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Live Dog Racing Comes To An End In Arizona

By [Jimmy Jenkins](#)

Published: Tuesday, May 10, 2016 - 8:11am
Updated: Tuesday, May 10, 2016 - 10:11am

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(Photo by Jimmy Jenkins - KJZZ)
The Dog Days Bar at the Tucson Greyhound Park sits empty on a Saturday night. In its heyday, thousands of patrons used to crowd the track.

A ragged rabbit lure squeaks as it skips along a rusted metal railing. The sound sends eight anxious greyhounds into a frenzy before they're released from their wooden starting boxes to barrel down the dirt track at the Tucson Greyhound Park. There used to be five dog tracks like this in Arizona. Now Tucson is the last one in the state. While thousands used to fill the stands here, only about five people are sitting outside on this cool Saturday evening watching the dogs run in circles under the stars.

Phil Clay and his wife came down from Phoenix. They like watching live racing but don't take it too seriously. "It's just something to do, it's fun to watch them run around the track," Clay said. "You know, pick a couple numbers and see what happens without any real intelligence behind it."

There's a bigger crowd inside the racetrack clubhouse. But they're not paying attention to the greyhounds or having a drink at the Dog Days Bar. They're watching simulcast videos from other racetracks around the state. For the Tucson Greyhound Park, this is where the real money comes from.

Off Track Betting

Tucson Greyhound Park earns hundreds of thousands of dollars a year from other racetracks that pay to simulcast their races on TV screens in Tucson. People can come to the Greyhound Park or one of their off track betting sites to wager on horse and dog races in others parts of the state and the country.

But Arizona law mandates that to offer simulcast races and off track betting, Tucson Greyhound Park has to offer live racing as well. Which is why the dogs are still running-- eight at a time, 16 races a night, 140 nights a year-- in front of mostly empty bleachers. And with each lap the dogs may be risking their limbs and their lives.



(Photo by Jimmy Jenkins - KJZZ)
The starting boxes at the Tucson Greyhound Park

Running For Their Lives

Christine Dorchak is the President of [GREY2K USA](#), which is the group behind the current racing ban effort. She says the greyhounds are sleek and lightweight and can run as fast as 40 miles an hour. "Greyhounds are the second fastest animals on Earth and they're very fragile," Dorchak said. When they bump into each other at such high speeds, their bodies just can't withstand the impact. "And that's why we see broken necks, broken legs, we see paralysis, we see spinal cord injuries," Dorchak said.

GREY2K USA claims greyhound racing is cruel and inhumane and the group cites the Tucson track as one of the worst in the country for dog injuries. Records from the track show two dogs died racing last year, while more than 120 were injured. [Video](#) taken by GREY2K USA shows the dogs are kept in their muzzles while living in cramped cages on track owned property.

A Declining Industry

Michael Racy represents Tucson Greyhound Park. He says the industry is aware of its public perception. "Horse and dog racing nationwide has been struggling over the last many years," Racy said. "The sport overall is and has been in decline."

Racy says public tastes and perceptions have turned against animal racing, and competition from casino style gaming has only sped up the decline. "It is hard for traditional gaming to compete against the very fast action of video terminals slot machines," he said.

The track owners have come to accept the end of the live racing era, but Racy said they want to hold on to the lucrative simulcast revenue. So a compromise was struck between the track and the animal right groups to get a bill through the state House.

Compromise

[Chris Ackerley](#) represents Tucson at the Legislature. He says the bill they've crafted will allow Tucson Greyhound Park to stop hosting live racing at the end of the year and still offer simulcasting at the track and their off track sites for two more years. This arrangement would allow the park to keep its main revenue source, while dog racing would come to an end in Arizona.

"It was originally brought to do away with live dog racing, but the majority of the bill actually has to do with off track betting," Racy said of the legislation. "But if we're going to legislate them out of business then there needs to be an exit strategy."

Ackerley says additional legislation will be needed to determine what happens after the two-year grace period. The track and kennel owners will have to figure out what to do with the more than 400 dogs that live on the track property. Some will be adopted, some will be bred and others will go on to race at tracks in five other states. But at least after the end of this year, the dogs won't be chasing the rabbit at the Tucson Greyhound Park anymore.