



Photo by Jeremy Reper

## While controversy surrounds Florida greyhound racing, the sport is quietly fading away

By Larry Griffin

It's a lazy Saturday afternoon at the Melbourne Greyhound Park casino on April 15, the last day of racing for the season. The stands are mostly empty, with a smattering of a few dozen people scattered around an area that could seat hundreds. General manager Jim O'Brien says it's the biggest crowd, by far, that they've seen all season.

That's because greyhound racing is an industry in decline. Greyhound racing is banned in most of the United States; there are just 19 remaining active tracks in the country, and of those, 12 are located in Florida, where a pari-mutuel contract exists, linking greyhound racing to gambling. If gambling outlets don't have a greyhound racing permit, they're not allowed to hold gambling activities at their facility.

This won't be changing any time soon. In Florida's 2017 legislative session, a bill that would have decoupled racing from casino gambling failed when legislators were unable to reach a consensus.

O'Brien says his casino loses about \$200,000 a year keeping the dogs racing per the pari-mutuel contract with the state. That amount includes what it costs to get the tracks and kennels ready, air conditioning, and keeping the dogs in good shape, he says.

"It's a part of our business," he says. "It loses money, but we're big boys and if that's what the state requirement is, that's what the state requirement is."

The crowds watching greyhound racing have dwindled in recent years. The greater awareness of the mistreatment of some dogs in the industry, a general increase in animal rights activism, and the changing interests of the public have shifted tastes away from the sport.

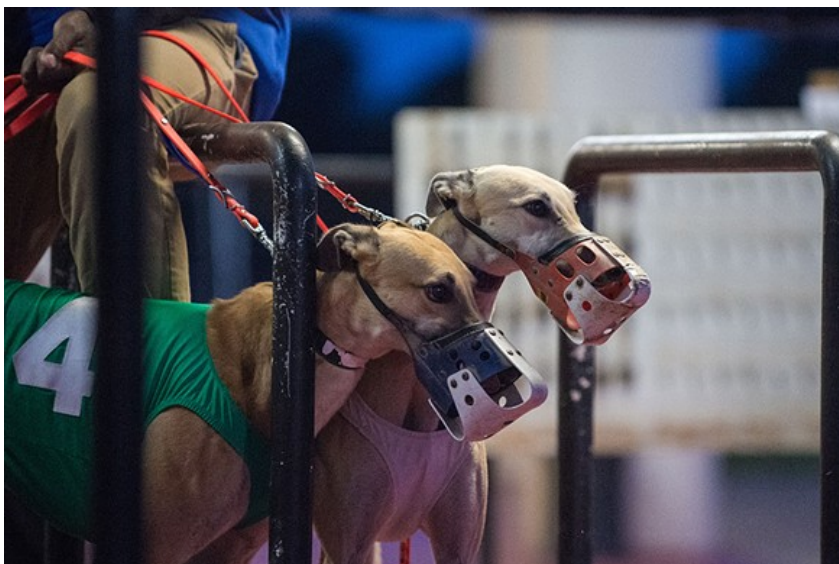


Photo by Jeremy Reper

That's also due in no small part to eye-opening revelations on the injuries dogs suffer from a recent state rule that requires greyhound injuries to be made public, not to mention accusations lodged against a Florida dog trainer after five of his greyhounds tested positive for cocaine in April.

O'Brien, though, thinks the difference comes down simply to age.

"We do have people that are regulars, just not enough," he says. "The millennials don't watch live dogs, they weren't brought up in that atmosphere. Most of the people are 60 and up."



Photo by Jeremy Reper

At Sanford Orlando Kennel Club, dogs stay in small kennels when not racing

Carey Theil, executive director of greyhound activist group Grey2K, which operates nationwide, also says he sees a generational change away from interest in greyhound racing.

"Change is hard," Theil says. "It doesn't happen overnight. It's a generational change, and it may take five, 10 or 15 years, but I'm confident it will eventually

end entirely." Theil posits it as the simple math of aging – the older base of greyhound racing fans is dying off and not being replaced with anyone new.

Jennifer O'Connor, of the PETA Foundation, sees a different reason for the "plummeting attendance."

"Greyhounds used in the racing industry live in misery and frequently die in misery," she writes in an email to *Orlando Weekly*. "Kind people condemn cruelty."

But on Saturday in Melbourne, the crowd, however small, is varied in race, age and gender, and seems to be enjoying itself, content to lounge and watch each race. The races are lightning-quick – the dogs sprint the track into the face of the day's biting winds and the races are over in split seconds.

Rockledge resident Gigi Barber says she doesn't watch racing much, but does find it relaxing when she has the time to watch it. "It's exciting to see the dogs running," she says. "I think that's cute. ... It's fun to be close-up and see racing live."

Her friend Audrah George, also of Rockledge, says she learns things about dogs from watching them run.

"They want to compete," she says. "That's the way I feel. They can hardly wait to get out of the box."

Josh Goodyear of Melbourne is outside watching the dogs up close with two of his friends. He's been coming to the track for a long time – since he was young, he says.

