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Dog-racing struggles to keep pace

By ALLAN TURNER, HOUSTON CHRONICLE
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THEY'RE OFF: A pack of greyhounds is up to speed at Gulf Greyhound Park, where profits have not been keeping pace the past few years. Photo: Michael Paulsen / © 2011 Houston Chronicle

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Houston and Texas

LA MARQUE - Stately and silver-haired, [Ronald Buck](#) punched a meaty fist at the cloudless blue sky and barked encouragement to the dogs that raced around the track. His words were unintelligible, but his fervor was pyrotechnic.

On lucky days at [Gulf Greyhound Park](#), the Pasadena retiree cheers his picks to victory. On others, he complained, "They just stop and look at you."

Win or lose, Buck, 75, and his buddies relish their time together at the races. The men play the dogs several

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times a month, usually at midweek when admission is free.

Last Wednesday, the men were among several hundred fans out for 13 afternoon events. Around them, though, the track's cavernous clubhouse was empty.

Gulf Greyhound Park, a \$55 million-plus facility sprawling over 110 acres, opened amid fanfare in 1992 as the grandest dog track in Texas. Now, hard times have left it the state's only dog track regularly scheduling live events.

Like other parimutuel tracks in Texas, Gulf Greyhound is being hammered by a sour economy, out-of-state competitors and animal rights advocates who decry the sport as barbaric.

The [Texas Racing Commission](#), which regulates dog and horse tracks, reports on-site wagering at live dog races dropped from about \$30 million in 2005 to about \$11 million last year. (Total money wagered at Gulf Greyhound, including both live and simulcast races, dropped to \$40.6 million last year from \$54.9 million in 2005.)

In a January report to legislators, industry officials noted that between 2004 and 2009 live races at the state's three greyhound tracks - others are in Corpus Christi and Harlingen - dropped from 1,038 to 472. The track workforce dropped from 1,100 in 2000, to 333 in 2009.

"When we opened," said Gulf Greyhound's assistant general manager [Joe Quinn](#), "there was no state lottery, no gambling in Louisiana, no horse track in north Houston, no online gambling. This is a very challenging environment."

Injuries to dogs

Texans in 2009 spent about \$4 billion on the state lottery and \$2 billion in casinos in neighboring states. Illegal gambling thrives in every major city.

Beyond economics, the racing industry is targeted by animal rights advocates who contend the sport is inherently cruel. Last week, Massachusetts-based [Grey2K USA](#) released a report asserting that 1,351 greyhounds had been injured at the La Marque track between Jan. 1, 2008, and Aug. 4. Forty-nine of the dogs died of injuries or were euthanized.

"I think the public does not have a sense of how common greyhound injuries are," said Grey2K executive director [Carey Theil](#). Typically, he said, the most perilous point of the race is as dogs, which can reach speeds of 45 mph, group together and bump on curves.

Injuries at Gulf Greyhound Park, he said, included 249 broken legs and 161 other fractures.

Age of the fans

Texas Racing Commission veterinarian Dr. [Ken Quirk](#), who oversees animal doctors assigned to race tracks, said he believes provisions for animal safety have improved over the past three decades.

Still, he said, "animals performing a particular endeavor at full speed" are at risk for injury.

Diane Whiteley, executive director of the [Texas Greyhound Association](#), an industry lobbying group, countered that Theil's group falsely accentuated serious injuries at the La Marque track. "Most of them are relatively minor," she said. "What happens is that Grey2K distorts them to make racing seem a much more dangerous sport than it is."

The Grey2K study found 32 percent of the total injuries involved sprains or strained or pulled muscles.

Whiteley conceded the Texas dog racing industry has declined, but said it is stabilizing, thanks to an industry decision to discontinue regularly scheduled races at the Corpus Christi and Harlingen tracks. The agreement funnels a portion of profits from simulcast wagering at those locations into prize purses at Gulf Greyhound.

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"We have to figure out how to compete in an increasingly digital world," she said. "We have so many competing forms of entertainment."

Race fans' aging is a big concern, she said.

"There are not a lot of young people involved in racing," Whiteley said. "They're a technology-savvy generation, and greyhound racing is a little slow for them."

Marketing ideas

More challenging is the competition from out-of-state tracks that augment prize purses with money from other forms of on-track gambling. For almost a decade, Whiteley said, the Legislature has turned a deaf ear to industry pleas to allow slot-machine gambling at Texas tracks.

Without that boost, she said, the long-term prospects for Texas dog racing are "very bleak."

Quinn said his track is determined to preserve the sport and its jobs.

To that end, he said, track management aggressively has re-thought marketing. Patrons now can bet as little as a dime. Track facilities are touted as ideal venues for dinners, concerts and conventions.

"We want to try and entice people to come out and have some fun," Quinn said.

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