

Greyhounds put in harm's way so racino can prosper

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Over in West Memphis, at Southland Park, they spend hours in the dark, pawing at metal, making money for someone else at no small risk to their health.

But the greyhounds, their trainers say, are better off than those gamblers. Unlike the men and women hunched over Southland's 1,000 "electronic games of skill," smoking cigarettes and losing money in vast rooms that never see the light of day, the dogs are doing what they love to do: Run.

Or so they say. Not everyone agrees that racing is a good life for a dog. Greyhound advocate organizations have piled up data nationwide about poor living conditions in track kennels and race injuries — some so severe they require the dogs to be put down — for the fleet species. The sport itself has lost popularity, losing out to more lucrative forms of gambling and a growing sentiment against racing dogs. In the past decade, 26 tracks have shut down. Some states, like Arizona, have curtailed the number of allowable racing days. Ardent greyhound protection group GREY 2K USA wrote legislation that has ended dog racing in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Hampshire.

Southland Park Gaming and Racing is one of the oldest operating tracks in the United States. Its dog injury record compares well with some tracks (429 at Southland, 1,351 at Gulf Greyhound Park in Texas for the years 2008-2011). Its operators and trainers insist the dogs are well-treated and that they are doing what they love to do, and there's an onsite adoption agency, Mid-South Greyhound Adoption Option, whose customers post happy stories and photos about their dogs on their Facebook page. The track has economic value; it is one of the top employers in West Memphis. Subsidized by the electronic wagers, Southland's purses have improved.

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BRIAN CHILSON

AND THEY'RE OFF:
Southland Park's
greyhounds.

But the fact is, without the gaming, which the state allowed starting in 2006 as a way to compete with casinos in surrounding states, there would be no track. If the games of skill could be uncoupled from the live racing, the change in attendance and wagering, and impact on the West Memphis economy, would be barely noticeable. People would get to gamble, Southland would get to take their money and the dogs could become pets, running around a yard instead of a track.

A decade ago, 15 states allowed dog racing. Arkansas is one of seven remaining states that still do. There are now only 22 tracks (13 in Florida alone) in operation.

Arkansas law requires that electronic gaming be located only at racetracks, which is why gamblers have to go to the Oaklawn horse track in Hot Springs or Southland to play Caribbean Stud or Girls Just Want to Have Fun. The greyhounds bring in miniscule profits compared to the electronic games, but theirs are the tails that wag the business, and what a business Southland is: From January to April this year, \$607.7 million was wagered, \$173.7 million in February alone, on the electric games of skill (EGS). After a payout of \$1.23 billion in winnings in 2011, its net in 2011 was \$80 million. Compare that to the handle on the dog track: \$19 million for all of 2011. The Racing Commission could not provide the net, but director Ron Oliver estimated it at about 65 percent of the handle.

Troy Keeping, Southland's president and general manager, says Southland is bucking a national trend, describing its track as a "very viable, profitable racing business." But some track owners — like Caesars Entertainment, which operates the Bluffs Run Greyhound Park in Council Bluffs, Iowa — want to get out of the dog business. The New York Times reported in March that Caesars is losing millions of dollars each year at Bluffs Run and has gone so far as to offer the state of Iowa, which like Arkansas ties gaming to live racing, \$49 million for the right to shut down the track.

Keeping, himself a greyhound rescuer, said Southland has a better purse structure and better quality greyhounds than failing tracks. "I would almost define us as a niche market," he said, with a long history — the park opened in 1956 — and a reputation as "always one of the top tracks." He blamed the fact that some gambling operations want to ditch their dogs on "certain animal activist groups."

Not Tallahassee's, however. There, the Humane Society, GREY 2K USA and track owners are on the same side, trying to change Florida's law that ties poker rooms and slot machines to live racing. The bottom line motivates the gamers; the well-being of the dogs GREY 2K.

The Arkansas Racing Commission does not require the dog track to keep statistics on injuries, though it does require a state veterinarian to be present during the races. Records supplied by the commission's lawyer, Byron Freeland, show that there have been at least 23 dogs injured so far

in 2012 — with fractures, tendon tears, lacerations, and one seizure. It's unknown what treatment was given or whether any were euthanized, though records show that one dog died at the track after it ran into a rail.

The number of dogs injured is a fraction of the 1,200 dogs kept in kennels on the property, but too many for GREY2K, which has compiled statistics on injuries at Southland since January 2008. According to GREY2K, there has been an average of 8.86 injuries a month at Southland since 2008, or 452 reported injuries in 440 dogs. The high year was 2008, with 182 injuries; there were 101 in 2009, 58 in 2010 and 88 in 2011. Most of the injuries, 47 percent, were leg and toe fractures; some suffered broken necks and backs.

In 2008 and the first part of 2009, 32 greyhounds died or were euthanized. The track's vet, Dr. Lisa Robinson, quit keeping data on outcomes in May 2009. She did not respond to requests for an interview by the *Times*, so this reporter used the GREY2K's figures to extrapolate how many dogs may have been euthanized. In 2008, the percentage of injured dogs (182) that had to be euthanized (27) was about 15 percent. If 15 percent of the 452 dogs injured since 2008 had to be put down, that would mean 67 greyhounds were euthanized over four years.

In 2007, seven male greyhounds died at Southland in a kennel. Two males began to fight and other greyhounds got excited and overheated; the temperature that day was 100 degrees plus. One dog died; the others were euthanized. The track, to its credit, discontinued its contract with the kennel operator, Washburn-Oregon Trail Kennel, for 2008.

Southland needed the EGS games to compete with the Tunica casino on the other side of the Mississippi River; without them, it would not have survived. Southland's owner, Delaware North, headquartered in Buffalo, N.Y., invested \$40 million to transform the park into a racino in 2006 and is spending another \$11 million this year on an expansion that includes a new bar/lounge area and 16,000 square feet of new gaming space.

The dog track is less well-loved. The rail that the lure — a big, white stuffed bone — shoots around on is about 35 years old, park people say, and the day a reporter visited — a Wednesday, the only day afternoon races are run — a crew was at work welding and hammering on a problem spot. The self-betting area that opens onto the track apron is dingy and a space called the owners' lounge hasn't been swept in a few years; it is unused. A new sewer line has been installed by the track, a strip of white concrete and drain reveal, but it's not quite doing the job, a breeze here and there revealed.

The second floor Kennel Club is in much better shape, with TV screens positioned in the paying seats for race replays, a bar, the Bourbon Street Steakhouse Grill and a small betting area set aside for non-smokers. The small clientele ranged from well-heeled male retirees to couples; practically no one there was under 45, except the woman at the bar. Wednesday's race, being a

matinee, isn't typical; Friday and Saturday nights are hopping, the bartender said. There is also simulcast horse and greyhound racing broadcast from large HDTVs on this floor as well.

Trackside, Southland racing director Shane Bolender was giving a talk to about 20 new hires — Southland employs around 500 people — about greyhounds. Here's what they learned: It is the greyhound's nature to run; they can reach a speed of up to 40 miles per hour (only the cheetah can go faster). The races are over in about 32 seconds — during which time the coursing hounds have covered 583 yards chasing the speedy (40-50 mph) bone ("Rusty"). They wear muzzles to help the judges determine the winner, Bolender explained. (They also wear them because they have thin skin and can hurt other dogs during play.) There are 110 races a week; 18 to 20 of those races are nine-dog races; the others have fewer entries.

Greyhounds are only 3 percent body fat, and if adopted, owners should know that they are healthier skinny and shouldn't be fattened up. Their diet at Southland is meat and vegetables. They don't sweat except through their feet, which is why they are thoroughly hosed down with cool water after every race and why post time is pushed to 4 p.m. in July and August.

In an interview later, Bolender said the dogs are tested for drugs, just as horses are, but that positives are rare: "I haven't had a bad test in I couldn't tell you how long." The last positive test he could remember was from a dog that had been fed bee pollen, an anti-inflammatory that masks soreness, a minor violation. Half the field in every race is tested. Special tests are ordered post-race if the results are out of the ordinary, he said, such as "if a longshot looked like gangbusters" or if the top-rated dog runs a bad race.

Greyhounds are trained from puppyhood to chase things. They usually come to the track when they're a year and a half old, Bolender said. "There's a lot of time and effort and money that goes in to get a greyhound to set foot" on the racetrack, Bolender said, a cost he estimated at \$3,500 to \$4,000 per dog. He said he'd seen buyers at the National Greyhound Association headquarters in Kansas pay up to \$60,000 or \$70,000 for one "track-ready" greyhound. The 1,200 greyhounds on the property at Southland represent an investment of about \$4.5 million, he said.

These pricey dogs are kept in 17 kennels that hold up to 78 dogs each. They're let out for "school" at 3 or 4 a.m. a couple of times a week, for their race or sprints, and a few other times a day, an assistant trainer told the *Times*.

Their racing days are over by age 4. It's what happens then that has created a widespread backlash against greyhound racing: Up until the late 1980s, the dogs were routinely euthanized once they were no longer useful. There are horror stories of dogs being left behind by their owners at Florida track kennels to sicken or starve to death. (In 2003, the Paragould Animal Welfare Society in Greene County found six starving greyhounds, one of them pregnant, a dead greyhound in a racing cage, two dead greyhounds in a shed and 15 greyhound bodies in a non-

working freezer at an abandoned breeding farm.) Though the Greyhound Racing Association frowns on it, some farms train puppies on live lures, like rabbits, guinea pigs or chickens. Arkansas laws on greyhound farms do not prohibit live lures, though the state's animal cruelty laws should.

