

THE DAILY NEWS

Gulf Greyhound celebrates 20th anniversary

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LA MARQUE — When it opened 20 years ago Saturday, Gulf Greyhound Park drew 8,000 customers who wagered \$870,000. A few days later, what was then the largest greyhound track in the world had a record-setting 11,653 customers, and a month later, customers wagered about \$1 million in one day.

By the end of 1993, its first full year of operation, average attendance at the track was 4,190 people a day. Visitors wagered \$268.38 million that year, and more than 1,100 people worked at the track.

Twenty years later?

On average, fewer than 500 people come to the track each day, and the wagers on live and simulcast racing were about \$35.4 million in 2011, according to Texas Racing Commission statistics. There are now about 195 — mostly part-time — employees.

As the track prepares to celebrate its 20th anniversary this weekend, officials said they are committed to keeping the doors open as the track looks to a new future — possibly with casino-style gambling.

“For us to have a restaurant that seated more than 1,800 people, it was just unbelievable,” Gulf Greyhound Park Manager Sally Briggs said.

Briggs is among the 37 employees who have been with the track since the start. She started as the administrative assistant for then manager Butch Hughes, worked her way up through the ranks and in 2003 was named general manager.

“Even though we are not what we used to be, we’re still holding our own,” Briggs said. “We had a great spring and summer. (Wagering) was up, and attendance was good.”

Simulcast racing — satellite feeds from horse and dog tracks from across the country — now accounts for most of the wagering and draws most of the crowd, Briggs said.

Two of the track’s four floors are closed to the public.

After years of attendance and wagering declines, the track is aggressively working to bring more customers into the facility, Briggs said.

Gulf Greyhound recently formed a partnership with the new Tanger Outlets to promote the facility.

The track loaned its parking lot when the outlet center opened its doors to handle overflow parking and shuttle service, something Briggs said they'll do again Thanksgiving weekend.

The track is advertising more, too, she said.

Assisted-living centers from the Houston-area bus residents to the track each Wednesday afternoon for a matinee race program and an inexpensive buffet. Briggs recently hired someone to seek groups to have parties in one of the track's party suites.

There's also a weekly Snowman Poker tournament in which players play for points to enter tournaments elsewhere. Those are some of the ways Gulf Greyhound is trying to keep people coming, Briggs said.

The track also leases its parking lot for car shows, sports car club races and corporate events.

Others, including critics, don't see a bright future.

"Gulf (Greyhound) is a microcosm of what's happening in the dog racing industry across the country," Carey Thiel, executive director of the anti-dog racing group Grey2K, said. "Gambling is down. You see a shift from live racing to simulcast. It's a dying industry."

Thiel points out that in Gulf Greyhound's request to the Texas Racing Commission for racing days, there are none for 2014. He takes that as an indication that the track is prepared to close its doors.

"They're looking at what the legislature will do about legalizing (casino-style) gambling next year and then making no plans for the year after," he said, noting that tracks usually set their racing dates two years in advance.

Not so, Briggs said. She said despite the downturn, the track's ownership group is committed to keeping the facility up and running.

"As long as we keep expenses in check and maintain what we have, we are still a viable (operation)," Briggs said.

Gulf Greyhound Park's reach goes beyond the facility in La Marque. The company is part of a group that now manages what was Corpus Christi Greyhound Park, as well as a simulcast-only facility in Fredericksburg, Briggs said.

The future of the tracks might not come from wagering on dogs or horses. Rather, there might be yet another push for legislation that would allow casino-style gambling at pari-mutuel centers like Gulf Greyhound Park.

"We just want the people to have a chance to vote," Briggs said of the lobbying effort. "If it goes to the vote of the people of Texas, we think that will finally (expand gambling) in Texas."

It's still a long shot. State Rep. Craig Eiland, D-Galveston, has twice introduced legislation to put gambling on the ballot as a constitutional amendment.

The drafted legislation has never been given a vote in the Republican-controlled Texas Legislature.

Even if the legislation doesn't pass, customers can count on one thing. Terry Lilly will still be walking the floors at the track looking to help customers understand the finer points of greyhound racing. Like Briggs, Lilly, 72, has been with the track from the start.

Lilly spent one day as a teller before taking on a job in customer service. She's now the customer service manager.

"It's been great," Lilly said. "It's still fun and exciting. We have customers who've been with us 20 years too, and I like being around people."

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Gulf Greyhound at 20

WHEN: 7 p.m. Saturday

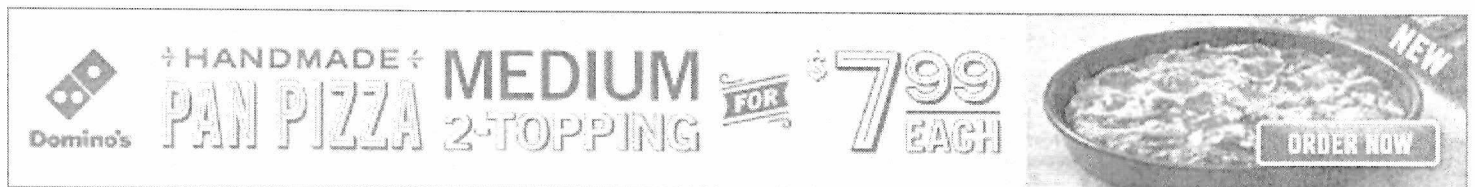
WHERE: Interstate 45 at FM 1764 in La Marque

WHAT'S HAPPENING: Gulf Greyhound Park will mark its 20th anniversary with prizes for customers and an anniversary race.

The first 300 customers will get commemorative T-shirts and wallets. Some of the wallets will have prizes inside.

Beer drinkers will get a commemorative 20th anniversary glass

The 13th race that night will feature eight of the state's best greyhounds running for a \$20,000 purse Texas Greyhound Association Sprint Championship.



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