

Racing greyhounds need our common sense, compassion

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Guest columnist

MARCH 26, 2015, 8:10 PM



Thirty-six inches by 24 inches by 32 inches. This is what racing greyhounds at Florida dog tracks call "home." It is the minimum size of the cages in which they are warehoused for 20 hours or more each day.

When they are let out of their confinement to run, they face the risk of serious injury on some of the oldest dog tracks in the country. Just a few months ago, a greyhound named PorPorPitifulMe was electrocuted while racing at the Palm Beach Kennel Club, and nearly 200 dogs have been killed over the past 20 months. In fact, a racing greyhound dies every three days in this state.

How did Florida come to treat dogs like disposable gambling machines?

It was in 1931 that the Sunshine State became the first to legalize betting on greyhounds after lawmakers overrode the veto of Gov. Doyle E. Carlton by just one vote. By 1935, 10 dog tracks had opened all across the state. Florida was off to the races, and 18 states would eventually follow in its path. Twelve of those states have reversed course, and dog racing is now over in states such as Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Wisconsin and all across New England.

Today, there are 12 operational tracks in Florida, a majority of all remaining greyhound racetracks nationwide. According to a comprehensive study commissioned by lawmakers in 2013, the amount of money bet on live racing has declined by 72 percent since 1990, and the state is in the red by as much as \$3.3 million a year. This is because the cost of regulation now surpasses total pari-mutuel taxes collected.

As documented by my organization — GREY2K USA Worldwide — in a newly released report, "High Stakes: Greyhound Racing in the United States," dog racing is a dying industry wherever it persists. Since 2001, host states have watched revenues plummet by 79 percent. More than 6,000 injuries and 300 deaths have been reported at the two tracks in West Virginia, and nearly 2,300 injuries have occurred at Texas' only dog track, Gulf Greyhound Park, just since 2008.

Florida has never required injury information to be disclosed to the public, so the number of injuries suffered by the thousands of greyhounds used for racing here remains a dreadful secret.

Fortunately, state files tell us at least part of the story. According to the Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering, 14 dogs have tested positive for cocaine since 2008. Forty-two dogs were abandoned to die in their cages when the racing season ended at Ebro Greyhound Park in 2010, and 20 greyhounds were injured during a seven-week period at Flagler in Miami in 2011. These included 15 broken legs, and a dog named Fuzzys San Joe died of a heart attack. In 2013, the Sarasota Kennel Club pledged to allow public inspection of injury data for the first time, but racing director Tom Bowersox withdrew the offer.

It is time for this cruelty to end. Over the past several sessions, lawmakers have come close to passing both injury reporting and "decoupling," which would signal a phase-out of live racing. Until decoupling passes, dog tracks will be required to offer a mandatory minimum of 100 race performances a year, no matter how much they are losing and how much the greyhounds are suffering.

It is time for common sense and compassion to kick in.

Thankfully, the state Senate started the session right by passing an injury-reporting bill. The Victoria Q. Gaetz Racing Greyhound Protection Act, named for the dog-loving wife of the former Senate president, was approved unanimously and now moves to the House. Meanwhile, House Majority Leader Dana Young has introduced her own legislation that calls for both decoupling and injury reporting. These issues deserve immediate attention.

Until these bills or similar measures pass into law, greyhounds will continue to suffer and die, and taxpayers will pick up the tab. It is time to make the humane choice and end dog racing. Since 1991, one state after another has turned its back on this antiquated activity; yet Florida remains the heart of this cruel industry.

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