

Is Arkansas the next state to ban greyhound racing? A decision could be around the corner.

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For years, greyhound racing legend Darby Henry would travel between West Memphis, Arkansas, and St. Petersburg, Florida, in tune with their respective racing seasons.

Henry's shuffling between the two states stretched from the 1960s into the late 1980s, coinciding with the sport's peak popularity at West Memphis' Southland Greyhound Park, now known as Southland Casino Racing.

"Through the 1960s, 1970s and into the 1980s, a typical Saturday night at Southland might see the parking lots full, with 20,000 people in attendance," Southland's website recalls, noting annual greyhound race wagers typically surpassed \$200 million back then.

Southland erased Henry's need to travel by making its racing year-round, but soon any trek to Florida for greyhounds will be rendered an impossibility. Greyhound operations in Florida will phase out by 2021, voters decided last year.

"It really got me because my uncle ran there for 56 years," said Darren Henry, Darby Henry's nephew and current owner of the kennel his uncle operated for decades.

Southland's greyhound operations remain in the face of declining wagers, national groups pushing to end the sport and more attention being drawn to the casino side of the facility. But how long it will survive in Arkansas is a difficult question for Southland's allies.



Interest had already been declining in greyhound racing, but the Florida vote stunned industry players in Arkansas.

"We were shocked, and why people shock us anymore, I don't know. But they do," said Rachelle Henry, who runs the kennel with Darren Henry, her husband.

Organizations against the sport touted the Florida decision as a landmark victory. Chief among them is GREY2K USA, a nonprofit that wants to phase out commercial dog racing and has pushed for laws doing that in several states. The group is now shifting its focus to end the competition in Arkansas, according to executive director Carey Theil.

A constitutional amendment can get on the ballot in Arkansas if its state legislature passes a proposed amendment or enough voters sign a petition to qualify the measure for the ballot.

Carmela, a former racing dog, sits in her cage at the Mid-South Greyhound Adoption Option, Inc. on Thursday, June 20, 2019. The facility partners with the Southland Casino Racing track in Arkansas, one of the few facilities of its kind left in the country.

Groups like GREY2K point to greyhound injuries and deaths due to racing among the reasons to end the sport. Those in the industry say injuries are rare, with the dogs



taken care of during rehabilitation, and deaths even rarer.

Greyhound injuries at Southland numbered more than 1,300 since 2008, per GREY2K, with injuries increasing sharply in the past few years.

“We believe voters will be troubled by these injuries,” Theil said.



A Southland spokeswoman said representatives of its racing operations were unavailable for interviews, saying the casino’s expansion is taking up too much of their time.

Southland ascends as greyhound racing falls
Southland began in 1956 as Southland Greyhound Park. Popularity grew enough to where it extended greyhound racing from a seasonal occurrence to a year-round offering, aided by an underground heating system, according to Southland.

The racing facility has witnessed nights like Sept. 24, 1981, where almost 21,000 people were on hand and more than \$1.3 million was wagered, per Southland.

The rise of Tunica County, Mississippi, as a gambling destination drew away traffic once going to Southland. Daily attendance dropped to about 500 visitors, according to Southland. Annual revenues dropped from more than \$200 million in the 1980s to below \$35 million in the 1990s, it said.

A greyhound is led to the starting block before a race at Southland Casino Racing in West Memphis, Arkansas on Wednesday, Aug. 7, 2019.

The venue has seen a comeback in the new millennium. Arkansas law in 2005 permitted electronic games of skill for racing tracks like Southland, and Southland saw a spike in activity after a flood in 2011 hit Tunica County and

brought those gamblers to West Memphis.

But Southland is also an example of what is seen at other greyhound tracks across the country, including those that have recently fallen: Casino-style gambling is propping up the financial strain of racing operations.

Heavy purse subsidies have led to heavier purse prizes at Southland relative to other tracks, Theil said. The more than \$150 million in purse subsidies since 2006 exceeded the amount bet on greyhound racing during that span, he added.

In 2012, Southland director of racing operations Shane Bolender said purses are higher following the influx of gaming activity at the venue, meaning better races people are more compelled to bet on.

“The racing wagers had been declining for many years, but this year we expect to be flat or even above last year, and it should be even better next year,” Bolender told The Commercial Appeal at the time.

The amount bet on greyhound racing at Southland has dropped in the past decade from \$20.3 million in 2010 to \$16.4 million in 2018, according to GREY2K. This falls in line with the national decline of gambling on greyhound racing, from \$687.5 million to \$522.1 million, the organization said.



