

Editorial Boards Agree: It's Time to Pass Greyhound Decoupling



Photograph by the Florida
Department of Business and
Professional Regulation, 2007.

Over the past year, editorial boards from across the state have endorsed greyhound decoupling. This humane proposal is supported by the **Orlando Sentinel, Tampa Bay Times, Panama City News Herald, Sun-Sentinel, Jacksonville Times-Union, Sarasota Herald-Tribune, Lakeland Ledger, Ocala Star-Banner** and **Bradenton Herald**.

Tampa Bay Times

"If the Legislature makes one change to gaming laws this year, **it should pass decoupling.**"

- Panama City News Herald, February 7, 2014

RACED TO DEATH



"Requiring facilities to offer racing that the public no longer supports doesn't make sense. **Eliminating the requirement won't hurt anyone, but it will help greyhounds avoid a fate they don't deserve.**"

- Sarasota Herald-Tribune, January 31, 2014

"Dogs should not be abused and kept running in so many races just to keep the card rooms operating. **If they can't afford to do it right, the tracks should be shut down** and their card rooms limited to the size and sites that exist today."

-Tampa Bay Times, February 21, 2014

Editorial: Time to rethink greyhound racing

Friday, February 21, 2014

Lawmakers didn't set out to hurt racing dogs when they allowed card games at greyhound tracks. But in propping up a fading racing industry, they inadvertently put the health of dogs at risk by requiring tracks to stage more races than demand supports — just to keep the card rooms open. It's time to reassess the arrangement, acknowledge the rules have produced unintended consequences, and quit propping up an industry that would be gone without the misguided incentives.

In the last seven months of 2013, new public reports show 74 greyhounds died at 10 Florida racetracks. Derby Lane in St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach Kennel Club and Poker Room reported a dozen deaths each. The reports of deaths are the first of their kind; a 2010 law required track operators beginning last year to disclose when a dog dies. But the reports generate more questions than answers about the care of dogs and a struggling industry.



Associated Press (2007)

In the last seven months of 2013, new public reports show 74 greyhounds died at 10 Florida racetracks.

As Mary Ellen Klas of the *Times/Herald* Tallahassee Bureau reported last Sunday, the accounts of dogs' deaths ranged from a greyhound that was force-fed after not eating for four days to dogs suffering fatal injuries on the track; from a puppy apparently arriving from breeders too ill to survive to an animal put back in its kennel before it had cooled down.


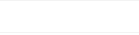
The tracks acknowledge they likely would be closed if the state had not agreed in 1996 to let them add lucrative card games. The agreement required them to maintain at least 90 percent of the live races run in 1996. Yet wagering at the 13 facilities that run greyhound races was \$265.4 million in 2012, down two-thirds from the \$933.8 million they collected in 1990, according to Spectrum Gaming Group's report for the Legislature. Those same dog tracks reported that dog racing losses totaled \$35 million in 2012, prompting several track owners to say they would end racing if they could keep the card games.

The question is how to make that work without giving parimutuels one more loophole. A Jacksonville dog track already has opened an off-site card room. Broward County's Gulfstream Park Racing and Casino, a horse track with slot machines, has been trying to convince the state to allow it to use a second parimutuel permit it has in a new location — a Miami site owned by Genting, a Malaysia concern that has pushed for Florida to allow destination casinos.

Regardless of what happens in the legislative session, the state should be doing more than standing by. Tracks should be required to report animal injuries and invest in improvements that could reduce them.

The industry says that would be too expensive. That is a tired excuse. Dogs should not be abused and kept running in so many races just to keep the card rooms operating. If they can't afford to do it right, the tracks should be shut down and their card rooms limited to the size and sites that exist today.

Betting on decoupling

 Published: Friday, February 7, 2014 

When it comes to remaking state gambling laws, it appears the Florida Legislature is going to play it safe this year and not roll the dice on more casinos.

There's a good bet, though, that lawmakers finally will give pari-mutuels more freedom on how to schedule their operations.

The Senate Gaming Committee on Monday unveiled the outline of a comprehensive gaming bill that falls short of the sweeping reforms that have been discussed in recent years, and that many had anticipated would be at the forefront of the 2014 session. Noticeably absent is an attempt to expand Las Vegas casino-style gambling around the state; instead, the measure would limit expansion to just two resorts in South Florida. Currently, the state licenses such gaming only at sites operated by the Seminole Tribe.

