

Emails highlight concerns about Gulf Greyhound Park

By CHRISTOPHER SMITH GONZALEZ | Posted: Sunday, March 8, 2015 12:45 am



Gulf Greyhound Park

Greyhounds race down the first straightaway during a race at Gulf Greyhound Park in La Marque on Saturday afternoon July 28, 2007.

LA MARQUE — State racing commission officials and a track maintenance consultant expressed concerns about the safety of the track at Gulf Greyhound Park, the number of dogs injured and the ability of track maintenance workers to keep the track safe in a series of emails from 2014.

At one point last year, the commission halted racing at the park and even suggested it would seek to suspend all racing if the number of injuries was not reduced.

But both state officials and the track expert said things have improved since the email exchange and that injuries are down.

Representatives from Gulf Greyhound Park said the track is not causing injuries and that overall injuries have gone down year after year.

While Texas Racing Commission officials and Gulf Greyhound Park management have maintained in the past that the track is safe, emails between racing commission officials in 2014 show state judges at the track and a consultant brought in to help maintain the track have at times become frustrated at its condition.

The emails were originally obtained by Grey2K USA, a Massachusetts-based group with the explicit purpose of ending dog racing. The Daily News independently confirmed the authenticity of the emails with the Texas Racing Commission.

A plan to reduce injuries

The racing commission, which oversees dog and horse racing in the state, suspended racing at Gulf Greyhound Park, the only full-time greyhound racetrack in the state, for a few days in early August 2014 after three dogs suffered major injuries in one day. The commission threatened to request immediate suspension of all racing if injuries weren't reduced and requested to see an injury prevention program from the park management.

The park has made improvements, injuries are down and racing was resumed after park management took steps to recondition the track, said Robert Elrod, a spokesman with the racing commission.

Sally Briggs, general manager at Gulf Greyhound Park, said there was a spike in injuries over the summer of 2014. But Briggs said that tends to happen every year due to heat. She said the injuries were not due to track conditions and that injuries are down over the past five years.

The park drafted a plan to deal with the track and reduce injuries, which it presented to the state. Briggs also said she asked Greg Johnson, park superintendent at Sam Houston Race Park, to come on as a track maintenance consultant in August. The park has hired more track workers, while laying off some of its track maintenance staff, including the track superintendent, over the past year, Briggs said.

The park does not now have a track superintendent, she said.

Track concerns

While Briggs maintains the track is safe and no different from any other, an email from the presiding judge at the park to racing commission officials shows there had been concerns.

On July 28, Mike Pelletier, presiding judge at Gulf Greyhound Park, wrote to Joel Speight, deputy executive director at the racing commission, and Chuck Trout, commission executive director, about a “washboard effect” on the track that persisted despite efforts to smooth the track.

“The track has tried several things to fix the problem and nothing has worked,” Pelletier wrote.

Pelletier said a dog broke a hock coming down the stretch, which was rare, and another broke a leg during a morning practice session. Track judges and the commission’s own veterinarian, Ralph W. Wilkinson, were concerned about track, according to the email.

“The Judges and Dr. Wilkinson feel something has to be done to fix the track once and for all,” Pelletier wrote. “We are tired of seeing dogs hurt and no answers from anyone. We have made no progress on this issue in several months.”

In a July 30 email from the racing commission to Pelletier describing a discussion with park management, the commission said there had been a spike in injuries in June — nine injuries — and in July — 10 injuries.

The commission asked park management to provide copies of an action plan and to reduce injuries to one or less per week for each 1,000 racing starts or the commission would request an “immediate suspension of all racing.”

Injury rates

Injuries are down over the past five years, according to data provided by the park to the state and to The Daily News.

There were a total of 406 injuries in 2009, according to data in the Injury Prevention Program the park presented to the state racing commission. The commission provided a copy of the report to The Daily News.

In data provided to The Daily News by Briggs, total injuries had dropped to 225 in 2014.

Briggs said the safety of the greyhounds is the top concern at the park.

“Because if we don’t have the greyhounds running that are good and do not get hurt and can keep on running then we are not going to be open,” she said.

She said a spike in injuries in June and July was typical of hot summer months and tended to happen at any track.

But, in an analysis of state injury reports, Grey2K found broken bones to be the most common injury suffered by greyhounds. The data is from January 2008 to November 2014 and includes injury numbers from Gulf Greyhound Park and Valley Race Park, which ceased routine live racing in 2009.

In that time period, out of about 2,300 injuries reported, about 450 dogs suffered fractured legs and almost 300 fractured other bones.

While weather conditions can be a factor in injuries, Christine Dorchak, president and general counsel of Grey2K, said she believed track conditions are leading to more injuries.

“There are conditions at Gulf Greyhound Park that are causing injuries and it is due to the negligence and lack of care of the people who work at the facility,” Dorchak said.

