



FRED GRIMM

Doped up greyhounds add to the disgrace dogging parimutuels in Florida

BY FRED GRIMM
fgrimm@miamiherald.com

July 21, 2017 07:00 AM

And now, cocaine. At least 22 greyhound racing dogs have tested positive for cocaine in Florida so far this year, adding yet another ghastly taint to an infamously abusive parimutuel.

In May, the state yanked the license of a veteran trainer at Derby Park in St. Petersburg after urine tests found traces of cocaine metabolites in five of his dogs, according to the Tampa Bay Times.

Then another 17 dogs tested positive for coke at the Orange Park Kennel Club near Jacksonville. Actually, state regulators reported that those 17 dogs rang up 23 cocaine-positive results among them, according to First Coast News.

We can add this latest doping outrage to the 2014 scandal involving a South Florida trainer caught injecting anabolic steroids into his greyhounds.

Meanwhile, at least 383 dogs have died over the past four years at the dozen dog tracks still operating in Florida, according to state records cited by GREY2K, the Massachusetts-based activist group pushing for an end to dog racing.

Non-fatal injuries suffered by greyhounds must be considerable, though we can't know for sure, given that the good ol' boys up in Tallahassee have managed to stifle legislation that would require tracks to keep injury records. But maybe we can extrapolate the suffering by the reports coming out of a single track in Seminole County.

AT LEAST 383 GREYHOUNDS HAVE DIED AT FLORIDA DOG TRACKS SINCE 2013.

Last year, after activists presented the Seminole County Commission with a petition signed by 14,000 voters, commissioners adopted an ordinance requiring the Sanford Orlando Kennel Club to keep records of each dog injury. Since May 5, 11 reports have been filed with the county, including an incident on May 17 involving a 61-pound female named K-Picker. "Dog was bumped into the rail coming out of the far turn, resulting in a large, deep laceration on the left thigh," the report said. "Dog was euthanized for humane reasons."

Nine other dogs suffered fractured legs.

Of course, racing-dog owners were not pleased about this information going public. News about dead or maimed animals only adds to their industry's unsavory image. Who doesn't remember the case of the Baldwin County, Alabama, farmer who told authorities in 2002 that Florida greyhound trainers were paying him \$10 a head to "dispose" of aging, slow or gimp dogs? The old farmer admitted killing between 2,000 and 3,000 greyhounds over the years, shooting them in the head with a .22-caliber rifle, then tossing their remains into a trench.

In May, two members of the Central Florida Greyhound Association filed suit against Seminole County, claiming the injury-report ordinance trespasses on state jurisdiction.

Carey Theil, executive director of GREY2K USA Worldwide, figures that the dog owners want to snuff this out before other counties get the same idea. Because, if Seminole County can pass an injury-report requirement, surely similar ordinances would be popular in progressive counties like Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach.

Last session a bill that would ban steroid doping at the dog tracks also failed, along with legislation to "decouple" dog racing from state gambling licenses allowing poker rooms and slot casinos. The bill failed despite racino operators begging to get shed of the money-losing dog-racing requirement.

Too bad. Dog racing has such dwindling popularity that the tracks couldn't survive without the state law requiring parimutuels with profitable poker rooms and racinos to stage live racing. So greyhound tracks (much like the state's equally absurd jai-alai frontons) remain open despite ever diminishing crowds.

Nationally, betting on greyhound racing fell from an all-time high of \$3.5 billion in 1991 to just \$665 million in 2012. Once, more than 50 dog tracks operated in 15 states. We're down to 19 tracks, 12 of them in Florida. Paid attendance has dropped more than 85 percent in the last dozen years.

Dog racing has become such an economic absurdity that Florida now spends more on its regulation than the state makes from its cut of the revenue. Yet we keep it around.

Maybe news of coked-up dogs will change that.

Last week, according to First Coast News, an ABC affiliate out of Jacksonville, Jamie Shelton, president of the Orange Park track, told the local Rotary Club that the cocaine reports had been "sensationalized" by the press. He suggested that the cocaine tests may have come from inadvertent exposure, from environmental contamination. (Which might indicate that the state should be testing trainers instead of dogs.)

Except that recent racing dog doping scandals in Britain and Australia also involved the use of cocaine as a performance-enhancing drug. Since fall, more than 20 trainers in New South Wales have been convicted of doping dogs with dangerous performance-enhancing drugs containing cocaine, morphine, codeine, amphetamines, cobalt, anabolic steroids, even arsenic.

In England, a reporter from Panorama went undercover in 2014 and discovered that trainers were doping racing dogs with steroids, beta blockers and cocaine.

Somehow, I doubt that the greyhounds at Orange Park tested positive for coke because crackheads had been hanging out in the dog kennels. They noted that one of the dogs, Flicka, with 169 races over her career, tested positive for cocaine after her two fastest finishes ever. "It seems really unlikely that that was a coincidence."

Fred Grimm: fgrimm@miamiherald.com, @grimm_fred