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Josh Brodesky: Greyhound Park is a black mark on South Tucson



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Josh Brodesky Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Sunday, January 2, 2011 12:00 am | Comments

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Even in this washed-out place, where the air is stale and hope is measured in \$2 bets, the dogs can still make things electric.

It's a testament, really, to the power and grace of the dogs that come to Southern Arizona to race - and sometimes to die.

Even in a place so sad, so problematic, so hopeless and pointless as Tucson Greyhound Park, these racers can inspire awe.

It's one thing to know they are fast, and another to see it; to watch them burst out of their gates with lightning fury, looping the track in 30 seconds.

But while their speed can take your breath away, it won't make you forget.

Not about the cramped cages these dogs live in, the diseased meat they are possibly fed or the injuries they suffer in the name of small-time wagers. Not about the deaths and disappearances we have seen over the years. No way to reconcile this so-called sport with its legacy of neglect.

There are the eight dogs that baked to death at the Ciudad Juarez border back in 2005. Dogs that had traveled from Tucson Greyhound Park. And there are the 140 or so dogs that "disappeared" in 2005 and 2006: Retired racers that should have been adopted out, but were most likely killed for profit by a hauler. Expensible. Worthless. Dead weight. Life you can't get back.

Hard to forget those tragedies when history keeps repeating itself.

Back in September, another eight dogs baked to death while being hauled across the country to a farm outside of Phoenix. Some of the 27 dogs in that haul were destined for Tucson Greyhound Park.

Now there is a behind-the-scenes video of one of Tucson Greyhound Park's kennels, showing muzzled greyhounds crammed into small, dark cages. In that video, a trainer says the dogs are fed meat from sick cows. Charcoal is mixed in to ensure humans don't eat it.

"We believe the time has come to end dog racing in Arizona," said Christine A. Dorchak, president and general counsel of Grey2K USA, the nonprofit that produced the video. "All of this suffering, for what?"


Good question.

Just what does Tucson Greyhound Park bring to our community?

Some small-time jobs. Some minor tax revenue to the city of South Tucson. Ignominy as the last dog track before greyhounds race in Mexico.

The track doesn't even pay taxes on the greatest source of its revenue, off track-betting through simulcast. Between 2001 and 2006, Arizona dog tracks - at that time Phoenix Greyhound Park was still open - received more than \$44 million in tax breaks, an audit report from the state's Department of Racing shows. An exemption on simulcast betting made up \$29.2 million of that, the report says.

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So we give it away. And what do we get in return? Suffering. Death. Dogs that disappear.

"Those things happen," said Tom Taylor, the track's manager. "They don't happen on our watch here."

Put on the ropes yet again - this time by the Grey2K movie - Taylor said he plans to open up the track through a public tour. He wants to show the media and officials the track is legit. The movie, he said, was "totally biased." The dogs are let outside multiple times a day. Most are not muzzled. They are not fed raw, diseased meat, he said. Meanwhile, the track has adopted out 325 retired racers this year.

"The dogs when they are on the track, in the kennel, they are taken care of wonderfully," he said. "The criticism has always been 'What happens when they leave the compound?'"

And that's the problem. There's no accountability for the care of these dogs once they are off the track. Tucson Greyhound Park takes no ownership.

South Tucson? Forget it. City Manager Enrique Serna said the city isn't staffed to enforce its dog-protection law, which voters passed in 2008 and which outlaws feeding dogs raw and diseased meat or injecting them with anabolic steroids.

The state's Department of Racing? Please. The agency doles out fines by the hundreds of dollars and suspensions by days. Small change.

The only real solution here is to dump this dying sport. What do we have to lose?

Not much. On Tuesday night, before the big rains hit, Tucson Greyhound Park was a quiet, desperate place. The stands were empty. Classic rock pumped out of the speakers. A handful of regulars made their bets. A group of college-age kids were out for a lark, sipping cheap beer, placing even cheaper wagers. And with each race, the dogs would circle the track in 30 seconds of fury.

They might have been chasing an electric bunny, but given the weight of history, it felt more like they were running for their lives.

Contact columnist Josh Brodesky at jbrodesky@azstarnet.com or 573-4242.

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