

A vanishing sport: Dog racing is running its course

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Kennel trainer Sarah Kettlewell hugs one of the greyhounds at the Florida Kennels in Hialeah.

Barney O'Donnell wades through dozens of his dogs when he steps into their turnout pen. They surround him, jumping up to his waist and wagging their tails as he scratches ears, pats heads and shakes paws.

"What do you want? How you doing, buddy?" O'Donnell says. "Cindy, how's my Cindy?"

O'Donnell, 81, has been training sleek greyhounds to race for 55 years. It's a tough business that dirties your fingernails and burns your nerves. The barking, bathing, feeding and racing never stop. O'Donnell

has acquired a crust over the years, the same way a mollusk thickens its shell. But his gruff voice turns to honey when he's talking to his dogs. "They understand curse words, you know," he says. "You can't swear at 'em. It hurts their feelings. They're very smart."

It would be easier to treat the dogs as numbers, just as the few bettors do at the racetrack, where the grandstand has the feel of an abandoned relic. O'Donnell has devoted his life to greyhound racing and, now, right before his eyes, the sport is vanishing.

Only the hard-core fans remember his stars Derek's Cadillac, Yellow Printer, My Tipper, Placid Ace, Starlight Irene. Only the old-timers remember Rocking Ship, the Jesse Owens of dog racing who won 53 of 86 races and \$100,000 before he died from a snake bite in 1973.

O'Donnell goes to work at 6 a.m. seven days a week at the Florida Kennels in Hialeah yet wishes he could detach himself from his dogs and retire. There are often fewer than 100 people in stands that used to hold 8,000, 10,000, 14,750 on one record night.

Dog racing has been in decline for 20 years. In Florida, where 16 tracks survive, the handle, or amount wagered, on racing has dropped from about \$620 million to \$300 million in 10 years. Pari-mutuel wagering on dog racing, horse racing and jai alai has fallen 44 percent in the past 10 years, from \$1.7 billion to \$958.5 million, and state tax revenues have fallen by 55 percent as a result. The handle at Miami's Flagler dog track was \$25 million last year.

But patrons wagered \$68 million on the 734 slot machines in the adjoining Magic City Casino. The cardroom grossed an additional \$5.1 million.

“Live racing is a money-loser,” said Juan Fra, Magic City's general manager. He's spent his entire career in the business, starting as a 15-year-old leadout who walked the dogs through the post parade to the starting line. “I feel bad for the people on the greyhound side. Like fishermen, it's what they know. But you've got to adapt. Luckily, I love poker.”

At the intersection of Flagler Street and Douglas Road, giant neon signs shimmer with the name “Magic City Casino.” There's no mention of dog racing at what used to be known as “Fabulous Flagler.”

When you enter the casino, it's not easy to find the dog track. The people who do can choose from thousands of empty seats.

The song *Who Let the Dogs Out?* plays on the loudspeakers. An announcer gives handicapping information but those at the Tres Hermanos bar aren't listening. A race begins when the start box lids flip open and eight greyhounds bound out, angle toward the rail and chase the mechanical rabbit around the track. They run with long, lunging strides. As they charge into the homestretch, a spectator shouts out. “Come on, number four!” Letsgroovetonite, who avoided the bumping in the first turn, holds on for first in 30.99 seconds.

Nobody cheers. The dogs are led off the track.

Leaving the track and entering the casino is like walking from a desert into an oasis bazaar. The chiming, tooting slot machines, ambient pop music and murmurs of patrons create layers of noise. Everywhere you turn, there are flashing lights and animated characters: Zeus, Lucky Meerkats, Treasure of Machu Picchu, Reel Them In and Catch the Big One.

The people inside don't go outside, and most have no idea that the graceful, muscular greyhounds are racing around the track at 40 mph.

Yet Magic City must keep racing a minimum number of days per year in order to operate the casino. It's the same situation at the Mardi Gras casino and dog track in Hollywood. When South Florida voters approved slot machines in 2005 and 2008, state legislators mandated the creation of “racinos” to buffer the expansion of Las Vegas-style gambling and preserve pari-mutuel livelihoods.

But dog racing, horse racing and jai alai can't compete with slots and cardrooms. Magic City paid \$1.2 million in dog purses last year, little more than it paid poker players.

“These sports are somewhat complicated. You have to do math. You have to show up at a certain time,” said Bob Jarvis, a law professor at Nova Southeastern University and an expert on sports and gambling. “With a slot machine, you sit down, press a button, things happen. It's ideal for the cultural shifts in our limited-attention-span society.”

Owners have little incentive to refurbish the aging track side of the business when they can put that money into the casino, thus hastening the decline of the sport.

“Dogs, horses and jai alai players need to eat, sleep and go to the bathroom,” Jarvis said. “They’re expensive and their facilities take up acres of land.”