Nor does the bill address allowing slot machines in Washington and Gadsden Counties, where Attorney General Pam Bondi has blocked voter-approved referenda permitting the games. That's disappointing.

The bill reflects the disinterest House Speaker Will Weatherford and Senate President Don Gaetz recently expressed in tackling the larger gambling issues this year. The Legislature last year commissioned a study of gaming in preparation of debating whether to allow more casino-style resorts around the state. Big-money gambling interests have been preparing the battlefield in recent years for a legislative showdown.

Gaetz, though, says a decision doesn't have to be made this year, and Weatherford has said he doesn't want the House to consider an expansion of gambling unless it is accompanied by a constitutional amendment asking voters if they want to have a say in future expansions.

It's good to see the Senate bill tackle one issue that's been festering for too long: Eliminating the requirement that the owners of racetracks present a minimum number of greyhound races annually in order to maintain their licenses to operate poker rooms, aka "decoupling."

Betting on dog races has been declining for years, so tracks have supplanted some of that lost revenue by offering other forms of gambling, such as poker rooms. But state law requires greyhound tracks to conduct a minimum number of races each year if they also have other forms of gaming. That can range from 100 performances all the way to 394; Ebro Greyhound Park in Washington County requires a minimum of 167 (a performance consists of at least eight live races).

Why be forced to offer the public something it doesn't want? Pari-mutuels don't like the law because they lose money on the races. Animal-rights activists dislike it because it means more dogs are required to run.

At Monday's committee hearing, Sen. Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater, expressed reservations about decoupling, saying it's not a "black and white issue." He said breeders and trainers make their living based on these races, and decoupling would mean the state is picking winners and losers.

On the contrary, the current law is propping up breeders and trainers by mandating an arbitrary number of races when the market cannot sustain them. Decoupling would let tracks, not government, decide how many races to run.

Decoupling doesn't have the political sizzle that more casinos would, but it's a common-sense deregulatory effort whose time has come. If the Legislature makes one change to gaming laws this year, it should pass decoupling.

Printed on page A10

Humane gambling legislation

'Decouple' dog racing and poker rooms

Published: Friday, January 31, 2014

Florida legislators could face many difficult decisions about gambling in the annual session that starts March 4.

For instance, should the state end, amend or continue a gaming compact, which expires in 2015, with the Seminole Tribe of Florida?

Should Florida take steps toward allowing full-scale casinos, either statewide or in Broward and Miami-Dade counties? Should slot machines be permitted in Palm Beach, Naples and other places where voters approved them at racetracks?

Or should legislators and the governor take a typical election-year approach and avoid these subjects?

Whatever the case, the Legislature could and should make at least one very easy decision related to gambling: Eliminate the requirement that the owners of racetracks -- such as the Sarasota Kennel Club -- present greyhound racing in order to maintain their licenses to operate poker rooms.

This is a requirement that no one seems to want. Neither the racing industry in Florida nor animal-rights groups publicly supports the mandate and, based on dramatic drops in attendance and betting at tracks, not even gamblers seem to care much about greyhound racing.

Outlawed in 38 states



HERALD-TRIBUNE ARCHIVE / CHIP LITHERLAND / 2009

Greyhounds go airborne as they chase a mechanical rabbit, in foreground, around the track at the Sarasota Kennel Club. The Legislature may consider a proposal to eliminate the requirement that racetrack owners present dog racing in order to maintain licenses to operate poker rooms.

Commercial dog racing has been outlawed in 38 states and exists in only seven. Of the 21 tracks operating in the United States, 12 are in Florida.

The total regular handle -- the amount bet at pari-mutuels with dog racing -- declined by 72 percent in Florida between 1990 and 2013. During the same period, taxes and fees paid by tracks and collected by the state dropped by 98 percent.

The anti-racing group Grey2kUSA estimates that it costs Florida more to lightly regulate the racing industry than the \$1.8 million in taxes and fees collected.

Consider this: The owners of Sarasota's track have contended that they cannot afford to buy all-metal cages, mandated by state law, for greyhounds; what's more, they said last year, the demand for those cages is so low that few are manufactured. The SKC's owners sought, and obtained, a waiver from the rules. As a result, many dogs are kept in wooden crates; that's just wrong.

