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Same numbers, different views on greyhound racing

by **David Gutman**

CHARLESTON -- In the last five years, there were more than 4,700 greyhound injuries at West Virginia's two dog-racing tracks and more than 1,400 of those injuries were catastrophic, career-ending injuries.

In those five years, from January 2008 to June 2013, 289 greyhounds died or were euthanized at West Virginia's two dog tracks, according to an analysis of state records by an animal rights organization.

West Virginia spends nearly \$30 million annually on greyhound racing, providing prize money and state funding for dog breeders.

What these numbers mean, as is the case with most statistics, depends on whom you ask.

"We believe this is cruel and inhumane, but the industry certainly doesn't," said Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2k USA, a nonprofit dedicated to ending dog racing. "This is not because they're cruel people, it's just what has always been done in the industry."

Grey2k recently completed a study of greyhound racing in West Virginia based on information from the state racing commission received through a Freedom of Information Act request.

Sam Burdette, a dog breeder and the president of the state greyhound association, says that Grey2k distorts the truth.

"The dogs are not treated cruel, or that's not prevailing in the industry. They are well taken care of, they are exercised and they are adopted when they finish racing," Burdette said.

Issue after issue, statistic after statistic, Grey2k and Burdette see the same numbers but come to different conclusions.

State regulations mandate that the greyhound crates where the dogs spend much of their time be a minimum of 44-by-32-by-34 inches in size.

"A cage is 34 inches high, a large greyhound is 30 inches at the shoulder," said Christine Dorchak, the president of Grey2k. "They can't even stand up."

Burdette sees it differently.

"There's sufficient room in the crates for the dogs to stand up and maneuver and I would question anybody that says there's not," he said. "These dogs look at their crates as their home."

In 2001, there were 50 dog tracks in 15 states nationwide. Today there are 21 tracks in seven states. Of those seven, West Virginia is one of the few that does not mandate a minimum amount of time that dogs must be let out of their crates.

Grey2k says that dogs are let out in a pen four times a day for about half an hour each time, meaning they spend 22 hours a day in their crates.

Burdette says that those let out times are sometimes as much as an hour and that the dogs are raced once a week and sometimes exercised in between races.

Grey2k, citing state records, said there were 4,796 dog injuries and 289 dog deaths at West Virginia's two tracks over the past five years, although that number is almost certainly lower than the actual number because eight

months of data were not available.

In March of this year, at the Mardi Gras Casino in Cross Lanes, 38 dogs were injured on the racetrack. Eleven of those injuries involved broken bones, four were career ending injuries and one dog had to be euthanized.

At Mardi Gras, there is racing six days a week and twice on Saturday. Each session of racing features 15 races, with eight dogs in each race.

Burdette says you need to view the injury numbers in the context of the number of races.

"There's seven cards a week, times 15 races per card, times eight dogs per race," Burdette said. That gives you more than 3,000 chances each month for a dog to get hurt at Mardi Gras and more than 400,000 chances for a dog to get hurt at either track over the five-year span that Grey2k examined.

"I have no figures comparing that to other sporting events, but it is a sporting event, there's opportunities for athletes to be injured and if you divide these figures by 400 some thousand, percentage-wise, I would like to see a comparison to other sporting events," Burdette said. "Two hundred eighty-nine (deaths), I don't know how that compares, there's probably more in greyhound racing than normal."

Economics of dog racing

Greyhound racing has been legal in West Virginia since 1975. There has been a dog track in Wheeling since 1976 and a dog track in Cross Lanes since 1985.

In the early 1990s the state allowed the tracks to open casinos there, and both tracks now have hotels, slot machines and table games.

The state takes about 50 percent of casino revenues, most of it for education and senior programs, but some of it goes back to casinos to modernize their slot machines, and nearly \$30 million per year goes for greyhound prize money and to the state's 80 or so greyhound breeders.

Greyhound racing and casinos are a bit of a marriage of convenience.

The Legislature originally authorized slot machines and table gaming as a way to prop up the fading racing business and the jobs it supports.

So casinos in West Virginia owe their existence to racing. But racing is now the most labor intensive and least profitable gaming operation, and casinos are state-mandated to run a minimum number of races per week.

Wheeling Island recently lobbied the Legislature, unsuccessfully, to reduce that number.

In 2012, people bet about \$110 million on races at West Virginia's two dog tracks. That's more than was bet in 1993, before the casinos were added, but it's less than was bet 10 years ago, when \$115 million was wagered.

"Can greyhound racing by itself, stand-alone, survive? I don't believe so," said Dan Adkins, a vice president for Florida-based Mardi Gras Casinos, which owns the casino in Cross Lanes. "If you're going to have gambling why not be able to offer additional products. Do I think they (racing and gaming) complement each other? Yes I do. The additional gaming products have certainly kept these people in business."

Burdette sees any effort by the out-of-state owned casinos to minimize or drop dog racing as a broken promise.

"When they voted on it, it was to be a totally integrated affair," he said. "Racing is labor intensive, it employs people in West Virginia. If they can eliminate racing, all that goes to their bottom line."

Grey2k says it is concerned with the ethics of dog racing, not the finances, but says the economics are emblematic of an outdated industry.

"Subsidies are the equivalent of horse and buggy operations being subsidized by automobile makers," Theil said. "Thirty years ago the things they did were acceptable, and the world has changed."

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