


PortlandTribune

Remembering the park

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Empty for 11 years, historic greyhound park will be demolished by new owners this year



OUTLOOK PHOTO: JOSH KULLA - Abandoned since 2004, the Multnomah Greyhound Park's massive grandstand and infield carries signs of age and vandalism. Its new owners, the Grand Ronde Tribe, plans to tear down the structure this spring.

You can still feel the sand on Multnomah Greyhound Park's track, but the once-immaculate infield is overgrown with blackberries.

Plywood covers broken windows of the towering grandstand. Inside, seats and walkways are covered with shards of glass, old pamphlets and pages from a 2004 phone directory.

It's been 11 years since the massive structure in the middle of Wood Village closed, and 11 years since it was cared for. It now crumbles at the whim of the elements and trespassers.

Walls, windows and even ceilings are covered with graffiti. Trash leaves clues to the trespassers — a Dutch Bros cup, Dewalt drill case, Rice Krispies Treat box and plenty of empty cigarette packages.

The once-bustling entertainment center was shuttered in December 2004. The roar of applause from thousands of bettors has long been replaced by the occasional chirping bird and the greyhounds by nine or so feral cats who've turned the concrete structure into a playground.

Ready for Grand Opening Monday Night



OUTLOOK FILE PHOTO - The greyhound park opened in Wood Village in 1957, costing the Multnomah Kennel Club \$1.5 million to complete.

THE WALKER

Eric Gustafson

You only needed to be 12 years old to enter the Multnomah Kennel Club. Eric Gustafson of Gresham was 11 when he snuck into his first race in 1968.

“The guys at the gate would always ask kids when they walk in, ‘What’s your birthday?’ My dad coached me what to answer,” Gustafson said. His first bet was on a dog named Laurelhurst.

“It was the number four dog, in the fourth race, and unfortunately he finished fourth,” he laughs.

That was just the beginning of what became a nearly 40-year association with greyhound racing. In the 1970s, Gustafson worked as one of the walkers, one of the many teenagers hired to lead greyhounds around the track before and after races.

“When I was walking dogs, there were very, very strict rules against betting,” Gustafson said. “Which doesn’t mean we didn’t do it. We bet all the time.”

On the night before high school graduation, Gustafson and a friend planned out 24 trifecta bets — where each bet includes a pick for first, second and third place. You had to be 21 to wager, so Gustafson’s dad placed the bets.

“I was actually walking a dog in that race that we bet on,” he said. “The race was over and it just so happens that our dogs came in the right order.”

They won \$3,350.

“I split it with my buddy ... he bought a Volkswagen with his half,” Gustafson said. “I pretty much spent my half on beer.”

Gustafson met his wife, Sherry, at the park, where they even held their wedding reception. He later handled the track’s data, performance records, daily programs and assorted paperwork.

His association with the park transitioned into a long sidelight managing greyhounds, as well as a 30-year career in the Multnomah Education Service District’s technology department.

Gustafson raced greyhounds in Arizona until five years ago and had greyhounds at MGP when it closed.

“When the last day came, there was a lot of uncertainty about whether we could get it going again,” he said. “We were hoping to get someone to come in and operate it. On the last day, we didn’t think it would really be the last day. It wasn’t like a funeral, because we didn’t think it was over.”

It wasn’t until 2008 that Gustafson lost hope.



OUTLOOK PHOTO: JOSH KULLA - In its heyday, MGP's grandstands could seat more than 6,000 people. Now the interior is filled with shattered glass from the floor-to-ceiling windows.

THE ACTION

Here comes Rusty

The gates spring open. Lean, sleek greyhounds charge around the track, trained to chase a fake, white rabbit speeding 60 mph on a mechanical rail. The race lasts just 30 seconds. In that short time — and for 12 other races — thousands of people will bet thousands of dollars as they yell and scream for their favorite dog.

Greyhound racing began in downtown Portland in 1933 but the legendary track didn't move east until 1957, under the name Fairview Park. In 1978 it was renamed Murray Kemp Greyhound Park in honor of the club's founder and longtime president. In 1991 it became Multnomah Greyhound Park.

The track reached its peak in 1987 when 611,430 people attended during the season. Seasons ran 130 days from May through early October; daily betting totals often reached \$1 million.

The park could hold 18,760 people but had just 6,064 seats, so many bettors crowded onto paved slope between the stands and track.

It wasn't unusual to see 10,000 people at the park, having dinner in the third-floor buffet or with a group of friends in the second-floor seats, all scurrying to get their bets down every 15 minutes.

But change was on the horizon as Oregon allowed other forms of gambling to take hold. In 1985, the voter-approved Oregon Lottery started its first "scratch-it" games, expanding to video poker in 1992. By 1996 there were six tribal casinos in Oregon. The change in gambling habits hit live racing — greyhounds at MKC and thoroughbreds at Portland Meadows.

To compete, Multnomah Greyhound Park added video poker in 1995. It was of little help. By 2002, betting totals fell to \$11 million, less than half from just seven years earlier.

The track closed in December 2004 so its new owners, Magna Entertainment, could focus on its other racing property, Portland Meadows.



OUTLOOK PHOTO: JOSH KULLA - Today, the grandstand is neglected and filled with debris from the last races held in 2004.

