

Activists: 20 dogs died after Texas races in '08

But breeders say that only a tiny percentage of greyhounds are hurt

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AUSTIN — P's Strawboss had a fractured neck. Slatex Frank's toe was torn loose. DLT Monster Mutt's right hock was dislocated. Tipp Speedster suffered a torn ligament.

They were among 20 greyhounds that died or were euthanized after races in Texas last year, and among 312 dogs that had minor-to-major injuries that are an inevitable part of racing, according to records obtained by a Massachusetts-based group seeking to end dog racing nationally.

For Christine Dorchak, president and general counsel of GREY2K USA, the figures from the Texas Racing Commission show the need to halt an industry in which dogs are hurt as "a cost of doing business."

To breeders and track proponents, the figures show a tiny percentage of injuries compared to the tens of thousands of times dogs collectively round tracks. Nearly two-thirds of 2008 injuries were rated as minor, according to the commission. No injuries prompted further commission investigation or action.

"As long as greyhound racing continues, greyhounds will be hurt and sometimes die. And that's our concern," Dorchak said. "Dogs deserve to be protected. ... There's no excuse for treating them like commodities."

Diane Whiteley, a breeder and executive director of the Texas Greyhound Association, disputed the criticism.

"For us, that's like saying no dogs should be athletic," Whiteley said. "Anybody that's ever had a greyhound that's been injured feels awful about that. They're like your kids."

'Very, very regulated'

Gulf Greyhound Park in La Marque, the only Texas track that currently has live dog racing, accounted for most of the 2008 injuries with its year-round racing schedule. Valley Race Park in Harlingen raced part of last year and since has taken a break in live racing.

Of the 342 Texas track injuries examined by GREY2K USA for 2008 (28 dogs were injured more than once), 321 occurred at Gulf Greyhound Park. The rest were at Valley Race Park.

Both tracks defend their records of safety and care for the dogs and say state oversight is strict.

"We are very, very regulated," said Gulf Greyhound General Manager Sally Briggs. A state veterinarian and track veterinarian, plus three state judges, are on site for races, and trainers are licensed, she said.

"Compare it to athletes. That's what these greyhounds are," said Briggs. "All athletes are going to get hurt at some point in time. ... We do everything we can to keep them from having injuries."

Dorchak discounted the comparison.

"I've heard those who defend greyhound racing compare racing injuries suffered by dogs to injuries suffered by girls playing volleyball," she said. "There's no death by volleyball that I know of. These greyhounds are trained to race, and they suffer the consequences. They don't have a choice."

Andrea Young, president and chief operating officer of Valley Race Park, said in a statement, "Valley Race Park works hard with the greyhound community and the Texas Racing Commission to provide a safe environment and the best possible racing conditions for all race participants."

Track proponents compare the number of injuries to the number of races multiplied by the number of dogs in each race. By that reckoning, the 342 injuries represent less than 1 percent of the total 40,811 starts in Texas in 2008. The injuries occurred among a total 2,492 dogs, according to the commission, meaning 12.5 percent of dogs were injured in some way.

According to state figures, the 321 injuries at Gulf Greyhound occurred among 1,393 dogs that collectively ran a total of 29,347 times. At Valley Race Park, there were 21 injuries to 1,099 dogs that collectively ran 11,464 times.

'Poetry in motion'

Cathryn Caldwell, whose Fast K9's Greyhound Adoption in League City routes retired racers to adoptive homes, referred to industry estimates that more than 90 percent of registered greyhounds are adopted or returned to the farm as pets or to breed.

"I think if you were to wholesale close greyhound racing tomorrow, the streets would run with blood. There is no way adoption could take in and handle all of the dogs that would be released,"

Jackie Puls, of Spring, who adopted retired Gulf Greyhound racer Lofty from Caldwell, said she and her husband enjoy watching greyhound races.

"It's like poetry in motion," Puls said. "These dogs are making money, and they're treated like little princes and princesses."

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