

# The legal status and difficult future of greyhound racing

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Next year will be the centenary of the opening of the world's first commercial greyhound racing track, built in Emeryville, California. At the time, the town, wedged between Berkeley and Oakland, was a haven for gambling dens, speakeasies and brothels and thus it was thought a greyhound circuit would fit snugly.

Emeryville, where the building of its first dog track predated its first church by 40 years, would later be called the "rottenest city on the Pacific" by US Chief Justice Earl Warren. The track would however only host races for a few months in 1919 as a federal crackdown on illicit gambling and bootlegging ruined the night at the dogs for the e'villes, as the locals liked to call themselves.

But greyhound racing would soon thrive in other parts of the US, notably in Florida, which, post-Prohibition, was the first state to legalise gambling on the greyhounds in 1931. Today, greyhound racing has been illegal for decades in its original state of California and last month Florida banned betting on the sport. This means that as we approach its centenary as an industry, **the sport is effectively dead in the US.** And the prognosis internationally is equally grim.

First to the US and Florida: in Florida, elections are famously fraught and tight. Last month, and in an election as close and as controversial as George W Bush's Supreme Court victory over Al Gore in 2000, the Republican candidate was declared Governor on a recount with a mere 0.4% majority.

Things were not so close in one of the many constitutional amendments tagged onto the gubernatorial ballot in Florida. Amendment 13 sought to put into Florida's constitution an express ban on greyhound racing by penalising betting on the sport.

**The amendment succeeded on a 69-31% majority and commercial greyhound racing will end in Florida from 1 January 2021.** Florida has just over half of the remaining greyhound tracks left in the US. It is by far the biggest gambling market for the sport in the US and its revenues have subsidised the sport nationally. **Without Florida, the sport will wither and die in the mere 5 states in which it now survives: Alabama, Arkansas, Iowa, Texas and West Virginia.**

**Greyhound racing's terminal illness as an industry in the US is a pattern repeated globally.** The last track in Asia – based at the gambling hub that is Macau – closed this year. The last track in London - at Plough Lane, Wimbledon – closed last year. This means that at present commercial greyhound racing is now confined to six countries: the US, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and, of course, Ireland.

In the US the sport is in irreversible decline, a factor that will also likely kill off the single remaining track left in Mexico, located in the border town of Tijuana. As a result, modern greyhound racing will enter its second centenary in only four countries. Equally, there are four reasons as to why greyhound racing is now in its death throes in the US and four things to look out for in those countries, such as Ireland, who seek to keep it alive: complacency by those who run the sport; its declining economic relevancy; internal integrity threats; and animal welfare concerns.

In the US, the Republican party was seen as being more sympathetic to the sport - the five states in the US where the sport remains legal all voted for Trump at the last Presidential election. What greyhound racing supporters in Florida did not realise in the run up to last month's vote is that in a state where the Republican majority is wafer thin, old political bonds were equally as brittle. The sport, although once a significant contributor to the economy in Florida – both as an employer in rural areas and in terms of gambling tax revenue; was in severe decline.

The sport's administration in the US appeared not only complacent as to the changing political and economic landscape but also socially; failing to attract younger, urban audiences to its tracks and losing existing punters to other sports. What's worse the sport seemed to wallow in its insularity and while no one in the US expected greyhound racing ever to return to the mainstream, it did appear content to remain off-off-Broadway.

Republican politicians in Florida did the maths – tax dollars and votes – and decided that the sport was simply not worth saving. In the US, tracks are now being converted into casinos; kennels are being replaced with poker tables; banks of supporters watching live dog-racing and placing bets on-course are being substituted by banks of plasma TVs showing live feeds of major league sport for punters to bet online.

It's a far change from 1931 when Florida first legalised greyhound racing. In that year, the great Mick the Miller, the Irish-bred dog credited with popularising the sport in the UK, retired in front of 40,000 at the old Wembley stadium.

Greyhound racing at Wembley is no more and the odds of the sport existing in Britain to celebrate Mick the Miller in 2031 are lengthening. As for Ireland, if you are a supporter of the sport, would you be confident, even now, that the sport would survive a referendum on its future?