

12 greyhounds test positive for cocaine at FL



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A local greyhound trainer's license has been suspended after 12 dogs in his care tested positive for cocaine.

According to records obtained by First Coast News, the dogs, all racers at Bestbet Orange Park, tested positive for Benzoylcegonine (BZE) -- a metabolite of cocaine.

"This is the largest greyhound drug case in American history," says Carey Theil, Executive Director of GREY2K USA in Arlington, Mass., a non-profit that opposes greyhound racing and monitors dog tracks around the country. "This is staggering."

First Coast News obtained records from the state Department of Business and Professional Regulation. They show at least 12 dogs in the care of trainer Charles McClellan tested positive for cocaine, for a total of 18 cases in 4 months. The state requires the winner of each greyhound race, as well as another randomly chosen dog, to be drug tested after races. Urine tests conducted by the University of Florida College on Medicine Racing Laboratory came back positive for BZE. McClellan is cited for a Class 1 drug violation for each positive test.

Bestbet officials declined requests for an interview. Through spokesperson Michael Munz, the track released this statement:

"Bestbet Orange Park completely supports the swift action taken by the state in this matter and as always, fully cooperated with state officials as they conducted their random and routine tests. Bestbet Orange Park maintains a zero-tolerance policy for any trainer or staff member that does anything which puts one of the dog's health at risk. In this instance, the process carried out by the state of Florida and the regulators was carefully followed under state law. The bottom line is, the system worked."

Carey Theil disagrees. "The track tells the public the dogs are 'well taken care of at our facility: We're making sure everything is fine.' So they can't have 18 greyhound cocaine violations and say, 'oh, sorry, it's not our responsibility!'"

First Coast News crime analyst Mark Baughman says it appears the trainer was trying to influence race outcomes. "I would call it a doping case. It's definitely a doping case," said Baughman. "They're trying to give that dog a competitive edge."

According to the state's investigation, one dog won with cocaine in her system, Flicka, won first place in her race on March 1, and tested positive for cocaine the same day. They also discovered evidence of cocaine in another dog, Castle Rock, the following day, March 2. Then more cocaine positives on March 5, 15, 23, 27, 29 and 31 -- for Flicka as well as other dogs.

Baughman says the repeated presence of cocaine suggests intentionality. "It shows there's been some cocaine administered into that animal, in this case, the dog," he says.



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McClellan is not the only trainer cited for the presence of cocaine in race dogs at Bestbet Orange Park. Five other trainers were cited for cocaine metabolites in dogs between 2010 to 2016.

According to Dr. Robert Aguiar, a veterinarian at First Coast No More Homeless Pets, cocaine has the potential to be fatal for a racing dog.

"These animals can go into heat stroke after the race and can collapse because their temperatures can reach 105 degrees," he says.

Dr. Scott Stanley, a toxicologist with UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, says that while cocaine is a stimulant, there has been no evidence to support the claim that cocaine can help a greyhound win a race.

"There are no studies performed by reliable research investigators," he said.

Theil says that while studies about cocaine in dogs may not be conclusive, he sees anecdotal evidence.

"We know the two fastest races of Flicka's career were races which she tested positive for cocaine," he says. "Let me be clear: She has 169 official races in her career. The two fastest times of her career are the two races in which she tested positive for cocaine. That's incredibly disturbing."

The state of Florida ordered an emergency suspension of McClellan's license on June 9, saying his "drug positive violations" are "a threat to the safety and welfare of any animals in his care as a Greyhound trainer."

First Coast News briefly caught up with McClellan at the Orange Park track. He said he had lost his job a few weeks prior -- that was six months after the first positive drug test reported in January.

Munz noted, "the trainer's license was revoked for life and he was removed from the premises." He observed that trainers are not track employees, but are "independent contractors."

However, state records show his license was not revoked but suspended. In fact, the hearing on his license is set for Aug. 23.

The state Department of Business and Professional Regulation says it is not required to notify the racing facility when there's an emergency suspension:

"There is no requirement that the division serve the facility with a copy of an emergency suspension order for a trainer that may be operating at their track, however, generally we will contact the facility as a courtesy."

When asked if and when they notified Best Bet about the 18 positive cocaine tests since January, DBPR elected not to answer the question.

When we followed up with Best Bet regarding Flicka, we're told she's "alive and well." Her last race of record was on June 1.

There are only 19 tracks currently open in the United States and 12 of them are in Florida.

Greyhound dogs test positive for cocaine

