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Jax Kennel Club will no longer host races

Simulcasting still will be available, but the action remains in Orange Park.

Chet Fussman

The Jacksonville Kennel Club first opened its doors in 1935, and live greyhound racing has continued at the track on McDuff Avenue for more than 70 years. But that long slice of Jacksonville sports history reaches the finish line this week.

Traditionally, the Jacksonville greyhound racing circuit shifts from Orange Park Kennel Club to the Jacksonville track after the Memorial Day weekend. This year, though, Jacksonville Greyhound Racing, which owns both facilities, has elected to keep live racing at the Orange Park track on a year-round basis.

Jacksonville Kennel Club remains open for simulcasting - meaning patrons there still can bet on the races at Orange Park as well as other greyhound and horse tracks. Instead of live racing, the races are shown on television screens throughout the facility.

Jacksonville Greyhound Racing says it isn't abandoning its oldest facility and is making the change because of construction concerns near Jacksonville Kennel Club that inconvenience customers.

"Road construction in and around the area of the track is causing us to move to Orange Park," said track spokesman Michael Munz of the Dalton Agency, whom track officials referred to for comment. "It's the best option for our patrons."

Not all of them agree. In interviews with a half-dozen patrons at the track last week, all said that Jacksonville Greyhound Racing wants to move year-round racing to Orange Park because it's a newer facility in a more upscale area.

"They want to fade this out and build Orange Park up," said Robert Vaughn, who says he lives about six miles from the Jacksonville track and goes there for simulcasting most weeknights. "They came up with this excuse about construction, but it's not about that."

Added William Brisbane, who says he lives about a mile from the Jacksonville track and has been a patron for more than 40 years: "They have road construction around the courthouse all the time, but people get there anyway. It would be the same here. I just don't understand it."

The city is widening McDuff Avenue from two lanes to three, constructing new sidewalks and upgrading nine signalized interchanges on McDuff from Roosevelt Boulevard to Beaver Street. The \$11 million Better Jacksonville Plan project is expected to take two years to complete.

"It is under construction," said Mike Miller, director of external affairs for Jacksonville Transportation Authority. "We have a project to do, and they create short-term inconveniences."

But Miller said the JTA does its best to work with businesses and residents to minimize any disruptions. As for the construction's impact on the kennel club, Miller said, "I'm sure there are other ways to access the facility."

The Jacksonville Kennel Club opened for live racing on Jan. 7, 1935. The track was rebuilt into a \$7 million, four-level facility in 1978, and has been part of the greyhound racing circuit with Orange Park Kennel Club and briefly St. Johns Greyhound Park (now the Best Bet, converted into a simulcast-only facility with a poker room).

During the 2005-2006 racing season, Orange Park Kennel Club had 198 racing performances, compared to 109 at Jacksonville. According to the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, the total betting handle declined at both tracks last year, but significantly more at the Jacksonville Kennel Club (total handle of \$7.4 million on live racing, down 16 percent) than at Orange Park (\$12.2 million, down 2 percent).

"The decision has been made, and business is business," said another patron who identified himself as Bernard, but wouldn't give his last name and says he comes to the track almost every night and will continue to for simulcasting. "You look at the accessibility and the socio-economic status of this neighborhood, and we are at a loss. The bigger crowds and

handle are over there [Orange Park]."

Munz, the track's spokesman, said racing officials recognize the track's tradition.

"We've got a lot of long-time patrons who come out to McDuff," Munz said. "McDuff does great. They have a long history there."

Munz said no layoffs are planned because the track remains open for simulcasting. He also said live racing might return to Jacksonville Kennel Club when the nearby construction project is finished.

"That's an issue that will be revisited," he said.

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