Concerns about treatment

Other concerns about the treatment and safety of greyhounds abound. A greyhound was electrocuted in Sarasota last year while chasing the mechanical rabbit used during races. Florida newspapers have reported evidence that dogs have been drugged -- with cocaine, for example. And there have long been questions about the conditions under which dogs are kept and "retired."

Last year, "decoupling" bills tied to greyhound racing and card rooms were filed in the Florida House of Representatives and Senate. The bills would have eliminated the racing requirement to maintain card rooms. Unfortunately, the bills didn't pass.

There are some signs that a decoupling provision could be part of a larger, broader revision of Florida's gambling laws this year. Good.

So long as gambling at dog tracks is not expanded, we urge legislators -- especially those from our region -- to support decoupling. Requiring facilities to offer racing that the public no longer supports doesn't make sense. Eliminating the requirement won't hurt anyone, but it will help greyhounds avoid a fate they don't deserve.

End unnecessary subsidies for greyhound tracks

Tue, Oct 29, 2013

Floridians have been subsidizing the greyhound industry for years. Not the tracks. Usage has been declining among the customers.

What has been subsidized is the industry of providing dogs for the tracks.

A number of humane society groups say that subsidies often are going to out-of-state greyhound facilities.

In most of the nation, greyhound racing is dead. Florida is one of the last strongholds.

And it probably would have been replaced by other forms of gambling long ago if not for a state law that mandates live dog racing in return for adding other games such as poker.

An unusual coalition has supported a change in the law in recent years — humane society groups that oppose much of the greyhound training activities and the tracks themselves that see more profit potential in poker than in dogs.

"This forced union of two unrelated forms of gambling makes no sense and inflicts unnecessary cruelty on greyhounds, who spend their racing lives confined, suffering terrible injuries and may be killed once they are no longer profitable," said Ann Church, vice president of state affairs for the ASPCA.

The Jacksonville Humane Society is one of the 16 animal protection groups that support a change in the law to "decouple" greyhound racing from other forms of gambling.

There is no reason for this subsidy. Florida has much better uses for its taxpayer subsidies — higher education, for instance.

Change needed on dog-racing rule

By the Sun Sentinel Editorial Board

March 3, 2014

While it's unlikely that state lawmakers will pass comprehensive gambling reform this year, one regulatory fix simply cannot afford to wait another year — the one that ties gambling licenses at Florida dog tracks to the number of greyhound races they hold.

The rule, called the 90 Percent Rule, is archaic and needs to be changed. On this, both animal-rights activists and dog-track operators agree.

The rule requires dog-track operators with poker rooms to continue conducting at least 90 percent of the number of races they held before receiving permission to open card rooms in 1997. "De-coupling" the number of required races from a track's gambling license would give operators needed relief.

It also might help save the lives of dozens of dogs.

It's important to note that most of Florida's 13 dog tracks lose money every year from betting on greyhounds — \$35 million annually, according to the Spectrum Gaming Group's Gambling Impact Study. Only three dog tracks made a profit.

Changing the rule makes good business sense because today, the moneymaking potential lies in games of chance, not from the canines' performance on the track. For unfortunately, betting on the dogs is going to the dogs.

Between 1990 and 2012, revenue from dog races dropped from \$933.8 million to \$265.4 million, a 67 percent decline, according to the gambling study.

"It's a dying sport," said Michael Glen, general manager of the Palm Beach Kennel Club, told the Spectrum Gaming Group. "Decoupling will help us in the short run as we would run fewer races, in turn (we) will lower our operating costs."

Florida is one of only seven states that still allows greyhound racing. In the rest of the country, commercial dog racing is an outlawed practice. Of the 21 dog tracks still operating in the U.S., 12 are located in Florida.

At the same time, it's impossible to ignore what's happening with the dogs themselves. During a seven-month stretch of 2013, 74 racing dogs died, or one every three days, according to stories published last month in the Miami Herald and Tampa Bay Times.

Animal activists and anti-racing groups, like Grey2KUSA, have long called for decoupling to reduce the deadly toll of dog races, but their pleas have fallen on deaf ears at the state Capitol.

Not everyone believes in the merits of decoupling. Some greyhound breeders and kennel operators worry that separating poker rooms from mandatory dog races would hurt their livelihood, and they're probably right.