The state racing commission was also concerned about the spike in injuries in 2014 and the park has taken action to reduce them, the state said.

In the six weeks before the racing commission sent the July 30 letter to Gulf Greyhound Park requiring it to reduce the number of injuries, the park had about 3.1 major injuries for every 1,000 dogs starting a race, Elrod said.

That is still below the performance metric of 3.5 injuries per 1,000 starts, he said. The track has made improvements and the rate is now down to 1.9 injuries for every 1,000 starts, Elrod said.

Once injuries are averaged out over the year, the park sees about two to four injuries a week, Briggs said.

Trainers, owners and track personnel all care about the safety of the greyhounds and do all they can to keep them safe, she said.

Briggs said some injuries are going to happen.

“Give me another sport that athletes don’t get hurt at,” she said.

Track work

While Briggs has said there are no problems with the track, management has taken steps to address the commission’s concerns.

Briggs presented an injury prevention program to the commission on August 25, according to a commission email. The plan laid out how park management inspects and prepares the track and would monitor injury concerns.

“We want the track consistency to be the same all the way across from the outside to the inside,” Briggs said.

The track is made up of a mix of sand and clay in seven different layers with rock and a drainage mat at the bottom, she said.

According to the injury prevention plan, the track was tested in 2011 and was tested again last year with positive results, Briggs said.

The park has also worked with Robert Gillette, a veterinarian at Auburn University, in the past to inspect the track and make sure it's safe, Briggs said.

Johnson said in an interview with The Daily News that the track itself is a "very, very nice surface and is very easy to maintain."

He praised Briggs for the efforts she took to stop racing in bad weather. That is not something most tracks would do since it means losing money but Briggs was quick to suspend racing when it meant keeping the dogs safe, he said.

"In this business that is almost unheard of," Johnson said.

But problems do occur when track maintenance workers cut corners or don't do the work as they have been shown, Johnson said.

He said he noticed an immediate drop in injury rates after he began working with their track crew. The injury numbers have remained low since then but the track can change quickly if the proper work is not performed, he said.

"The minute you try to cut a corner you start having issues and you go south real quick," Johnson said.

Problems finding help

But while Briggs said the track workers and park management are doing all that can be done, Johnson, who began consulting with the park in August, said in a series of emails that more could be done to keep dogs safe.

"Although the injury rate has gone down at the track, there are still way too many dogs getting hurt because of what appears to be a lack of genuine concern by track workers and their immediate supervisor," Johnson wrote in another email to Speight on October 16.

Johnson repeated that observation to Speight in a number of different emails from October to as recently as December. In one email, Johnson told Speight he may even have to "to rethink my involvement down there if they continue to not follow instructions and the track hurts more dogs unnecessarily."

Johnson also said dog tracks are easy to deal with but "you have to stay on top of the changing conditions or it will go bad quickly. They know what to do down there but for some reason it is not getting done."

Briggs said the park has made changes to its track maintenance staff. While not going into the details of personnel decisions, Briggs said the park laid off a previous track superintendent in July. And while a current park program listed Aaron Brantley as the track superintendent, he was also let go in December, she said.

The park has three track maintenance workers and the park's director of racing, Ron Godfroy, oversees their work, she said.

But in December, Johnson wrote that injuries were down but he believed more could be done to get them even lower.

"I can't be there every day and until they try to find someone to take proper care of the surface, we will continue to have these struggles," Johnson said.

Going forward

Briggs said she would like to hire a qualified track superintendent but simply has not been able to find one. She has emailed all the tracks in the country looking for an interested track expert who would like to move to Texas. She even tried to find a willing candidate from a racetrack that was closing in Iowa, Briggs said.

"We've just tried and tried to find somebody," Briggs said. "Those people are hard to find."

Meanwhile, according to the park's injury prevention plan, there is a safety committee in place that will track injury and illness statistics, conduct periodic track surface inspections and make recommendations on necessary corrective actions.

Kennel operators are also encouraged to pass safety concerns on to the committee, according to the plan.

Nick James, executive director of the Texas Greyhound Association, is a member of the committee and said he has been working with the track for the past three years. James said that despite the spike in injuries that may occur, Gulf Greyhound Park was one of the safest tracks in the country.

James said he has seen Briggs cancel races when issues come up and that he believed the park was doing everything possible, including looking for a new superintendent, to continue to lower the number of injuries.

"It is never going to be perfect but we've had weeks when we've had no injuries," James said. "Sometimes there'll be one, sometimes two but it's very seldom any more that there's more than maybe one or two a week."

Elrod with the racing commission said the park's injury rate is well below the performance metric. But he said the commission would continue to monitor the park.

"(Racing commission) staff will continue to monitor all operations at (Gulf Greyhound Park), including track conditions and intervene when or if necessary to ensure the safety, integrity, and fairness of pari-mutuel greyhound racing," Elrod said.