino](#) complex, which includes Bluffs Run. Caesars Entertainment, which owns the operation and was required to spend \$10 million last year on dog racing, has offered to pay the state \$49 million for the right to close the track.

The reversal is regarded as a betrayal by those who earn their paychecks — or lose them — at the greyhound tracks. Though many of the racing supporters acknowledge that the sport cannot survive financially on its own, they argue that operations like Bluffs Run should not be allowed to abandon dog racing for greater profits after using it as justification to expand into other forms of gambling.

“The racing end was used as a ticket to help them acquire those licenses,” said Gary Guccione, secretary-treasurer of the [National Greyhound Association](#), which is based in Kansas, where the last track closed two years ago. “And now they’re trying to push racing out.”

For the animal rights groups opposed to racing, the unexpected alliance with track owners has broadened the case from a moral argument about the treatment of the dogs — which spend much of their lives in confinement, can suffer debilitating injuries while racing and are put up for adoption at the end of their careers — to a business-focused argument against government mandates.

“We’ve been fighting the racetrack owners for years, and to suddenly have them as allies takes some getting used to,” said Carey Theil, executive director of [Grey2K USA](#), a nonprofit group focused on ending greyhound racing.

There are now 22 tracks in 7 states, down from 49 tracks in 15 states a decade ago, according to Grey2K. Some tracks have gone out of business, others were shut down through legislation, and most of the survivors rely on other gambling revenue.

In Florida, home to more than half of the remaining tracks, owners had expected legislation to pass this year that would allow them to cut back dog racing while keeping other gambling operations. A similar measure stalled last year despite bipartisan support, and it once again appears to have died in the Legislature.

Isadore Havenick is lobbying for that legislation on behalf of his family-owned company in Florida, which has run racetracks in the state for six decades. He said the races were losing millions of dollars. “The only time there’s a large crowd of people watching dogs is when people get up from the poker tables to smoke,” he said.

David Schwartz, director of the [Center for Gaming Research at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas](#), said that the decline in interest in dog racing appeared to be more intense than what had happened with horse racing. “All live racing is declining in popularity,” he said. “It’s just not as impulse-oriented, as convenience-oriented as most gambling is today.”

Bluffs Run opened in 1986. But it has seen a steady drop in wagers on live races since the beginning, from \$122 million that first year to \$4.6 million in 2010, according to the [Iowa](#)

[Racing and Gaming Commission.](#)

Built for 6,500 visitors — the crowds were so big on opening day that many were turned away — only about 70 regulars showed up at Bluffs Run one day last week. Most knew one another by name. They placed a total of \$11,125 in bets on live races, a fraction of the \$3,090,179 wagered that day at the casino downstairs.

Even though the track is home to the most lucrative greyhound race in the nation, the [Iowa Breeders Classic](#), with a \$500,000 purse, twice as much money is bet on simulcast horse races as is bet on the live dog races. So when the local cable operator stopped broadcasting races and the local newspaper stopped running results, there was little surprise.

But to those in the grandstand, where the stained carpet and old furnishings testify to the greyhounds' second-rate status at the gambling complex, dog racing has a special charm. It rewards careful study, fosters community and consumes money slowly.

Anger crept into their voices as they talked about Caesars Entertainment. They noted that casino gambling was legalized here explicitly to subsidize the dog racing. And they said the company was undermining its own product.

Bob Hardison, a breeder who is president of the Iowa Greyhound Association, expressed satisfaction that the legislation appeared to have failed again this year but was worried that the efforts would continue. "They are spending millions of dollars trying to destroy greyhound racing not only in Iowa but around the country," he said.

The scene downstairs suggested why. Working a different slot machine with each hand, Angela Clover, 58, said she used to attend the greyhound races with her father, who is still a regular, but she had not returned for years. She said the slots were more of a rush.

Her 28-year-old son, Nick, nodded in agreement. "You really have to pay attention to the background and history of the dogs," he said. "That's a lot of work to do. You won't see very many guys my age up there."

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