

Live greyhound racing diminishes while La Marque track hangs on

By KATHRYN EASTBURN | October 20, 2019



Greyhounds round a corner during a race at Gulf Greyhound Park in La Marque on Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2017.

STUART VILLANUEVA/The Daily News

LA MARQUE

The only dog racing track in the county will soon become one of just five tracks nationwide that continue to stage live races, after an Arkansas track announced it would phase out live greyhound racing by 2022.

The Arkansas Racing Commission last week approved a plan by Southland Casino Racing in West Memphis, the last track of its kind in the state, to phase out live greyhound racing by Dec. 31, 2022, a victory for animal advocates opposing dog racing and a serious turn of events for the future of the sport.

The move will leave fewer tracks like Gulf Greyhound Park, 1000 FM 2004 in La Marque, which already only hosts live races a small portion of the year.

Florida voters shut down greyhound racing last year in the state that hosted 11 of 17 remaining live tracks in the country. Texas has three dog tracks licensed by the Texas Racing Commission, but Gulf is the only one with live races.

A look at the Texas Racing Commission website shows 36 live racing days scheduled in January and February 2020 in La Marque, a small number of races compared to during the track's heyday. Since 1992, when the track opened to an enthusiastic crowd of 11,000, the sport has given way, as it has at most tracks, to betting on simulcast races viewed on television screens.

“We have simulcasts seven days a week and live racing for two months per year,” said Sally Briggs, Gulf Greyhound Park’s general manager. “In 2020 we’ll have 36 performance days. We’ll usually run 10 races per each performance day, four times a week. We ran in January and part of February this year.”

Simulcast wagering still draws gamblers but won’t be sustainable for dog racing if all U.S. dog race tracks are eventually shut down.

“U.S. permit holders are not licensed to take wagers on foreign races,” said Christine Dorchak, president and general counsel for GREY2K USA Worldwide, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit working to abolish greyhound racing.

GREY2K has had Gulf Greyhound Park on its radar for years, and last year complained to the racing commission that despite having so few races per year, the track’s record for injured and killed dogs during the 2017 to 2018 racing season was up over the previous season with 11 dogs suffering broken legs and four that died at the La Marque track.

Live racing was halted at Gulf Greyhound Park in 2015 due to increased competition from casinos, unprofitability and rising costs, but resumed in December 2017.

GREY2K Executive Director Carey Thiel argued in last year’s letter to the racing commission that the death of one dog in particular, a greyhound named Pizza Man Dan, was beyond the pale.

An injury report from the commission showed an injury was discovered after the kennel master heard “an excruciating scream from the dog” and found the dog bleeding profusely from his tongue. The report said “blood was everywhere in the cage” and “repair was not possible at the track due to extensive damage.”

Instead of taking the dog to be treated off-site at an emergency clinic, the veterinarian at the track decided to put it down, according to the report. Other animals were put down after breaking legs, according to the report.

GREY2K predicts the closing of Southland in Arkansas will be a death knell for live racing in the United States.

“Florida was the beginning of the end. The closure of Southland is just the next chapter,” Dorchak said. “Dog racing in Texas, if it was on life support before, is on its way to last rites.”

Arkansas announced it will help workers find new jobs and will gradually ratchet down the number of races at Southland through the end of 2022, allowing time for adoption of about 1,200 greyhounds that currently race at the track.

The track has been open with live greyhound racing since 1956 and is one of the most popular tracks in the country, according to Southland.

“We’re awfully glad that dog racing is so minimalized now,” Dorchak said. “But dogs are still paying with their lives.”

The industry used to have 49 live racing tracks in 15 states. After Arkansas shuts down, there will be five remaining live greyhound racing tracks in four states, including Gulf Greyhound Park.