The state's powerful horse industry wants no part of it, either. They see the change as a threat to breeders, trainers and horse owners.

But the horse industry doesn't face quite the same challenges that face greyhound tracks, and there's nothing to say the law can't be changed to simply focus on the industry that needs change now.

It's time for lawmakers to listen up and address what's happening at a business they regulate, the state's dog tracks.

Lawmakers found a way to amend the excessive tax rates initially charged pari-mutuels. They should take that same tack in addressing a rule that forces races that a growing number of people no longer want.

"I KNOW THE TRACK IS THE OTHER DIRECTION... I'M JUST RUNNING TO ESCAPE THE STATE OF FLORIDA!"





THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES



Decouple Live Greyhound Racing

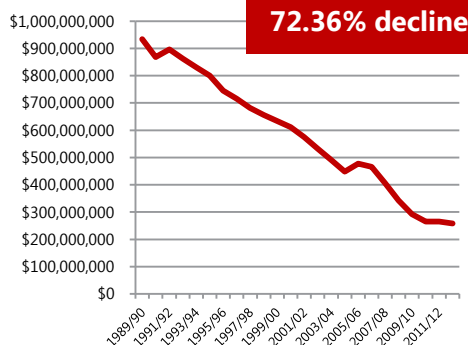
- Greyhound racing is a dying industry, and now exists in only seven states. A majority (12 of 21) of all operational greyhound tracks in the United States are in Florida. In the state, the amount gambled at dog tracks declined by 72% between 1990 and 2013.
- Public opposition to dog racing is increasing due to humane concerns such as confinement and injuries. At Florida tracks, thousands of greyhounds are kept in small cages for long hours each day. Since 2004, the state has documented at least nine cases of severe neglect at Florida dog tracks and associated kennel compounds.
- The state dog racing mandate forces racetracks to offer live racing as a “loss leader” for more viable forms of betting. This comes at a significant cost to both taxpayers and track operators, and conflicts with free market principles. In 2012, Florida tracks lost a combined \$35 million on greyhound racing.
- Decoupling is not about whether dog racing should be legal, but whether the state should force a business to conduct one activity so that it may offer another. According to a study commissioned by the legislature, greyhound decoupling will reduce gambling in Florida by an estimated \$23 million.
- Greyhound decoupling is supported by editorial boards and humane groups throughout Florida, including the Florida Times Union, Sarasota Herald Tribune, Panama City News Herald, Florida Association of Animal Welfare Organizations, Jacksonville Humane Society, Florida Animal Control Association, SPCA Tampa Bay, Greyhound Rescue and Adoptions of Tampa Bay and Greyhound Adoptions of Florida.
- Since 1990, the amount of taxes and fees collected by the state for live greyhound racing has declined by 98% from more than \$76 million in 1990 to only \$1.5 million in 2013. According to a study commissioned by the legislature, the state lost between \$1 million and \$3.3 million on greyhound racing in 2012.



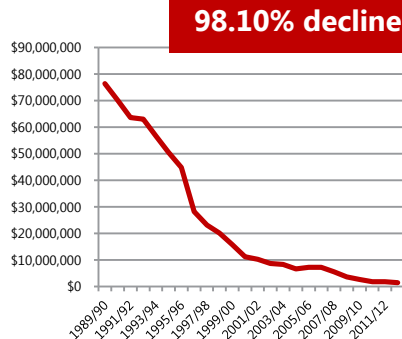
Sweetie Pie of FL

Wagers and taxes collected from greyhound racing in Florida have dramatically declined from 1990 to 2013, yet state mandates require the number of live performances to remain steady.

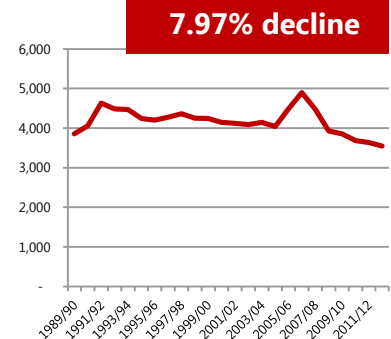
Total Regular Handle, 1990-2013



Taxes and Fees Collected on Live Racing, 1990 - 2013



Total Live Performances, 1990-2013



Source: Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering