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Group says greyhound injuries down

Official at anti-racing nonprofit notes number hurt at Mardi Gras is unchanged

by Ry Rivard
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Greyhound dogs racing on West Virginia tracks suffered hundreds of injuries last year, though the number of injuries is on the decline, according to an anti-greyhound racing group.

Grey2K USA, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit dedicated to outlawing greyhound racing nationwide, studied state records to find 855 injuries to greyhounds occurred at the state's two tracks in 2011.

Of these, 520 injuries occurred at Mardi Gras Casino & Resort in Nitro and 335 at Wheeling Island Hotel-Casino-Racetrack, according to the analysis. Of those, 40 greyhounds died or were euthanized and nearly 230 suffered injuries that ended their use in racing, according to Grey2K.

By comparison, in 2010, there were 935 injuries: 520 at Mardi Gras and 415 at Wheeling.

State Director of Racing Jon Amores attributed the decline at Wheeling to a new track surface there.

While the number of injuries was lower at Wheeling, the number of fatalities there was higher. At Mardi Gras, 15 greyhounds died or were euthanized in 2011. At Wheeling, there were 25 such fatalities.

Grey2K Executive Director Carey Theil called the overall decline at Wheeling "good news" but noted the number at Mardi Gras was unchanged.

"Nonetheless, when you have hundreds of dogs suffering broken legs, it's further evidence of problems in the industry and - to us - that greyhound racing is cruel and inhumane and should be allowed to end," Theil said.

A photo from a race provided by the group shows a dog named Iruska IC Beauty suffering a spinal injury. The group also points to veterinarian reports that talk about dogs being killed after they suffered leg injuries.

Racing injuries have drawn attention lately. The New York Times has been publishing a series about injuries to horses.

Then there are questions about how states, like West Virginia, subsidize racing.

Gambling money, mostly from slot machines, props up dog and horse racing, which likely would wither without subsidies. Some question whether the state could better spend elsewhere the millions spent on racing. State law requires four of the state's five casinos to operate in conjunction with racetracks.

Earlier this year, the chairman of the state Republican Party stepped into a political minefield when he announced a push for a recall election that could have forced Mardi Gras to remove table games. That move could have caused the casino to close.

Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin has been attacked by his political foes because members of his family who operate greyhound kennels have received state-directed money for racing. The distribution of money is proscribed by the state, but the family has received money based only on how well their dogs perform.

There are also questions about industry practices aside from day-to-day injuries to the animals while they race.

A California man was sentenced to six months in prison last week for threatening to release tapes last fall that he said would have injured Tomblin's reputation.

The man, Harry Marshall Rae, used to be a prominent figure in the greyhound racing industry and has now turned against it. He contends there are inhumane mass killings of greyhounds and believes dogs are being trained to chase live rabbits, a forbidden practice dog breeders claim is no longer used.

The tracks, as well as racing director Amores, don't agree with Theil's calls to end racing.

"We know that this, like a lot of other similar activities, people ascribe a moral component to it - whether it be greyhound racing or gambling or anything that goes on at Mardi Gras - and we're unsurprised that they take that position and we disagree and we know that there are a lot of patrons that enjoy it and for those that don't, certainly no one is forcing them to participate," Amores said.

Dan Adkins, CEO of the company that owns Mardi Gras, said Grey2K has a "great way of sensationalism" and that the Nitro track was doing "pretty damn good" when it came to dog injuries.

He said the majority of injuries aren't serious or career ending.

"It's a sport, these are athletes, athletes get injured, but it's not all career ending," Adkins said.

An analysis by his company found that dogs started 43,253 races in 2011. By Adkins' measure, dogs get injured only 1.2 percent of the time they race.

Adkins said that's the best way to measure the injury rate.

Theil dismissed that measurement, noting that injury figures show fewer than 12,000 dogs were registered to race nationwide.

"It's like an NFL team having a rash of injuries and someone saying the odds of a player getting injured on any given play are remote," Theil said. "Well, that's true - but it misses the point."

He said if a dog is injured in its 50th race, "it's not much consolation to the dog that it wasn't hurt the first 49 times."

Wheeling Island's owner, Delaware North Companies, said it would not respond to Grey2K's report because of the group's "lack of objectivity, accuracy and credibility."

"Wheeling Island Hotel-Casino-Racetrack has a long-standing reputation as a top-quality racing operation, and we take every step possible to provide a safe racing venue, including rebuilding and resurfacing the track in 2010," the company said in a statement.

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