John Rushing scans the upcoming race to decide on a wager during an early evening greyhound race at Southland Casino Racing in West Memphis, Arkansas on Wednesday, Aug. 7, 2019. Rushing has been coming to Southland since 1963 when he worked as a valet for the track.

Robert Thorne, who has been in Arkansas' greyhound industry and Southland for decades, says the income the games of skill have put into the racing purses have helped in a big way, along with the funds distributed through the Arkansas Greyhound Breeding Development Program to attract more kennels to the area.

"I was the only dog farm here 15 years ago," he said.

Morphing this lifeline into a bigger audience hasn't been easy. Rachelle Henry, who helps run Darren Henry Kennels, says when she was growing up in Portland, Oregon, "there was nowhere to sit" at the local racing track. Southland sits 20 miles east of the kennel and can still get crowded, she said, but not like it used to be.



Henry points to the waning interest in pari-mutuel wagering — more people nowadays want "instant gratification" gambling, she said — as a big part of the industry's decline. Additionally, the clientele continues to get older and more are opting to watch greyhound races online, she said.

"They want something that's fast, which a machine is," said Vicki Cohen, executive director of the Mid-South Greyhound Adoption Option. Nearly all MSGAO's adoptable greyhounds come from Southland.

Vicki Cohen, the executive director of adoption at the Mid-South Greyhound Adoption Option, Inc. holds Tully, shortened from the competition name Tomahawk, one of former racing dogs sheltered at their facility on Thursday, June 20, 2019. Cohen says most dogs there are adopted

out within a few months of their formal retirement from the sport.

Florida's decision shocks greyhound industry Those involved in Arkansas' greyhound industry felt blindsided when Florida voters in November approved an amendment to end greyhound racing in the state by 2021. About 69% of voters favored the amendment, which determined what the future would hold for thousands of greyhounds.

Arkansas greyhound racing advocates say Florida's industry wasn't proactive enough in getting its message out about the positives of racing. Animal rights groups, meanwhile, waged an all-out campaign focused on greyhound safety concerns.

"They didn't think that people would ever vote to end racing, and they did," Cohen said.

The "Florida effect" has already taken hold in West Memphis. There are still people out there who don't realize racing greyhounds are available to be adopted, Cohen said, but an increasing number of people are becoming aware following Florida's vote.

"With Florida banning racing, a lot of people submitted (adoption) applications and were interested," she said. "There's a shortage of adoption greyhounds now. There's not enough to go around."

Andrea Love holds Arkans Zuko at the Darren Henry Kennel in West Memphis, Arkansas on Tuesday, July 16, 2019. The kennel breeds greyhounds for racing at Southland Casino Racing in Arkansas, one of the last remaining tracks, and states, where the sport remains legal.

Darren Henry Kennels raises greyhounds mainly for Southland, which is featuring more capable greyhounds



than ever as the number of tracks available gets smaller. Southland already has a reputation as a difficult track, or “one big egg,” as Darren Henry calls it.

“(Southland’s) always been tough as far as it’s the longest track in the country, and that bit more of length makes it that much tougher,” Rachelle Henry said. “Now the best dogs in the country run here on top of it being a longer distance, and it’s pretty tough.”

The kennel also has dogs that run in Florida, but they will have to go straight to adoption now, Rachelle Henry said. As Florida operators go away “because they won’t be able to make a living,” Darren Henry Kennels ramps up its operations to fill the void.

“The people we do business with are like, ‘I’m going to have to find something else to do,’” Rachelle Henry said. “Because we don’t only run our dogs. We run other people’s dogs, too.”

Southland rolls on. Will greyhounds join them? An amendment passed by Arkansas voters last year allowed Southland to become a full-service casino, introducing live games and sports betting.



Southland owner Delaware North made use of the change not long afterward, announcing a \$250 million expansion for the venue in January. The project introduced to Southland live gaming, a new hotel tower and added to established offerings. The announcement on the largest expansion in venue history did not mention any expansions to its greyhound racing operations.

The amendment that passed said 14% of net casino gaming receipts can be set aside to subsidize greyhound racing purses and to make capital improvements, so long as a greyhound racing franchise is being operated. Theil said the amendment “envisions a possible end of dog racing.”

But the Mid-South’s mindset may be harder to sway than other states that have stopped greyhound racing, Cohen



believes. The Arkansas greyhound racing industry must be more proactive than what was seen in Florida, and it’s already pushing harder on social media and opening up its operations to people, she added.

“The public is going to believe what they want to believe, but we can show what we do for dogs,” Cohen said.

Will those efforts be enough to convince Arkansas voters to keep the decades-long operation going?

“I wish I could answer that question,” Thorne said.

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