

Fred Grimm: Dog killing goes on as Florida looks the other way

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Florida allows convicted criminals to meddle in dog racing. Known animal abusers can own or train greyhounds. The state abides cheaters who pump performance-enhancing drugs and pain killers into their animals.

Not even the ghastly, now infamous discovery back in 2002 that Florida greyhound trainers were paying a farmer in Baldwin County, Alabama, \$10 a head to “dispose” of aging, slow or gimp dogs had much affect on their ability to operate in Florida.

Baldwin County authorities reported that the old farmer had admitted killing between 2,000 and 3,000 greyhounds over the years, shooting them in the head with a .22 caliber rifle, then tossing their remains into a long ditch cut across his property. “This case shows what was going on in the greyhound-racing industry in Florida,” Baldwin District Attorney David Whetstone had said. “It opens up the eyes to how sinister it was.”

But sinister didn’t seem to matter all that much to the bureaucrats running the Florida Division of Parimutuel Wagering. Ursula O’Donnell, one of the Florida trainers implicated in the mass extermination deal, managed to keep her license even after investigators found her signature on a check made out to the dog killer.

My colleague Mary Ellen Klas found that a long list of rogue operators have been allowed to train and own racing dogs by Florida parimutuel regulators — though the term “regulators” in that particular state agency seems to be a wild embellishment. “Abettors” might be more accurate.

Klas found records indicating one trainer had been able to obtain a license despite a conviction (and three-year prison term) for kidnapping and sexually assaulting his estranged wife. Nor did the ex-con lose his license despite recurring allegations between 2003 and 2010 that he had abused or neglected his dogs. So far he has gotten off with a \$300 fine and with his license intact.

She wrote about another trainer who had been convicted of running a drug and prostitution ring (and of committing unemployment compensation fraud), who had been barred from tracks in Miami for neglecting his dogs, yet who was able to keep operating in Sarasota for another three years before the parimutuel division regulators finally jerked his license.

There were other outrageous cases. Serial animal abusers. Trainers who were caught drugging dogs numerous times. Dog trainers with organized-crime connections. Yet they were able to stave off sanctions from state regulators for years. Sometimes forever.

But the real outrage is not that the state of Florida allows twisted miscreants to work in what one might suppose would be highly regulated gaming operations but that the state still props up this shoddy, anachronistic, abusive, moribund industry.

Dog racing has fallen so much in the public esteem that the tracks could no longer survive economically without the state law requiring parimutuels with profitable poker rooms and slot machines to stage live racing. So greyhound tracks (much like the state's equally absurd jai-alai frontons) remain open despite ever diminishing crowds.

Nationally, betting on greyhound racing (both trackside and at remote simulcast parlors) has fallen from an all-time high of \$3.5 billion in 1991 to \$665 million in 2012. Once, more than 50 dog tracks operated in 15 states. We're down to 21 tracks in seven states; 13 of those in Florida, where paid attendance at dog races has fallen 85 percent over the last decade. Betting on greyhound racing in Florida fell 67 percent between 1990 and 2012.

Dog racing has become such an economic absurdity that Florida now spends more on its tepid regulation — \$4.1 million a year — than the state makes from its cut of the revenue — \$3.3 million.

Dog track owners would be happy to either curtail or get rid of greyhound racing altogether. Last spring, Dan Adkins, who runs the Mardi Gras Casino in Hallandale Beach (which, tellingly, no longer bothers to incorporate dog racing in the brand name) partnered with Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the U.S., to write an extraordinary strange-bedfellows op-ed begging the Legislature to drop the mindless, arbitrary requirement that greyhound tracks stage 90 percent of the number of races they ran back in 1997. "This mandate is bad policy and comes with a high price for greyhounds," Adkins and Pacelle wrote. "When wagering dollars drop, so does the revenue paid to the kennel operators who provide care for the dogs. Lower revenue means there's less in the way of money to care for the dogs since the operators must cut overhead."

They cited the mounting injuries and abuses suffered by the dogs, including a Washington County case in 2010 when a dog trainer was charged with allowing 33 greyhounds to starve to death. "We should not be forcing businesses to continue a practice that is unsustainable and not of interest to its patrons, and we should not be placing dogs in harm's way," they wrote.

That was in March. The Legislature did not act. Nor has the governor — despite the reports that this decrepit industry harbors criminals and foments animal abuse — done much to shake his state parimutuel regulators out of their lethargy.

But the dodgy characters allowed to operate in dog racing are only peripheral players in a greater scandal. Maybe it's better described as a mystery. As in why the hell Florida insists on sustaining foul, cruel, sparsely attended, money-losing, dog-killing greyhound tracks.