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Racing commission releases case details

by Dave Boucher
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Two men recently punished by the state racing commission denied proper treatment to a greyhound with a broken leg, and a third man hit another dog, according to newly released information.

The West Virginia Racing Commission released the new information Monday.

The Daily Mail reported June 5 that the Wheeling Island racetrack board of judges punished James Bloom, James Grace and Christopher Bever for separate incidents of greyhound abuse or neglect.

Grace and Bever lost their trainer's permits, while Bloom's permit was suspended for six months.

The commission originally confirmed the punishments for the three men but did not provide any details about their cases in response to a Freedom of Information Act request made by the Daily Mail.

The requests asked for "all supplemental materials, including witness statements," relating to the incidents that led to the punishment. On Monday, the racing commission provided more information about the cases.

The racing commission misunderstood the request, said Executive Director Jon Amores.

"Once it was clear on what was being requested, we complied," Amores said. "We certainly have the documents available, and make them available."

The documents consist almost entirely of statements from witnesses, investigators and those involved in the incidents.

On March 7, racing commission veterinarian Lori Bohenko and Wheeling Island director of racing Jane Horvath inspected Cardinal Kennel, according to an incident report. They visited the compound, located in the Brooke County town of Beech Bottom, because Bohenko reportedly received an anonymous tip that an injured dog was not receiving treatment.

In her report, Bohenko said the first thing they noticed was the smell of urine.

"Upon arrival, I began choking so badly that even my eyes were watering," Horvath wrote in her report.

"When I composed myself, I realized that it was a strong odor of urine that had affected me."

Grace was the kennel manager and Bloom was the trainer of record for the Beech Bottom location of the Cardinal Kennel, according to a statement from kennel owner Roberty Mackey. Grace, Bloom and Mackey were not at the kennel the morning Bohenko and Horvath came for

the inspection.

They asked another employee to show them "Kiowa Dutch Girl," a dog they believed to be injured. Bohenko said the female dog had an obvious injury to her right hind leg: She couldn't put any weight on the swollen limb.

"Even with my untrained eye, it was very noticeable that she had a severely swollen leg - even up into her hip," Horvath wrote.

The kennel worker escorting Bohenko and Horvath said the dog was receiving only aspirin for the injury and Grace had told him not to take the dog to the vet.

In a sworn statement, Grace said when he first saw the dog, it didn't appear that she was in any kind of distress and swelling was minimal. However, he goes on to say he knew the leg could have been broken.

Both he and Bloom decided not to take the dog to the vet because they thought it would be too expensive to treat the injury and would cause the vet to put her to sleep.

"I've been working with greyhounds for 35 years, and I've seen many breaks over the years where dogs were not taken to the vet and they healed naturally (and) given away as pets," Grace said in the statement.

In his own statement, Bloom says Grace told them to let the dog heal on her own.

"I told him that I thought she should go to the vet. Her leg was bleeding, dangling, she couldn't put weight on it," Bloom said.

"It looked broken, she was wobbly, she'd try but she couldn't."

Bloom also told investigators Grace gave him a statement and told him to provide that as his own statement when asked by investigators.

A different kennel worker told investigators she and another worker were upset that Grace and Bloom didn't take the dog to the vet. She also said Grace told her not to make a statement to investigators until he spoke with his lawyer.

Bohenko told the kennel worker to take the dog to the vet. Mackey told investigators Grace called him after Bohenko left and said she was wrong. Mackey denied accusations that he was told about the injury when it happened, and said he fired both Grace and Bloom.

He also said he ordered the cleaning of the kennel. Horvath checked the kennel 15 days after her initial report and said it was in much better shape.

Amores said Tuesday that Bohenko helped coordinate treatment for the injured greyhound, something Bohenko isn't required to do. The dog made a full recovery and was recently adopted as a pet, Amores said.

In the unrelated Bever case, Bever is accused of hitting and jerking greyhounds while waiting to weigh them in before a race.

Video of the room where people are waiting to weigh in their dogs shows a man jerk on the leash of dogs and hit two greyhounds.

Richard Brehm, the presiding judge on the board of judges at Wheeling Island, said in a report that the man was Bever. Jason Marshall, an investigator with the West Virginia Lottery Investigation Office, also wrote in a report that the video shows Bever hitting two dogs.

Horvath said she saw Bever jerk and hit the dogs. She reported walking over and telling another trainer to help Bever control the situation. Bever then allegedly made inappropriate comments to Horvath.

Horvath asked Brehm and Bohneko to review video of the incident. According to Horvath's report, both agreed Bever's actions were not acceptable. Brehm asked Bever to leave, leading to a "verbal altercation." Although Brehm called the Wheeling Police Department, Bever was escorted off the property by racetrack security without incident, according to another report from a different inspector.

In addition to Horvath's report, there are five signed statements from witnesses who said they saw Bever hit the dogs.

Some initial information provided about the incidents came from GREY2KUSA, a national organization advocating for the end of greyhound racing. Carey Theil, Grey2K executive director, applauded the commission for punishing the offenders and releasing more information about the events.

"However, there is more that needs to be done. These cases should be referred to Ohio County Prosecuting Attorney Scott Smith for possible charges under the anti-cruelty law," Theil said in an email.

"Finally, the Commission should streamline its rulings so that more information is publicly released, and greyhound cruelty cases are routinely referred to law enforcement."

Amores said the commission would make any decisions about referrals to law enforcement.

Attempts to contact the trainers or kennels were unsuccessful.

Contact writer Dave Boucher at 304-348-4843 or **david.bouc...@dailymail.com**. Follow him at **www.twitter.com/Dave_Boucher1**.