"I just like the whole environment," Goodyear says. "It makes me happy."

Greyhound racing is caught in the middle of a years-long slog of legislative battles and people of differing pro- and anti-racing mindsets, all of whom claim they know what's best for the industry – and the animals.



Photo by Jeremy Reper

Rep. Carlos Guillermo Smith, D-Orlando, new to the Florida House, tried his hand in the 2017 session at legislation to stop harmful anabolic steroids administered to the dogs. That bill didn't make it through.

Smith wasn't under any illusion about stopping racing as a whole with his bill – he just wants the dogs to be treated as humanely as possible, he says.



His bill, HB 743, made it through the finish line in the House earlier this month, but failed due to a lack of support in the Senate before the session ended.

Smith says the idea for the bill came when he heard the absurdly high amount of greyhounds given steroids – 50 percent of them in the state, he says he heard a lobbyist admit at a committee hearing.

"I never thought it was that much," he says.

Smith's bill focused on banning testosterone from being used in racing dogs to help their performance. He reels off a litany of harmful side effects the drugs can cause.

"It can make the dogs more aggressive," he says. "It prevents female dogs from being in heat. There's just all kinds of chaos."



Photo by Jeremy Reper

He goes on to list virilization, liver problems and gastrointestinal problems, as well as problems with the dogs' heart functions. Those with long-term health problems often don't end up getting adopted after they finish racing, either, Smith says.

A big part of the reason for steroid use is because it's easier to prevent female dogs from being in heat than to separate the male and female dogs. That costs more money and takes more effort, Smith says, so many trainers just don't do it.

"I keep hearing 'why not let us give [the dogs] a little bit?'" Smith says, chuckling. "They shouldn't be allowed to give them at all."

Lobbyist Jack Cory, who represents the greyhound industry in Florida, says Smith had the completely wrong idea about anabolic steroids. Cory defends the steroids given to female dogs as completely legal and not harmful at all.



Photo by Jeremy Reper

"It's a very low dosage," Cory says. "It's not any different than the amount you or I would get from using a nasal spray from an over-the-counter drug. They don't have anything to do with enhancing the dogs' performance. Otherwise, you'd have nothing but female dogs running."

Cory says the steroids are important to use as a sort of birth control for the dogs.

"Banning steroids is a bad deal," he says. "It's like telling women they can't take birth control."

He characterizes Grey2K as an "out-of-state, radical animal rights group" and says they don't spend time actually helping any animals in Florida. He says if they really wanted to help, they'd focus on the animals who are killed in adoption shelters rather than on legal greyhound racing. He also says Rep. Smith is simply parroting wrongheaded ideas from people he spoke to about the issue.

And he says the sport does good for Florida – it brings in hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in revenue, he claims.



Photo by Jeremy Reper

But the sport can be deadly, and its darker side crops up frequently in the news now that greyhound deaths have to be reported under state law. A *Naples*

*Daily News* study found that between 2013 and 2016, St. Petersburg's Derby Lane track had the most deaths in Florida, with 57 dogs having died there. Derby Lane didn't respond to multiple phone calls from the *Orlando Weekly* for comment.

The Sanford Orlando Kennel Club reported 35 dog deaths between 2013 and 2016.

A study by Grey2K goes into greater detail, listing the cause of death for many greyhounds in the year 2013 as an example of how they're chronicled.

"A greyhound was bumped into the rail during schooling and was electrocuted," one listing for a dog named Royal Runner at the Palm Beach Kennel Club reads, dated June 21, 2013.

Another, for a dog named WW's Key Stone who died on Sept. 14, 2013, reads: "At the end of the 2nd race during the evening performance on 9/14/2013, this dog collapsed at the escape and was gone. Dog came in 2nd in race."

And, in a recently publicized case, the *Tampa Bay Times* reported that five greyhounds at the Derby Lane track tested positive for cocaine in their systems. The dogs all came from a kennel owned by trainer Malcolm McAllister, who vehemently claims he didn't do it and has no idea how it had happened.



Photo by Jeremy Reper

McAllister, as was reported, was once referred to as a "patriarch" of the industry by a Derby Lane executive. But because of this cocaine-related scandal, McAllister's license has been permanently revoked.

At the Sanford Orlando Kennel Club in Longwood, no one is complaining about losing money from the races they put on, because they're different from other racing outlets – they don't just put on the greyhound races because they have to, but actively want to do so. They don't do other gambling and they take pride in how they say they take care of their dogs.

Kennel Club general manager Mitch Cohen is eager to dispel what he says are common myths about his industry.

"The perception is totally wrong," he says. "We have a no-kill policy, no putting down the dogs. We have a 100 percent adoption rate."

He says they have recently upgraded their facilities as well to make it safer for the dogs, such as adding a safety lure to make sure the dogs don't collide. The lure is typically a stuffed animal with a mechanical arm pulling it around the track, enticing the dogs to follow it and continue around the track.

Cohen repeatedly stresses that the dog racing he practices at the Kennel Club is "100 percent safe and responsible." He says if a dog is hurt, they do their best to make sure the dog gets proper care and surgery if needed, picking up a "large portion" of the bill with the trainers.



