

Could greyhound racing in WV be on its last legs?

By Greg Stone

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West Virginia gaming industry reports show 666 injuries to greyhounds in 2021, including four dogs that died and 218 that suffered broken bones.

West Virginia is the only state in the country where the sport is still active.

Injuries and alleged inhumane treatment are only half the issue in West Virginia surrounding the sport. A look into revenue reports shows the only entity benefiting to any extent are the breeders who receive a \$17 million subsidy money produced from gamblers at the state's two casinos and dog tracks, Mardi Gras in Cross Lanes and Wheeling Island in Wheeling.

West Virginia is now the lone state where greyhound racing tracks are still active as of Jan. 1. A handful of other holdouts, including Arkansas and Alabama, are now out of the business.

Carey Theil, executive director of GREY2K USA Worldwide, has been fighting to end greyhound racing across the U.S. for some time. He uses a dual argument that the sport is inhumane and profits are small. But year after year, legislative leaders vote to keep a \$17 million dog breeder subsidy in place. It has long been controversial, though it does not come from tax dollars.

"Shortly after the session ended, we received a large batch of injury reports that we had requested months ago," Theil wrote in an email. "That is the highest number of injuries for a year since 2014."

Delegate Chris Pritt, R-Kanawha, sponsored one of the most recent unsuccessful legislation to "uncouple" greyhound racing from casino operations. He said humane concerns did not principally inform his bill but allows the "optics don't look good at all" to be the last state standing.

"I knew there was going to be a day when West Virginia was going to be the last state to have greyhound racing," Pritt said.

On the other hand, Pritt said he would have to study the cruelty issue to come out firmly for a racing ban. Another legislator proposed just such a measure last session but it also fell short.

A 1995 law mandated that casinos operating slot machines must also have on-site greyhound racing, with casino gambling subsidizing the industry.

That share of slot revenue to greyhound breeders is now \$17.2 million a year. If the state separated dog racing from casino complexes, the racing industry would likely die and that money be freed for other purposes.

Theil said he thought enough votes existed for passage in the House but the measure could not make it through the Senate. Sen. Ryan Weld, R-Brooke, has been especially effective in beating back challenges, as has Delegate Erikka Storch, R-Ohio, in the House.

"I think they're wrong on this issue," Theil said of Weld and Storch, "but effective advocates for the greyhound industry. As long as they're in the Legislature it's going to be a challenge to pass a bill."

Storch recently resigned to take a private sector position and Weld announced last month he would run for attorney general in 2024, making him ineligible to run for Senate again. He will be present during the 2024 legislative session, however.

Theil hopes the pair's eventual departure might make anti-greyhound legislation easier to pass.

"We'll overcome the opposition. It's a toxic issue with the voters," he said.

Is it cruel?

Greyhound racing opponents, including Theil, say greyhounds are kept for hours in warehouse-style kennels for long hours each day. Many breeders, Theil says, use “live lure training” in which the dogs are trained to chase and kill small animals.

Several of these live lure cases have West Virginia connections. A Colorado live lure case from 2022 involved a breeder admitting he was breeding dogs for West Virginia tracks. According to a 2022 Denver Post story, West Virginia racing officials had received documents with Lashmet’s admission and the case would be investigated.

Figures show neither state government nor the casinos greatly benefit. The casinos fork over the \$17 million but online and simulcast betting mean Mardi Gras and Wheeling Island receive miniscule revenue.

For instance, according to 2021 revenue figures, state government received a total of \$768,558 in tax revenue from greyhound racing but bettors wagered \$365.6 million, meaning the state tax percentage collected was .2%. The state also received \$106,405 in license fees.

As for technology cutting into revenue, \$126.6 million bettors wagered at Mardi Gras, but 94.8% arrived via simulcast gamblers in other states or over the internet. Money wagered remains at the site where the bet was made. This is known as Live Export wagering.

The state received zero general fund revenue from live export gambling on races at Mardi Gras.

The figures are similar at Wheeling Island. Bettors plunked down \$239 million on 2021 Wheeling Island dog races. Of this, gamblers wagered 95.6% remotely, meaning the track loses out. The only state revenue was \$80,236 in pensions.

Including live betting, simulcast betting – by satellite from another location – and live export, Wheeling kept only \$7.7 million of the \$239 million handle in 2021. That’s about 3 percent.

A conclusion might be, from a pro-greyhound racing person, that distinction as the only game in the country can’t be bad. But because the industry is structured to reward sites where electronic bets are made, the only potential boon would be if tourists flocked to Wheeling and Mardi Gras to place bets in person.

North Delaware company spokesman Glen White last year told West Virginia Public Radio that “We would support it if legislation passed that would allow us to operate the casinos without operating racing.”

Who’s winning?

Weld says the breeders who supply dogs to Wheeling Island provide employment. He guessed a “couple hundred” jobs are provided near Wheeling. Theil, who has spent the past 15 years fighting the industry, said 75 to 150 are employed to serve Mardi Gras.

The senator points out he adopted a greyhound named Ava. He says he has been impressed by the quality of care he has witnessed at the local breeding quarters.

“I’ve personally toured the kennels where they live and met several of the breeders,” he said. “The animals were well taken care of. A large number of jobs are supported by the industry here. If you’re one of those people who works in the industry and you lose your job it could be very substantial. It’s not costing the state any money.”

When reminded that the sport makes little money for casinos or the state, Weld pointed to local taxes generated in the Wheeling area.

Weld said some of his support of greyhound racing comes simply as a function of his legislative service.

“If you were an elected representative would you look someone in the eye and say ‘Pardon me while I go to Charleston and vote to kill your job?’” he said.

Campaign contribution records from 2020 show West Virginia Kennel Owners Association President Steve Sarras gave \$8,400 to Weld, and a total of 52,800 to nine legislators from 2020 to 2023. That included \$10,400 to then-senator Ron Stollings, D-Boone, and \$8,400 to Delegate Shawn Fluharty, D-Ohio.

Pritt says his fight is based on “untangling” the relationship between government and greyhound racing, meaning rolling back the law that mandates the two go together like peas and carrots.

“The state doesn’t have to ban racing,” he said. “We just get the government [law] out of all that. There could be individuals who would lose out by passage of the bill but at the same time we get the state out of it altogether.”