

SARASOTA

The End of Dog Racing at the Sarasota Kennel Club? | City & Region

Since 1929, dogs have been racing at the Sarasota Kennel Club, but the facility—and the sport—are starting to show their age.

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The Sarasota Kennel Club hangs by a thread.

That thread is poker. The money that keeps the Sarasota dog track in the black comes from gambling on cards, not dogs, thanks to a Florida law that requires dog (or horse) racing if facilities also offer gambling on card

games.

And that's how it happens that dog racing and One-Eyed Jacks poker co-exist in an aging facility on Old Bradenton Road.

Once, this orange and white building with its massive parking lot and oval quarter-mile dirt track was a destination for the affluent seeking an entertaining evening. Built in 1929, the Sarasota Kennel Club owes much to multimillionaire and philanthropist Jerry Collins and his family. Collins bought the club for \$5,005 in back taxes. As he did with four circuses and five other race tracks he bought, Collins made it profitable. Collins put the glory in its glory days.

But that was back then. Dogs were dogs. They raced. People watched. People cheered. People bet on the outcome. Today, protestors have greeted patrons on opening day at the club. Signs argue that dog racing for human entertainment is a form of animal cruelty. The racing dogs are said to be jacked-up on steroids. Attendance has declined. In some affluent circles today, dog racing is about as popular as cigarette smoking. And advocacy groups want it snuffed out.

Truth is, the Florida gambling industry has changed substantially over the past 25 years. Today's gambler has the Florida lottery, Seminole Indian facilities as close as Tampa, high-stakes poker, online gambling. Now, a gambling itch can be scratched with lottery tickets or a vacation at a Hard Rock Casino facility.

Recent figures show that, in Florida, where 16 dog and horse tracks survive, the amount wagered on racing has dropped from about \$620 million to \$300 million in the past decade alone.

Money not bet on racing has to be replaced by...something. At Sarasota Kennel Club, the most heavily peopled room is called One-Eyed Jacks, where people sit around tables and bet on game outcomes. Less populated are the grandstands, where patrons watch the live races. There's also a room with TV monitors, where bettors watch simulcasts of races from other tracks and can bet on those races, horses and dogs.

Around them, however, is a facility that looks its age. Oh, it's clean. Walls get painted. Floors get swept. But age shows, like an elderly woman who changes lipstick color every few years. She still looks old. Here, age shows in breakdowns of the mechanical rabbit that the greyhounds chase. That rabbit races on a rail that circles the quarter-mile dirt track, and sometimes the rabbit loses its get-up-and-go. Workers in trenches splice and twist and coax the decoy back into action. Races get delayed.

Age also shows in a starting gate that doesn't always open properly. In a poker room where it's too cold or too hot, depending on table location. Decline is mentioned frequently in online comments, where the facility is lambasted and enthusiasts are encouraged to travel to Tampa for improved facilities.

Florida's gaming laws are in flux these days. Not long ago, the law covering the hours of card-playing gambling was relaxed, and bettors leave the Sarasota Kennel Club as late as 3 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights.

Cards have been so financially successful that club owners want the next big money-maker: slot machines. At present, the Seminole Tribe has state rights to operate slot machines. Indian-owned-and-run gambling has enriched Seminoles so greatly that each tribal member receives about \$1,000 a month, and the state will get a

guaranteed \$3 billion over the next seven years.

Gov. Rick Scott has proffered a proposal that will add craps and roulette in Seminole facilities. That would bring Florida close to full Las Vegas-style resorts and casinos.

But here's a "biggie" for clubs like Sarasota's: The governor's 61-page proposal could end the requirement of dog racing where other gambling is allowed. His proposal removes the requirement for a minimum number of races a club must have in order to host legalized slot machines or poker games. In legal parlance, it's called "decoupling." No dogs? No problem.

The Legislature has yet to act on these changes. But with the popularity of dog racing in decline for the past 20 years, it seems likely that the end of dogs chasing Sparky the Rabbit might be near. Sarasota Kennel Club's director of racing, Thomas Bowersox, 71, has been with the track for 55 years. Yes, he's seen dramatic changes, he says. And decoupling won't spell the end of the club. The local facility, he says, will carry on, with or without dog racing.

Bet on it.