Today, the Greyhound Racing Association says, 90 percent of retired racers are adopted. The association says on its website, www.gra-america.org, that its goal is to reduce the number of greyhounds bred. However, the Association also maintains that "the animal rights movement has never been successful in banning greyhound racing in a state where the sport actually exists," a statement that is incorrect. The website could be out of date, rather than intentionally misleading.

Christine Dorchak, the president of GREY 2K USA, describes herself as "just a dog lover" who happened to grow up next to Wonderland Greyhound Park in Revere, Mass. "I knew ... these dogs were suffering. I felt compelled to help. And standing handing out flyers wasn't going to do it." Dorchak and GREY 2K have been compiling injury statistics, track histories, policy reports and news articles, all of which are on its website, www.grey2kusa.org.

In addition to the fact that racing dogs are injured, GREY 2K objects to how long they're confined (more than 20 hours a day), the poor quality of meat they're fed, and the fact that the only reason they're racing, for the most part, are that state laws tie gambling licenses to tracks. Though their physiology is incompatible with hot or cold weather, the dogs are made to run during temperature extremes. Dogs no longer fit to race are still put down by the thousands every year, despite adoption programs, GREY 2K says.

Do greyhounds love to run? "If you were kept in a cage for 20 or more hours a day ... you'd bet they'd love to run," Dorchak told the *Times*.

Dorchak was responding to a reporter's questions based on an interview she had had with Rachel Hogue, 25, of Memphis, a greyhound owner, assistant trainer and professional photographer.

Hogue studied up on greyhounds when she was headed to Auburn University in Alabama as a freshman and wanted to take a dog with her. After considering several breeds, Hogue went for the hound. "They're a perfect breed," she said, easy going, "couch potatoes," in fact (they are sprinters, not animals that want to run all the time). Once she got to school, she took in a second greyhound, a female. The female has since died, but she still has Dazzle, her first male.

Hogue said she came to Southland after she graduated because "I wanted to see what my dog's life was like before." She was hired to take photographs and is now an assistant trainer for Billy O'Donnell (who, it turns out, in 2010 unsuccessfully sued the state of Massachusetts for \$1 million, alleging the law outlawing greyhound racing amounted to an unconstitutional taking of

property).

Hogue's degree is in animal science. Does she think the dogs are mistreated? "I wouldn't be here if I did," she insisted. She said they were fed "the best kibble," sleep on layers of padded carpeting, and get turned out five times a day. She said if the dogs don't want to run they don't have to: "Some dogs don't have any interest." (*Times* photographer Brian Chilson can attest to that. He saw one dog with a what-the-hell attitude come out of the box and just trot.)

Still, a dog that Hogue had been hosing down after a race collapsed on its back legs when she brought it close for the photographer to get a look. Hogue said the dog was tired and needed more cooling; another trainer quickly took the dog back to the hosing area.

Hogue admires the athleticism of the dogs. She maintains that the injury rate at the track is "less than 10 percent," and most injuries are muscular, though data supplied by the state Racing Commission to the *Times* shows that 14 of the 23 injuries recorded by the state vet through March 19 were bone fractures. The dogs are athletes, she said, and athletes get hurt.

Hogue brings Dazzle to the track for "meet and greet" on Mid-South Greyhound Adoption days and when he sees the track from the stands he gets excited, like he wants to race again, she said.

"These dogs are very well taken care of," Hogue said. "They're the primary source of income for pretty much everyone out here."

That Hogue is an animal lover is unquestionable. Her photography website (rachelhogue.com) features hundreds of animal portraits: greyhounds, cats, horses, bison, the animals at the Memphis zoo. Her greyhound, Dazzle, features prominently.

Are the greyhounds happy? "Absolutely," said Hogue. No, says Dorchak. "I don't think dogs are happy being in cages ... being shot up with steroids to keep them from going into heat. ... I would just like dogs to be dogs." One of GREY2K's victories this year: "Greyhounds are again dogs in Kansas," Dorchak said. Kansas, the NGA's headquarters, had disqualified greyhounds from the definition of dog in its pet protection law. That was corrected just this month, Dorchak said. Ironically, for the NGA at least, Kansas no longer has dog racing.

Dorchak doesn't question the genuine love the people at the track have for the dogs. "Nobody is saying this is about a personal relationship. It's about a standard of neglect in the racing industry, where dogs are a commodity. They are treated as well or as poorly as the money they make for their owners. There is always a cost-benefit analysis. The greyhound, come one day, is going to be on the losing end of that analysis."

Update: *Since the publication of this story, the state Racing Commission released new figures on greyhound injuries at the track. From Jan. 1, 2012, to June 12, 47 greyhounds were injured*

at the track, including one that suffered head trauma and a fractured muzzle after hitting the rail with his head on May 19.