

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

Drugs Taint Integrity Of Greyhound Races

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TAMPA — On any given day, hundreds of greyhounds tear around racetracks in Florida in a display of sheer animal speed and strength. And each year loyal fans wager more than \$500 million on the dogs, hoping to hit a winner in a fair race.

Trouble is, some of the winners later test positive for cocaine and other drugs, calling the integrity of races into question.

What's more, the state doesn't strip the race title from dogs that test positive for drugs or determine how the drugs got into the animal.

As for patrons who wagered on races in which a winning dog later tested positive, they don't get to share in the wagering pool.

The state has no system of distributing money to gamblers who bet on dogs that finished close behind those testing positive for drug use.

What the state does do is demand that owners of greyhounds that test positive forfeit winnings, which average less than \$1,000 for a first-place finish.

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Legislator says regulation needs improvement.

GREYHOUND RACES

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Statewide each year, dog owners split about \$32 million in purses.

However, the Florida Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering — the agency that regulates racing at the state's 16 tracks — doesn't alert police when a greyhound tests positive. It also doesn't try to determine how drugs such as cocaine get into dogs.

The regulators say it's not their place to do either.

They believe the testing system works.

"We have a high level of accountability," said Dennis Miller, the state regulator who oversees tracks in South Florida.

Extent Of The Problem

About 40 greyhounds a year tested positive for cocaine during the past three years. More were positive for less serious substances.

When shown the figures, elected state officials such as state Sen. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a Broward County Democrat who has worked on dog track issues, said 40 a year is too many.

The testing system is flawed and should be improved, she said.

Under the system, every greyhound that finishes first is tested for drugs immediately after the race. Sometimes a second-place finisher is tested. Always tested at random is a dog that finished out of the

money.

The urine samples are shipped to a laboratory at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Results can take two to three weeks.

Wasserman Schultz is convinced that the state could come up with a way to test dogs before each race and have results available immediately so suspect dogs could be scratched from races.

She said she is weighing seeking testimony from state officials as to why that can't be done.

However, Cynthia Kollias-Baker, director of the UF laboratory, cautioned that rapid-screening tests can yield false positives. Although screening at the track would be ideal, she said, it also would be cost-prohibitive.

Fans of the sport, such as Tom Mighton, a retired New York parks employee who travels throughout Florida to watch greyhound races, say the state should correct testing flaws to protect patrons.

He finds it unfair that bettors are never alerted that race winners changed because of positive drug tests.

"There's no way to get your money back," Mighton said.

Greyhound fan Carvon "Smitty" Smith, 85, of Tampa said the system leaves bettors in the dark.

"I hope they aren't doing it," said Smith, referring to the possibility dogs are deliberately drugged, "but how would we know."

From June 1, 2002, to May 30, 2003 — the last 12-month period the state has race records for — 44 greyhounds tested positive for cocaine, according to state figures. In all,

137 greyhounds tested positive for the dozen or so substances race dogs can't use, including cocaine.

During the same period in 2001 to 2002, 37 greyhounds tested positive for cocaine out of 145 that were positive for other substances. Between June 1, 2000, and May 30, 2001, 38 greyhounds showed cocaine of the 74 that failed the drug test.

That average of 40 dogs per year compares with zero cases during the same period for 1999-2000, records show.

That only 119 dogs tested positive for cocaine during the past three years shows that Florida's policy of zero-tolerance for drugs in greyhounds is working, Kollias-Baker said.

The veterinary pharmacologist said the 137 dogs with drugs in their system in the latest year came from 35,712 samples sent to the UF laboratory — 1 in 260 samples.

She also said that even if state officials wanted to, it would be difficult to pinpoint the exact method of drug transmission to the dog.

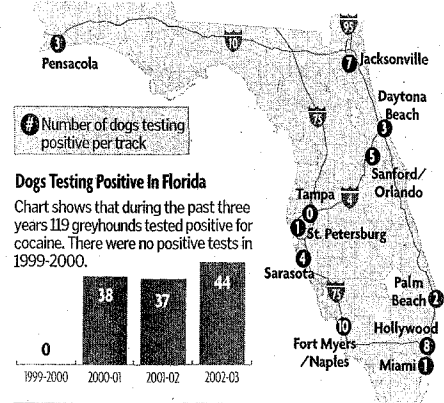
Worries About The Industry

Vera Filipelli, public relations director for Derby Lane greyhound track in St. Petersburg and a former greyhound trainer, says that although the number of positive tests is small, parimutuel officials should do everything to protect the integrity of the sport and fans.

"It's disturbing. Even one cocaine case is too much. We have to find out how they're getting cocaine in their systems, and once they find out how, there has to be serious action," Filipelli said.

DRUGGED RACE DOGS

During the 2002-03 state year, 44 greyhound racing dogs tested positive for cocaine. The map shows the number of dogs testing positive at each dog track location. After each race, the state tests the winner and a random dog, with the option of testing others.



Tribune map by VAUGHN HUGHES;
Source: Florida Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering

A review of how the state handled nine cases of dogs that tested positive for cocaine at the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track during 2002 show what steps the state typically takes.

Steve Petrillo of Fort Myers was listed as the trainer for all nine of the dogs. The state revoked his trainer license.

That was it.

The Lee County Sheriff's Office, which covers the Naples-Fort Myers dog track, was never contacted about Petrillo, sheriff's spokeswoman Ileana LiMarzi said. It never had a chance to investigate the drugs or whether a race was fixed.

Nor did racing officials investigate whether drugs were used to influence the races.

The state did not investigate how cocaine got into Petrillo's greyhounds.

The Florida Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering's "best guess" was that Petrillo used cocaine during the time he handled the greyhounds and that "incidental contact" transferred the drug to the dogs, said David Roberts, agency director. He regarded the Petrillo case as typical.

Roberts discounts the notion that trainers are doping greyhounds to enhance race performances or fix races.

"Nobody is sure how the dog will react if you give it cocaine," Roberts said.

Petrillo told the Tribune that he used cocaine recreationally but did not give it to the dogs to make them run faster. "I'm not that stupid," he said.

Chuck Marriott, president of the National Greyhound Association and a trainer who races dogs at Derby Lane, said that if

a trainer has cocaine "on his hands and he brushes the dog with his hand, the drug goes in to the dog."

Explanation Doesn't Wash

But Wasserman Schultz and greyhound advocates say it's unrealistic to believe greyhounds test positive for cocaine only because trainers are using cocaine.

"That's ridiculous. That's naive," the state senator said.

Carey Theil, president of the greyhound advocacy group GREY2K USA, based in Somerville, Mass., says most races and dogs are so fast that even trace amounts of cocaine could determine which dogs finish in the money.

"If there was an organized attempt to fix the races by using this drug, I would assume that's something the state would be interested in," Theil said. "It begs the question whether there are further irregularities at Florida dog tracks. If I was a betting man, I would think twice about betting the house on a Florida dog race."

Along with Florida's 16 tracks, there are 30 other venues in the United States. About 1.7 million people paid to attend dog races in Florida last year, but attendance is waning as cruise ships and Internet sites lure gamblers away.

Theil says Florida officials should consider improvements to its greyhound testing and trainer licensing.

Roberts said requiring private tracks to test workers for drugs may be tough.

"You can encourage it," he said, "but it's hard to require it."

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