

Dog racing to continue after gambling deal dies

By T.S. Jarmusz

Posted May 3, 2017 at 3:43 PM

Updated May 3, 2017 at 4:55 PM

It was nearly a photo finish, but as Florida's legislative session draws to its scheduled end on Friday, a push to end a requirement for dog racing at tracks with other gambling failed when a broader deal on gambling fell apart.

The House and Senate came within a nose of reaching a consensus that would have allowed slot machines in eight counties and limited blackjack in South Florida along with two new casinos there. The deal also would have allowed dog tracks to do away with racing operations – including those at the Daytona Beach Racing and Card Club.

Pressed by animal rights groups to eliminate the dog racing requirement and industry lobbyists not to, the Legislature has butted heads on the issue for years. Though legislative leaders agreed to allow dog tracks to decide whether they kept racing — known as decoupling — the gambling package fell apart when they couldn't come to terms on whether to allow slots at pari-mutuels in counties where voters have approved the machines.

Some wager it's only matter of time before decoupling happens, and experts say that would spell the end of dog racing at some of the state's 12 greyhound tracks.

But dog racing would still be a safe bet in Daytona — at least in the short term.

"We do plan to continue running live greyhound racing," said Fred Guzman, president and general manager of the Daytona Beach and Orange City Racing and Card Clubs. "It's still an important part of our business, and we have no intention of shutting that part of our business down."

Dog racing has been in decline since at least the '80s and coupling was the result of a 1997 Florida law aimed at injecting new life into a dying industry. It allowed tracks to add poker tables to their venues as long as they agreed to maintain 90 percent of the races they previously had run. When it passed, racetracks morphed into racinos.

But it didn't do as much for racetracks as many had hoped. A 2013 study by Spectrum Gaming Group revealed Florida's greyhound wagers plummeted from roughly \$934 million in 1990 to a little more than \$265 million in 2012, even though the number of races run fell only slightly during that period.

Daytona has weathered the decline better than other tracks.

"It's true that there are greyhound tracks in the state that are losing money," Guzman said. "We're not one of them."

For tracks, the incentive to reduce or discontinue racing boils down to money.

Large venues like Daytona, Jacksonville and Derby Lane in St. Petersburg will likely continue racing, while smaller tracks, those with slot machines and those in South Florida likely would decouple, said Dan Francati former Daytona Racing and Card Club president.

Francati left the organization in 2016 and said he was not speaking on behalf of it. While his track wasn't in the red, in later years it wasn't raking in the money seen in racing's heyday.

"The track has always been profitable, even with the decline of the industry," Francati said. "The profit has declined over the years. At one time, you were a greyhound track with a poker room. Now you're a poker room with greyhound track."

Ironically, those same tracks are now in agreement with groups they once vehemently opposed: animal activists. Given that since 2013, 376 dogs have died at Florida's racing facilities, animal rights groups have been pushing hard for decoupling for years.

"It is deeply disappointing that lawmakers have again failed to pass greyhound decoupling," said Carey Thiel, executive director of anti-dog racing nonprofit Grey2k. "As a result, dogs will continue to suffer and die needlessly."

Despite the setback, Thiel said he'll continue to fight and was optimistic dog racing will end in Florida.

While decoupling appeals to animal activists, it's potentially career-killing news for breeders, kennel operators and others in the industry – who say decoupling would eliminate thousands of jobs.

Fred Fulchino, vice president of the National Greyhound Association and president of the American Greyhound Council, said his group is "100 percent against" decoupling because it benefits card rooms at the expense of racetracks.

Given that Friday night in Daytona more people were in the card room than watching the races, a partnership once heralded to help the industry now is hurting it.

While Guzman said he would continue having races if decoupling passed, he wasn't sure if race schedules would need to be reduced at that time.

If racing were to end at Daytona, the effects would ripple through the local economy. The track employs 153 people directly in race-related operations. When one includes those employees along with other non-track employed workers like trainers, kennel operators and helpers, those salaries total more than \$5 million, Guzman said.

The recent proposal or any future one would leave Todd Byers, kennel operator and president of Daytona Beach Greyhound Kennel Owners Association, caught in limbo.

"It's not good," Byers said. "The law was a security blanket for us."

Byers has been in the business for 32 years. He employs four people and pays \$600 a week just to feed his 130 dogs. In a year, he said he spends more than \$170,000 to keep the business going — something he would like to continue doing.

"This is my home here," Byers said. "I'd probably be totally out of work and finding a job" if racing were to end at Daytona.

There are seven other kennels at the track, and Byers predicted if the track closed, most would face the same fate.

Even if they weren't die-hard race fans, patrons of the track want racing to stay.

Trey Williams of DeLand said he's been coming to the track for 14 years, and he wouldn't be happy to see racing go.

"The races really bring it out more," Williams said. "It's more exciting to see instead of just watching poker all the time."

Elaine Dupuis was on vacation from New Hampshire. She's been frequenting the races for more than 30 years and said, "It wouldn't be the same" without the dogs.

"I would be very upset because it brings so many people here and with their kids. It's very family friendly," said Tami White of Ponce Inlet. "You can have dinner here and even if you don't play, it's always fun to watch the dogs run."