Florida’s gambling and entertainment landscape has changed radically in the past 25 years with the state lottery, Indian gaming, high-stakes poker, online betting, the rebirth of Miami Beach and three additional pro sports franchises luring patrons away from pari-mutuels.

“The pari-mutuels finally realized they were dying,” Jarvis said. “They could either sell these huge pieces of property for condos or embrace their former enemy the casino. By then the Indians had a head start. The problem with the racinos is they still have to give a portion of the money to the purses and trainers. The Indians don’t have to share their money with anybody.”

O'Donnell cites the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino as the pari-mutuels' brilliant nemesis.

“Hard Rock has aggressive marketing,” he said. “You keep selling hair tonic, Jesus Christ, people are going to buy it. They give away cars. One of their prizes is paying off your mortgage. They’ve got the people absolutely wacko with their gimmicks. They could promote snow in the Caribbean.”

Jarvis likens dog racing to the medieval trebuchet: Its time has passed.

“TV never fell in love with dog racing,” he said. “A lot of people own dogs as pets. They see the greyhounds and say, ‘My, God, Fluffy is being forced to race and look how emaciated he is.’ ”

Animals rights activists have also hurt the sport. Seven states passed bans on dog racing. O'Donnell resents what he calls “disturbing lies.”

“They claim we were cruel,” O'Donnell said. “I’d like the homeless people at Camillus House to eat the way our dogs eat. They’d be fat.”

O'Donnell's dogs sleep in stacked wire crates at the kennel. It's clean, functional, minimalist, not a cuddly existence. He plays soft rock and oldies on the radio for them. They get taken outside five times a day. They'll go to the practice sprint path once every few days and race once every 5-7 days. Their careers last 2-3 years. They eat a stew of beef, spinach, carrots, barley, noodles and vitamins.

“These dogs love to run,” said O'Donnell's kennel trainer Sarah Kettlewell as she rubbed liniment on the haunches of Moving Target. She recently adopted a retired dog named Quiet. “They’re like our children. It’s the best feeling when you walk in and they bark -- ‘Hey, Mommy, let’s go.’ ”

O'Donnell and his wife Pauline breed, raise, train and race hundreds of dogs. They own a puppy farm in Texas. He comes from an Irish family in Boston. She comes from Ireland, where dog racing is popular. Their favorite dog was Yellow Printer, who used to sleep in bed with them.

The rumpled Barney and the elegant Pauline make an interesting couple.

“She does the thinking, I do the thumping,” O'Donnell said.

The O'Donnells are among the best in the business.

“Maybe they are what's kept me alive, the dogs,” O'Donnell said. “If more people spent time with animals there wouldn't be all this fighting in the world.”

O'Donnell recalled the sport's heyday, when going to the dogs was a fun night out. People came to the track in spiffy clothes. Babe Ruth, Bob Hope, Joe Louis and Milton Berle used to come. O'Donnell used to have breakfast with Jackie Gleason at a drugstore by the kennels while Gleason's chauffeur waited in the car.

The Miami Beach and Biscayne tracks, since demolished, were packed, too. For the major events, the \$80,000 classics, the leadouts wore tuxedos and top hats and spotlights shone on the dogs. Now, a typical purse pays half what it used to -- \$500 to the winner, with 35 percent going to the dog's owner and 65 percent to the kennel. Stud fees are down, too.

“People used to talk and debate about the dogs as if they were athletes,” said Fra, 51, who started at Flagler in 1974. “They'd discuss Downing's win streak. Bashful Guy was a fast-breaking dog, Sandy Printer was a come-from-behind dog. After the last race we'd drive over to Miami Jai Alai and bet the last game.”

The elegant greyhound was praised by King Solomon in the Bible. The breed was a favorite of Cleopatra and European aristocrats. It was brought to the United States to catch jack rabbits. In 1910 an impresario named O.P. Smith patented his “inanimate hare conveyor.” In 1922 he opened a track in Hialeah, where dog racing had an unsavory reputation until pari-mutuel betting was legalized in 1932.

Banana importer Isadore Hecht bought the Flagler track in 1954 and built it into an attraction. “There are a few things you aren't going to stop people from doing: smoking, drinking and sometimes placing a bet,” he said.

After he died, his family kept it running, opening a flea market in the parking lot and holding bar mitzvahs in the auditorium. Building the casino cost \$55 million but now Magic City is breaking even and vice president Izzy Havenick, whose pet dogs roam the offices, hopes the recent tax cut on slot revenues, a brightening economy and the potential for retail shops will boost its profile.

As for the future of greyhound racing, O'Donnell is not optimistic. He rumbles around the kennel area in his old Lincoln Town Car and points out empty buildings that used to be home to the top dogs.

“We have quite an adoption program,” he said. “They don't shed much and they're very affectionate. People love them.”