

The Washington Post

Dog racing ‘has a drug problem’ as 12 Florida greyhounds test positive for cocaine

By [Kyle Swenson](#)

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Updated

The gate snaps up and Flicka’s gone, a dark greyhound bulling to the front of a pack kicking up dirt under the Florida sun.

Within a heartbeat or two, she’s ahead of the seven other dogs, the tip of an arrow formation thinning to single file at the turn. “Miss Flicka continues the lead,” an announcer croaks as the hounds sling into the last stretch of the fifth race at Bestbet Orange Park, a track 15 miles south of Jacksonville. Flicka dominates for nearly each of the race’s 550 yards, easily hitting the finish line first. “WW’s Flicka wires this bunch!” the announcer shouts.

For the greyhounds running at Florida’s dozen racetracks, a trip to the winner’s circle also means a urine test. Per state regulations, the dog officially known as “[WW’s Flicka](#)” submitted her sample on the same day, April 27. The results came back positive for benzoylecgonine, a metabolite of cocaine.

But a hardcore narcotic swimming through the bloodstream of an innocent pup shouldn’t have been a surprise to anyone paying attention. According to state records, Flicka had already tested positive five times for cocaine this year before the late April test — including a positive drug test just the previous week.

Flicka would turn out to be one of 12 greyhounds that tested positive for cocaine on 18 occasions over a four-month period in Florida this year. As first [reported by First Coast News](#), the same trainer, Charles McClellan, handled all the doped dogs. Despite the steady run of failed tests, McClellan continued to work with animals at races until June 9, when state regulators filed an emergency order suspending his license.

The Jacksonville scandal is easily the “biggest greyhound drug case in American history,” Carey Theil, executive director of industry watchdog group, [GREY2K USA Worldwide](#), told The Washington Post. This is the second cocaine testing to rock Florida’s dog tracks this year, fitting into larger pattern of increased cocaine across the sport, Theil explained.

Florida’s cocaine-fueled greyhounds spotlight how far some will go to squeeze whatever money they can from a shrinking industry and, critics say, showcases a lack of accountability in the current regulatory setup.

“It’s deeply disturbing,” Theil told the Post. “And the fact that we’re seeing this over and over again indicates the industry has a drug problem.”

American greyhound action is making a last stand in Florida.

[According to Theil’s group](#), which operates as a nonprofit opposed to greyhound racing, at the industry’s peak in the early 1990s, around \$3 billion annually was bet on dog races. Today, the industry’s gaming profits are seriously down: Between 2001 and 2014, the total amount bet on greyhounds dropped 70 percent, and the amount of state tax revenue from it slipped by 82 percent.

The loss in popularity can be traced in part to persistent complaints about inhumane and cruel animal treatment. Forty states now outlaw greyhound racing. Since 1991, 43 tracks have closed or ended live events. Of the 19 greyhound tracks still operating in the United States, 12 are in the Sunshine State.

But an industry on the ropes has opponents all the more nervous. “I do think that as the industry declines, animal welfare issues become a greater problem,” Theil said. “There’s less money for the dogs’ care and more incentive to cheat.”

Doping in greyhound racing has been a persistent problem, from anabolic steroids to industrial solvents. Cocaine, however, is relatively new to the American greyhound circuit. According to state records, there have been 62 positive cocaine tests in Florida since 2008.

States regulators, however, rarely conduct follow-up investigations after a positive test, leaving a blind-spot in the regulatory process. Was the dog actually fed cocaine on purpose? One counter-explanation could be human transference — meaning an animal might have accidentally been exposed. A dog may have ingested cocaine, for example, or been exposed to large amounts of crack cocaine smoke. Up until recently, Theil — whose radar is constantly fixed on the industry’s shadowy corners — wasn’t even sure what to make of cocaine positives. “States don’t do thorough investigations as far as we can tell, so we don’t know,” he said.

But for the industry critic, the rampant cocaine at Florida tracks in 2017 points to a clear answer: “To me, this looks like race-fixing. There does seem to be a correlation between dogs testing positive and performance,” Theil explained, pointing to Flicka as an example. “The two fastest times of her career are two races she tested positive.”

Scott Stanley, a toxicologist with UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, told First Coast News that “there are no studies performed by reliable research investigators” showing that cocaine enhances a dog’s performance. If anything, exposure to cocaine in dogs can lead to seizures, rapid heartbeat, and elevated blood pressure, among other behavioral anomalies. [According to one veterinary text](#), “Any amount of cocaine in a companion animal may result in toxicosis.”

Last February, Florida’s regulatory arm responsible for monitoring greyhound races — the Department of Business and Professional Regulation’s Division of Pari-Mutuel Racing — filed an administrative complaint against a dog trainer named Malcolm McAllister. Five greyhounds trained by the Tampa-area dog-racing veteran tested positive for cocaine. Although McAllister claimed he didn’t know the drug got into his animals, the state eventually revoked his license, according to [the Tampa Bay Times](#).

The same state agency ordered an emergency suspension of Jacksonville’s McClellan in a June 9 filing. Citing the 12 dogs that tested positive for cocaine, the state alleged the trainer was a “threat to the safety and welfare of any animals in his care.” The suspension order was just in time: McClellan, the filing noted, was due to race dogs that very same evening. The trainer has a formal hearing on his suspension scheduled on Aug. 23.

The Washington Post could not contact McClellan, but when First Coast News [confronted the trainer](#) earlier this month, he “said he had lost his job a few weeks prior.” The television station also received a statement from a representative of the Jacksonville-area track:

“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.”

In an email to The Post, kennel owner Steve Serras said he had “yet to be officially notified by the state” about the positive samples. He said his dogs have been “tested at a disproportionately higher level than other kennels,” a fact Serras said is tied to his vocal defense of the greyhound industry. He added that he felt this was “not doping or animal abuse” but an issue of “innocent environmental contamination.”

“The trainer has appealed his positive samples and is entitled by law to due process,” he said. “If it is proven that this is a result of drugs in the workplace it will be dealt with appropriately. I do not condone the use of illegal drugs,” he added.

For industry critic Theil, however, the system’s current regulatory wiring is key to the larger problem. The trainer is just one player in the picture. Racing greyhounds have owners, who in turn place their dogs in a kennel. Kennel owners contract with the track, often leasing space at the compound for the competitions. Kennel owners also hire trainers. But when a dog tests positive for banned substances, only the trainer falls into the regulatory crosshairs.

According to [the Associated Press](#), McClellan was working for the West Virginia-based Steve Sarras Kennel at the time of the failed drug tests. The kennel owner, who serves on the National Greyhound Association Board, did not respond to the AP’s request for comment.

“It does seem as though the system is set up for the trainer to be the fall guy,” Theil told the Post. “It’s appropriate for the trainer to be disciplined, but the investigation should not stop there. There are more people who have responsibility.”

This story has been updated with a response from kennel owner Steve Serras.

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