Photo by Jeremy Reper

"We treat these dogs like family," Cohen says.

And after the dog is adopted, Cohen says they're usually very happy.

"They turn into big couch potatoes when they're done," he says.

He dismisses some attacks from anti-racing organizations against his Kennel Club, saying they may not understand what goes on there in regards to ensuring the dogs are taken care of.

And when it came to the dogs themselves, Cohen speaks of them with a misty-eyed reverence.

"When a retired greyhound comes back after they've been gone, and they hear a lure, their ears perk up," he says. "They want to be with their old friends back on the track."





Photo by Jeremy Reper

Grey2K's Theil isn't so sure that the dogs enjoy racing so much as they enjoy not being cooped up in kennels for much of the day.

"I think greyhounds love to run," he says. "I have one and she loves to run. But I think it's cruel to keep them confined for 22 hours a day. I'm sure some do love to run – who wouldn't, after they were kept in a cage for 22 hours a day?"

He says the belief that dogs "love" to race sounded to him more like a rationalization for the "cruelty of what [greyhound racing tracks] are doing," and says he disputes the existence of any "good" greyhound racing tracks.

Most track managers face a predicament more akin to O'Brien's than Cohen's situation – they're forced to hold the racing in order to keep their pari-mutuel contracts, and losing money from it all the time.

Izzy Havernick, vice president of political affairs at the Miami track Magic City Casino, is frank in admitting that his track loses around \$2 million per year putting on greyhound races.

He blames the restrictive rules of the state.

"The number of races we have to run is mandated by the state," he says. "And they force us to run so many, whatever little traction we get, we do it so frequently that people start losing interest. The state mandates we run the amount of races we ran in 1996. The world is different than it was in '96. Rather than let the market dictate how much racing we do, they use an arbitrary number from way back when – that's what we have to run today."

Havernick calls the rules "a huge burden" and says it would actually be in the dogs' best interest to run fewer races as well.

The number of track attendees that come in specifically for the greyhound racing is dwindling, too – he says they have maybe 15 or 20 regulars who come in and watch the races often.

The state bill that could have decoupled greyhound racing would have ended the mandate that horse and dog tracks conduct live racing. However, it was not to be.

By May 2, the deal had officially fallen apart. The main point of contention was slot machines – eight counties in Florida voted to approve them as alternatives



to poker gambling, but the House thought it wouldn't work because only those counties had voted for it, not the entire state.

And so the bill fell apart, and with it, the decoupling of greyhound racing.



Photo by Jeremy Reper

Havernick says it was a shame, but they'll just keep soldiering on.

"They killed the bill," he tells *Orlando Weekly*. "We'll just keep trying. Hopefully something will eventually do something that's best for the tracks. Hopefully it will be good for everyone one day."

Smith, speaking about his own failed bill, says he was disappointed but determined to press on with future bills in the same arena.

"Passing a new greyhound protection bill in the House during my first session was a heavy lift, but we got it done," he wrote in a Facebook message to *Orlando Weekly*. "Unfortunately, the dog racing industry is a powerful special interest with friends in both parties. That's why the bill failed to pass the Senate. It's why Florida is one of the only states left where cruel and inhumane dog racing continues. Make no mistake – I'm not going anywhere, and I won't stop fighting to protect these greyhounds as long as I'm in the Legislature."

In his office at the Melbourne Greyhound Park casino, O'Brien bemoans the state of the greyhound racing industry.

"It's a sad thing," he says. "The industry is spiraling downward."

He maintains, as some other greyhound racing owners do, that the dogs are all kept safe and no harm comes to them. But PETA claims that "countless" greyhounds are killed each year if their owners decide that they aren't fast enough to win races. "Dogs have been shot, bludgeoned or simply dumped to fend for themselves. Those who make the first cut live on borrowed time: Their lives are secure only as long as they make money for their owners. Illness and injuries – including broken legs, heatstroke and heart attacks – claim the lives of many dogs," O'Connor writes.

Unable to hide his irritation toward some of the animal activists who have demonized his industry, O'Brien says they should educate themselves further and visit places like Melbourne Greyhound Park to see that not all of it is so dire.

"We're doing it right," he says. "We care."

He gestures to the pictures on the wall of his office, several of which depict dogs sitting in various peaceful settings, and says they're "dog people" there.

As for the industry itself, O'Brien has no illusions – it isn't the same as it once was.

"It's an industry that has seen its time," he says. "I wish it was better, but it's not. It's nobody's fault. The world changes."

*Due to a reporting error, this story originally quoted Rep. Smith as saying sterilization was a side effect of steroid usage. We misheard him; what he actually said was virilization. We regret the error.*

[Jump to comments](#)

Tags: News, Cover Story

#### READERS ALSO LIKED...



**Pulse survivor Keinon Carter went from being declared dead at the hospital, to opening a center for black LGBTQ youth**

Jun 7, 2017



**Organized resistance: An action guide for the next four years**

Feb 15, 2017



**'Alternative' education: Using charter schools to hide dropouts and game the system**

Feb 24, 2017