THE TICKET TAKER

Dennis Bryson

It was a different world behind the betting window. Many workers changed each season, Dennis Bryson said, and most of his fellow ticket-takers — himself included — had to know someone to get a job at the park.

“There were all kinds of people who worked there,” Bryson said. “You name it, we were there. I just happened to have a relative who was in the Legislature, so I happened to get a job.”

Bryson worked behind the counter for 20 years, taking bets, cashing tickets, and occasionally playing a prank or two.

“I had a lot of fun. Some nights I would laugh so much I’d leave there with my side hurting,” the Corbett resident said. “Some of it wasn’t legal, some of it was legal. When you’re dealing with the public, all kinds of crazy things happen. Some of the people working there were characters right out of Damon Runyon.”

Bryson taught at David Douglas and Columbia high schools, so like many others working at the park it was a nice way to supplement his income. He stopped when his son finished college.

“It was a great time and I’m glad I had the job, but it was kind of nice to have my evenings,” he said.

Bryson fondly remembers the ways ticket takers entertained themselves.

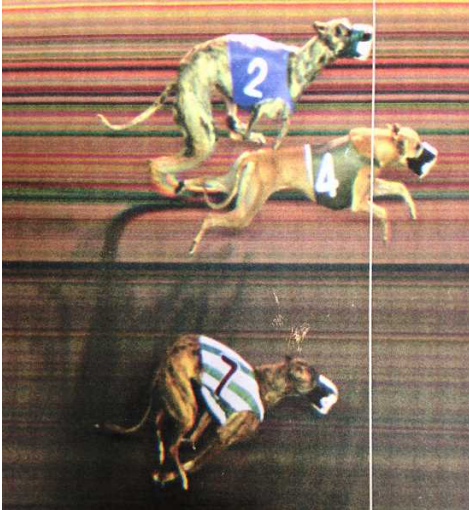
“The people behind the line were not supposed to bet, but we did because we would get all these tips,” he said. “One person was a chronic better. After every race, he would go over to the nearest garbage can, and sort his tickets.”

Bryson said one habitual better had size 15½ shoes, and would take them off behind the counter.

“One night I took his shoes and put them in the garbage can. At the end of the night, he couldn’t find his shoes, because he had buried them himself with his losing tickets, not knowing,” Bryson chuckled. “Things like that happened every night. I don’t know why I got paid some nights, I was totally entertained.”

Although the park would remain open for 20 more years when Bryson quit, he could tell the end was coming.

“In the beginning there was a lot of money, but the money started going to other places,” he said.



OUTLOOK PHOTO: JOSH KULLA - This photo from the second race on Aug. 25, 2004, is among the remnants found at MGP.

THE BUYERS

Grand Ronde

In 2005 two private developers began an effort to build Oregon's first and only nontribal casino on the property. Their initiative finally reached the ballot in 2013, but was soundly defeated by voters statewide.

Last October the owners of the state's largest casino, the Grand Ronde Tribe, purchased the decaying property for \$11.2 million. Although an agreement with the state limits each tribe to one casino, Grand Ronde leaders won't say how they will develop it, only that it will be leveled this year. The tribe says it wants to diversify its holdings, steering away from a casino that would draw customers away from Spirit Mountain Casino in Grand Ronde. A second casino would also require a difficult change in Oregon law.

Only when the ground is bare, the tribe says, will they will decide what the property could and will hold.

THE VOICE

Eric Anderson

If you didn't know Eric Anderson, you knew his voice.

"I was the guy who says, 'Here comes Rusty!'"

Anderson was the park's announcer from 1991 to 1993 and from 1996 until the final race in October 2004.

"It was a blast. It wasn't something I'd describe as work," said Anderson, a Troutdale city councilor for five years.

He remembers nights like when the track decided to capitalize on a dog named C.J. Pepto Geno who was about to set a record of 16 straight wins.

"So we did it up, everyone in tuxedos," he said. "A lot of people who had never seen a greyhound race before came because of the media hype for this greyhound. And he did it. I've never heard cheering that loud for a greyhound."

"Surreal," is how Anderson describes the park's last day.

"We knew it was the end. It started getting sad, I think we ran 18 races that night, we just ran a ton," he said. "The final race, I let the crowd scream, 'Here comes Rusty,' I let them do it."

Now, he'd do it differently.

“I would have let that last race run silent, just without any audio,” he said. “Some things don’t need color commentary. The last race of MGP, that’s been here for 60 years, is one of those things in hindsight that didn’t need any commentary.”

Capturing the same atmosphere and magic as the park, Anderson said, won’t be replicated. This is due in part to how competition has changed.

“You’ve got daily fantasy series now, the instant gratification of the internet,” he said. “Social media people aren’t conditioned to sit and wait for 15 minutes to be entertained. It was just a once in a lifetime thing.”

He said a changing audience is one of the reasons the park failed, despite the park also trying to change.

“But you can’t stop a national trend. You can slow it down, but you can’t reverse it,” he said. “We all knew what was going on nationally, but we weren’t ready to stop trying. We worked a little bit harder because of it.”

Although the park’s future is unclear, Anderson said it’s terrific to move forward.

“For something that died and went away in 2004, to have that physical reminder of something that has been gone for 11 years, no one deserves that,” Anderson said. “We’re going to get something that is viable for the region. I’m ecstatic.”

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