



Dogs are racing again in Texas, but for what?

By Roy Bragg | November 27, 2016 | Updated: November 27, 2016 7:11pm

HARLINGEN — Greyhound racing’s return to Texas over the weekend didn’t happen because anyone wanted it, but rather because certain special interests needed it.

If you’re betting on greyhound racing to be successful, odds are you’ll lose.

Things looked good for about 24 hours. The Friday night turnout at Valley Race Park, open for live racing for the first time since 2009, was huge. The line snaked into the packed parking lot. The 6,000-seat venue was nearly full.

By Saturday night, however, the novelty had worn off. A tiny crowd showed for the first race. A few more showed up late, but it wasn’t close to the previous night.

Breeders, of course, need dog racing to work. They want a piece of \$2.8 million in prize money that’s sitting dormant in state coffers.

Track owners, who bailed on dog racing because it lost money, want to play nice, hopeful they can curry the Legislature’s favor.

It's the newest second chance for Texas' live racing industry, which has a strange, convoluted history.

Essentially, it's been a flop everywhere.

At Valley Race Park, for example, attendance averaged around 2,000 during its last few seasons of live racing. That's one-third of the track's seating capacity.

The live racing industry blames casino gambling, at Texas Native American facilities and in nearby states, for the demise of their business.

Maybe, but there's also a fundamental design flaw with their product, to wit: It causes many people to cringe. The sight of muzzled dogs chasing a mechanical rabbit is disconcerting.

In addition, the industry has a history of cruelty.

Forty states feel so strongly about dog racing, they have banned it.

Grey2k USA, a humane organization, has documented dozens of incidents where dogs have died or been injured racing. Other times, they've been kept in unsanitary and unusually cruel conditions.

Moreover, Grey2K USA executive director Carey Thiel says, greyhound racing has not been profitable.

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Betting has plummeted. Gamblers bet \$3.5 billion on dogs in 1991; it's down to \$500 million a year now.

"It's a joke," Theil said. "There's no other way to put it."

Greyhound breeders say they've addressed concerns about animal care.

"A lot of the anti-racing people are dwelling on stuff done 20 years ago," said David Peck, Texas Greyhound Association president.

Peck says there's money set aside to pay for veterinary care for injured animals at each track and to sponsor an adoption program. Conditions at kennels, Peck added, are better and more humane.

"We've had to adapt over the years," Peck said.

The surviving horse and dog tracks, such as Retama Park in Selma, were only able to do so thanks to simulcasting, which is off-site betting on live races around the country.

Greyhound racing kept its paw in the game, however, because of a couple of requirements in state simulcasting law.

One codicil sets aside a portion of simulcast revenue for dog racing purses. With limited or no racing for several years, that money has piled up, creating a \$2.8 million windfall that's been untouched.

Another state rule allowed tracks to take up simulcasting as long as the venue maintained an "active license." To do that, tracks had to offer live racing or have plans to offer live races in the near future.

Tracks were allowed to fudge on this rule, Theil said, often promising to schedule races that never materialized. But there was always pressure to stage races.

That set up the agreement, reached earlier this year, that has put dogs back on Texas tracks.

The goal, Peck said, is to have viable venues in place in hopes the state approves slot machines.

As approved by the Texas Racing Commission, the new plan calls for 36 racing days here. That will be followed by a similar season in La Marque next year and in Corpus Christi after that.

The new money, Peck said, will allow tracks to increase purse sizes. He contends better purses will draw better dogs, and better dogs will draw more bettors to the track.

That's awfully optimistic. Wishful thinking, it appears, isn't just a blind spot for gamblers.

Everyone connected to the business wants the plan to work, but that doesn't mean it will.

If attendance dropped off so dramatically after one night, it's not realistic to assume it will pick up during the holiday season, a time when disposable income goes to presents.

Anyone counting on the narrow shoulders of a few hundred greyhounds to carry Texas into the age of casino gambling will probably be horribly disappointed.

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