

GREY2K USA Worldwide hopes to end greyhound racing in Birmingham, Mobile

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Christine Dorchak has seen 42 greyhound racetracks close. She helped it happen at 28 of them.

And now she has her sights set on the racetracks in Birmingham and Mobile, the only two in the state that still host live greyhound races.

The sport is “cruel and inhumane,” and it “not only costs greyhounds their lives, it is a parasite on taxpayers,” said Dorchak, president and general counsel for GREY2K USA Worldwide, an organization aimed at ending all greyhound racing.



GREY2K recently released “High Stakes,” the first comprehensive national report on the greyhound racing industry, and delivered it to Alabama lawmakers to get the ball rolling on introducing restrictive legislation in the state.

Since 2008, about 80,000 greyhounds have been registered to race with the National Greyhound Association, but the association “can’t tell you what happens to the vast majority of those dogs,” Dorchak said.

That’s because Alabama and Florida don’t require state records for what happens to their greyhounds. Those two states alone host two-thirds of the nation’s live racetracks, Dorchak said.

Reports from the one-third that do provide numbers show nearly 12,000 injuries and 1,000 deaths since 2008, “so you can imagine how many more injuries there must be that we cannot document for you,” Dorchak said.

The most common injury is a broken leg, which is “almost a death sentence,” because often the dog is destroyed and replaced, she said. Other dogs die from broken necks or skulls, from being trampled or electrocuted on the track or from contracting an illness in the warehouse-style kennels.

In those kennels living conditions are abysmal, she said. “The greyhounds are kept confined in small, stacked cages for an average of more than 20 hours a day. They race every four days or so, so they spend most of their time in cages where they can barely stand up and turn around.”

At Birmingham Race Course in 2013 — the last time the Birmingham Racing Commission chose to share its findings with the public, Dorchak said — inspectors reported three times that the kennel facility was “filthy, noxious and that the place (was) crawling with fleas. The dogs were infested.”

But no citations were given even though no efforts were made to improve conditions in between those reports, she said.

And Mobile Greyhound Park does not do any inspections of kennels at all, she said.

“It’s a very bad business for the dogs,” and the injuries and “despicable” treatment are being hidden from the public in Alabama, Dorchak said.

“Because it’s a dying industry, there’s very little money to spend to care for the dogs,” Dorchak said.

Wagering at Birmingham Race Course is in “catastrophic decline,” with total bets falling 20 percent from 2012 to 2013, she said. The track in Mobile saw a 61 percent decline in money

wagered from 2008 to 2013.

But still the industry persists. Birmingham Racing Commission has “bent over backwards” to bail out Birmingham Race Course, giving them a \$400,000 emergency gift in 2010 and \$398,000 more to help pay taxes it owed for 2011, Dorchak said.

The track says “they are in survival mode and they can’t make it on their own, so the racing commission gives this dying facility money so it can keep doing what it’s doing, which is losing money,” she said.

Why? Because the tracks’ licenses require that they host live racing in order to exist at all as a gambling facility, Dorchak said. “Even if they wanted to, Birmingham and Mobile could not give up live races. If they did, they would have to give up their licenses entirely.”

And much of the income of these tracks comes from betting on simulcast racing, just like two other facilities in Alabama — Greentrack in Eutaw and VictoryLand in Shorter — which simulcast greyhound and horse races from Alabama and other locations.

It’s a tangled web of a cruel industry and taxpayers are footing the bill, Dorchak said, citing an Auburn University study showing that “each additional dollar of greyhound handle is estimated to reduce net state revenue by a whopping and statistically significant \$7.61.”

“It’s a pit for the community and it’s a shame what’s happening to greyhounds here,” Dorchak said. “Once we have these records out in the public domain it will be very hard for these tracks to defend themselves.”

That’s how GREY2K fought until it ended greyhound racing in New England and other parts of the United States, and that’s the way the organization is starting to fight in Alabama now, she said.

Informing the public

“I’ll be writing a bill to require that injury records be made available to the public,” with the hope that getting the public informed will ultimately lead to the prohibition of greyhound racing in the state, she said.

Joe Godfrey, executive director of Alabama Citizens Action Program (ALCAP), said ALCAP welcomes any organizations that want to partner in ending gambling of any kind in Alabama.

“Our focus with ALCAP is with the gambling aspect, and anything we can do, any reason we can give for discouraging the expansion of gambling in our state, we are going to be working with those groups and trying to accomplish that,” he said.

Dorchak said GREY2K is right there with them.

“We are trying to reduce gambling, on greyhounds in particular,” she said. (TAB)