



As greyhound racing declines nationwide, the Birmingham Race Course is in 'survival mode'

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BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- The clubhouse level of the Birmingham Race Course is quiet before the dogs hit the track for the first run of the night. Dozens of people sit scattered at tables and counters, some in small groups, many alone.

It's quiet, one patron said, because this isn't a place to hang out. The people here at 7 p.m. on a Wednesday for the greyhound races are here to make money, or at least to try.

But it's quiet for another reason. The crowd Wednesday night is about average, but it's still slim. The crowds aren't what they used to be.

The Birmingham Race Course, like the other 20 greyhound tracks nationwide, is in a daily fight for its life. That's because dog races alone aren't enough in an era when there are so many other ways to gamble.

The first dream of racing on that vast stretch of land beside Ruffner Mountain between Irondale and Trussville didn't involve dogs. It was a dream of horse racing.

Going to the dogs

Judy Thompson, of Thompson Tractor Company, built the Birmingham Race Course in the 1980s with the idea of turning it into a horse track on the level of Saratoga Race Course in New York.

"They had visions of it being this grand horse-racing venue," said Kip Keefer, the executive director of the Birmingham Racing Commission. "They referred to it as potentially the Saratoga of the South."

The track was a massive facility that cost \$90 million to build and opened in 1987, Keefer said. But the horse racing never became profitable, and the course only lasted a year. Delaware North, a track management company, came in and ran the course for a couple of years, but the races again failed to pay the bills.

Milton McGregor, who'd had success with greyhound racing at his VictoryLand track in Shorter, bought the

track from the bank in 1992 and, with the help of a referendum making it legal, brought dog racing to Birmingham.

For a couple of years, the course ran both horse and greyhound races, but the horse wasn't popular enough to be profitable, so those stopped in 1995. Since then, no race contestant in Birmingham has had a jockey.

Innovative operation

You can, of course, still bet on horse races at the Birmingham Race Course. They're piped in from Belmont, Penn National, Louisiana Downs and many other tracks around the country to seemingly countless television screens. Bets can be made on other greyhound races, too, from Wheeling, in West Virginia, and tracks like Daytona and Palm Beach in Florida.

Simulcast bets make up about two-thirds of the wagers made at the Birmingham Race Course, Keefer said, often just because of the numbers. The greyhounds in Birmingham run 85 to 100 live races every week, while there are opportunities to bet on 1,200 to 1,500 simulcast races. And while the live races are only run five days a week, the simulcasts are open every single day.

When it reopened in the '90s, the Birmingham course was one of the first in the nation to take advantage of simulcasting, according to Keefer, who served as the course's general manager from 1994 to 1998.

"Birmingham was one of the more innovative operations," he said. "While greyhound racing was being made possible, Birmingham became one of the first sites in the country to have extensive simulcasting. Simulcasting has grown to be an industry standard now 20-some-odd years later."

While the wagers on races at other courses help, it hasn't made the course a booming business.

Survival mode

In May, representatives for the course **said they were about three years behind on property taxes** and asked the Racing Commission for about \$800,000 to pay the delinquent taxes. The course, citing the rising costs of simulcast, asked for the money from an escrow account set up from a portion of the wagers at the course.

The commission approved \$398,000 for the course. Board member Tom Dawkins was the only member to vote against it, saying the account was designed to fund winners' purses for horse racing. Dipping into that fund, horse racing proponents said, would reduce the incentives for people to bring horse racing back.

In 2010 and 2011, the Racing Commission **allowed the course to use a total of \$550,000 from an escrow account set aside to aid and encourage horse racing for maintenance and upgrades to simulcasting equipment.**

Simulcasting is one of the reasons the action at the Birmingham Race Course, even on a nice night, isn't in the grandstands. Many people go to bet on more races than just those happening outside. But even the races, which will draw 750 to 800 people on a daily basis, aren't enough to sustain greyhound tracks.

In Florida, the tracks often thrive on the proceeds from poker rooms. The livelihoods of other courses are tied to the fate of in-house casinos.

In the 2000s, the course made efforts to bring in a secondary form of revenue: Las Vegas-style bingo machines. Those efforts ran into political trouble, and Jefferson County sheriff's deputies at one point raided the course and confiscated machines. At VictoryLand and Greenetrack, where live greyhound racing has been cut in favor of solely simulcasting, the bingo machines that provided a boon have recently been the subject of raids and lawsuits.

Even without bingo machines, the course has a bit of that casino atmosphere. The drinks are inexpensive, with a sign at the entrance advertising beer for \$1.99. There's a restaurant with an extensive menu, and the course offers free Wi-Fi and sells electronic cigarettes. As in a casino, the course has plenty of amenities to keep people betting. But the draw doesn't seem to be enough, Keefer said.

The course has looked for other sources of revenue, even **adding a driving range on the vast property a few years ago**, but it isn't enough, Keefer said. Without an extra form of revenue, the purse for the winners of the horse races remains well below what many greyhound tracks can pay. The dogs who run are often greyhounds that couldn't cut it at Southland in West Memphis, Ark., or other courses.

"This track is in kind of a survival mode," Keefer said, "just trying to hang on in the hopes that something happens."

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