

TOP STORY

## Gambling on greyhounds (video)

By TIM HORAN Salina Journal Apr 25, 2015



TOM DORSEY

Photos by TOM DORSEY / Salina Journal Greyhounds make the first turn at the race track west of Abilene.

“Here comes Buddy” echoed loudly over the speakers at the National Greyhound Association racetrack for four days this week.

Each time the announcement was made, six sleek, long-bodied greyhounds jumped out of the starting box and reached speeds of 45 miles an hour as they attempted to catch a fake rabbit that was named after former longtime NGA board member Bud Rosch.

The greyhound tracks in Kansas and in the Midwest have long closed, but greyhound racing is still held here twice a year under the same rules and regulations as the 23 racetracks in the United States, with one minor difference. There are no \$2 win, place or show wagers being made by fans.

But that doesn't mean the participants in this sport

aren't gambling, and for some the rewards can be \$1 million or more, which is what the NGA expects to gross during the auctions Friday and today.

Greyhound farmers are gambling that their young pups that have yet to be to the racetrack will win in Abilene and then sell for big money in the auction.

The kennel owners are gambling the pups they buy in the auction will go on to win races at the country's top-paying tracks and then bring in breeding fees upon retirement.

And it's been this way since 1886, when the first national meet was held at Cheyenne Bottoms (a wildlife area northeast of Great Bend), an event that was highly publicized in Harper's Weekly.

While the races haven't been consecutive, next year the sport will celebrate 130 years.

“It’s been a roller-coaster ride,” said NGA Executive Director Gary Guccione, who’s been with the organization since 1971.

### **Fall, spring meets stable**

While the number of greyhounds tracks in the United States peaked at 59, that number since has dropped to 23. Guccione blames that on competition from Indian and state-run casinos.

Despite the ups and downs, the NGA spring and fall meets have remained stable.

“The meet format has changed and evolved but the general purpose of getting together remains the same,” Guccione said. “The competition, the social, an almost regathering of people that enjoy the Mecca of Abilene every six months. Networking their greyhound business and touching base with others. Selling dogs, showcasing pups. That hasn’t changed.”

### **A big bet on the dogs**

Jay Rangel took a big gamble 21/2 years ago when he purchased a Cadillac of greyhound farms south of Abilene on 1700 Avenue. The farm, then called Greymeadow Kennel, was owned by Jack and Mary Butler.

He said he purchased the farm because of its size and history of success. Greymeadow Kennel was the home of five All-Americans.

Rangel said his intent was to raise good dogs and sell them in the auction.

“Knowing they needed dogs at Southland (the top-paying racetrack, West Memphis, Ark.), we raised dogs to enter into the meets and into the auction,” Rangel said.

So far that gamble has paid off. With Paul Bitterman as a partner with most of the dogs, Rangel has sold more than \$1 million worth in the past four auctions.

### **A big winner this time**

He was certainly off to a good start this spring in Abilene, winning 29 first-round races. The dogs are separated by ages. All of the first-round winners move on to the second round for the main stake races. In one main stake on Friday, all six greyhounds were Rangel’s dogs, which means he claimed the entire

\$1,212 purse. That is something that has never been done before. In two other races, he owned five of the six winners.

Rangel won three main stake races on Thursday and four more on Friday, for a total of seven double winners. All of those greyhounds are consigned to the auction, and Rangel was hoping it would be another successful one.

“Who knows? It could be crazy,” he said.

Also at this spring meet Steve Ward, of Ellis, had a greyhound set the 5/16-mile track record. SE Tali Sundance ran 29.52 last Tuesday and almost had a repeat performance running 29.53 on Friday.

### **Selling hounds is ‘risky’**

Guccione said not all sales are success stories, and the buying and selling of racing greyhounds is “risky.”

“You can buy an \$86,000 dog and he doesn’t earn back one-tenth of what he cost,” Guccione said. Greys Bricklayer was the highest priced greyhound to sell in the auction and was injured shortly after he went to the racetrack. “Or you can buy Homspun Rowdy for \$1,750 and win a quarter of a million.”

Homspun Rowdy was one of the first success stories in the early 1980s.

### **Some success stories**

One of the regular auction buyers looking at Rangel’s dogs was Rodney Cooley, president of Charter Kennel.

Cooley operates a kennel whose dogs race at Southland and Wheeling, in W.Va. He worked with the kennel’s founder, Cary Alsobrook, for more than 20 years.

Charter Kennel bought Dodgem By Design for \$25,000. He became a 2002 All-American and also had a \$2 million stud career. Charter also purchased Lonesome Cry, who was a stake-race winner and a top sire, Guccione said.

“That’s the thing some of them are dreaming of, hoping that it can happen the them,” Guccione said. “And it can, to a few.”

## **Jump-starting a kennel**

Buying dogs at the meets is also a way to jump-start his kennels, said Cooley, who was buying dogs for Wheeling and Southland. The two tracks generally attract a different type of running style, with Wheeling being a little shorter than the NGA 5/16-mile track, and Southland being a little longer.

“You need a dog with more stamina, a bigger dog at Southland,” he said. “At Wheeling you need early speed. It’s not so much about size.”

## **A buyer from Australia**

Geoff Collins, of Wattle Flat, Australia, has bought several greyhounds in Abilene, despite the fact it cost him \$10,000 more to get the greyhound through the six-month USA quarantine, 10-day quarantine in Australia and airfare home.

“I love the American dogs,” Collins said. “They are strong. They are good for our tracks, and I like distance dogs. They are stronger dogs. They are durable dogs, well-conditioned, physically strong. Strength is the main thing.”

He said at the spring and fall meets he gets to see the dogs run and visit with the people raising them.

Collins said greyhound racing was a gamble, but an educated gamble.

“It’s not like putting money on the number 5 and hoping for the best,” he said.

## **\$130,000 in purses**

Collins bought Loose Wire in the auction for \$10,000. He imported her to Australia and had to change the name to Lucy Wires. She was the first American greyhound to win a stake race in Australia in the Sydney Cup and ran out more than \$130,000 in purses. She now has a litter of pups.

“That makes it all worth while, that one dog,” he said. “So I was lucky.”

Winning races at the NGA meets is also a way of promoting breedings. Stud fees for leaders in the sire standings range from \$500 to \$2,000.

Vince Berland, of Abilene, has owned several top sires. This week, he entered pups of his stud dog, Flyin Man Of God.

“He’s a new sire for us. That’s why we put two litters in (the track stakes) out of him,” Berland said. “That’s very important. That’s the name of the game, if you are trying to prove a sire. People have to see that a sire can produce, not just one pup but an entire litter.”

### **Drug testing the dogs**

The National Greyhound Association has a state-of-the-art drug testing program that includes tests for steroids.

“We need that to maintain the integrity of the race program so that buyers have confidence in the pups they are buying,” Guccione said.

The NGA also has a DNA testing program to ensure the heritage of the greyhounds. On more than one occasion a female will have a litter of pups out of two different males.

### **So why Abilene?**

Farmers who migrated to the fertile Midwest found that raising crops, particularly in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas had its share of problems. Millions of pesky jackrabbits with appetites capable of destroying a small farmers’ cash crops, flourished.

At the same time the railroad was heading west. Immigrants from Ireland and England came to the Midwest both as railroad workers and settlers and they knew a way to control the rodent population: greyhounds. It wasn’t long before at least one greyhound became a farmer’s watchdog.

The National Greyhound Association moved to its present location in Abilene in 1945.