

## With the chase over, dog track goes grey to blue

Closing day saddens racers *by Daniel McFadin | January 1, 2023 at 3:29 a.m.*



WEST MEMPHIS -- Then there was one.

One more 583-yard dash. One last chance to chase "Rusty."

One last running of the greyhounds.

Saturday night, the winner of the "Last Greyt Race" in Southland Greyhound Park's 66-year history was a dog named Smile N Mean It.

As the sun set on 2022 and the track, owners Mary and David Robinette didn't feel like celebrating.

"Pretty sad, actually," said David Robinette trackside afterward. "We've done this our entire life and that's the last one. ... I don't know how to put it into words."

For Mary Robinette, watching the final running was "exciting, thrilling, sad."

The couple first met at a dog kennel in North Sioux City, S.D, 42 years ago.

The dog's name, given by Mary, came from the title of a book written by Bud and Eunice Williams, pioneers of livestock marketing and stockmanship.

"So since we're going into cattle [after dog racing], it's kind of bittersweet," Mary said. "It's been a hell of a ride."

Said David, "These dogs have taken us and done them like we've never even imagined. Seen all parts of the world and everything else, and they've been really good to us."

The gray, overcast day was marked by multiple commemorative items, including a program with four different vintage covers from the track's heyday, each bearing the title, "The 'Last Greyt Race.'"

Some received a vial full of sand taken from the track surface.

The greyhounds and Robinettes weren't the only ones closing the book on their Southland tenure.

There was Robert Thorne, president of the Arkansas Greyhound Kennel Association.

Thorne's history with Southland dates back to when he was 16.

Greyhound racing was a staple of Southland since the track originally opened in 1956 as Southland Greyhound Park and was the only gambling venue in the Mid-South.

Thorne remembers nights in the late '70s and early '80s, in the days of the Kennel Club requiring a suit and tie, when 10,000 to 12,000 people crammed onto the property. Cars stretched from behind the track's backstretch to the kennel facility.

"It made West Memphis on the map," Thorne said.

Three years ago, Southland Casino Racing and the Arkansas Greyhound Kennel Association reached a pact to gradually phase out live greyhound racing at the West Memphis track by Saturday.

The shift away from dog racing was in part a response to concerns about the treatment of race dogs. Shrinking attentions spans were also a factor. Why wait 11 minutes for another dog race when one can press a button on a slot machine every few seconds?

With the phasing out of dog racing, Southland and its Mid-South Greyhound Adoption Option went about trying to find homes for more than 1,000 greyhounds. In May, the demand for dogs resulted in a wait list of up to six months.

After Saturday, there would be only one state left in the country -- West Virginia -- with greyhound racing. Thorne will send some of his dogs to a track there, in Wheeling.

"By Monday, there'll be less than 100 dogs here," Thorne said. "When at one time there were 1,600."

As Smile N Mean It's photo was taken on the frontstretch, tears were shed and hugs were given.

The PA system crackled to life one last time.

The announcer delivered a message, one made famous by Edward R. Murrow in the 1950s when Southland was just getting started.

"Good night and good luck."