

DOG TRACKS CORNERED BY WAGERING WOES, RACING FOES

By **FERNANDO PEINADO** — Jul. 9, 2014 10:32 AM EDT

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In this Tuesday, June 17, 2014, photo, greyhounds race at the Flagler Dog Track in Miami. Greyhound racing used to be a popular sport in the United States, but in recent years it has fallen out of favor with gamblers and aficionados. (AP Photo/Lynne Sladky)

MIAMI (AP) — A mural-sized photograph at Flagler Dog Track celebrates the good old days, decades gone: Men and women in their finest clothes lean against the fence to catch a glimpse of the greyhounds, the stands emblazoned with red, white and blue bunting, radio men perched in a booth to bring the action to fans at home.

Outside, on a recent Wednesday afternoon, the trumpet sounded, the track announcer introduced the dogs, and almost no one was there to see it. Only a couple dozen patrons looked down from the 7,000-seat grandstand.

"On a good day we can have 100 people on the stands, and they are mostly smokers who come out from the casino floor," said Isadore "Izzy" Havenick, whose family has owned the track since 1953.

The dog racing business, at once doomed and propped up by casino gambling, has come to a crossroads.

Greyhound racing's decline began years ago with the spread of casino-style gambling. To appease track operators, states gave them fat subsidies from the new gambling revenue.

The tracks themselves jumped into the casino business too, with licenses that often forced them to offer a minimum number of race days, an arrangement called "coupling."

But betting on live racing has fallen from almost \$1 billion in 1990 to \$258 million last year in Florida, home to 12 of the 21 tracks that regularly hold live dog races in the U.S.

The races have become a never-watched sideshow to the profitable poker rooms and slot machines.

The owners of many tracks — along with ghost tracks that now offer only simulcast racing — are hoping to survive long enough for states to let them drop the facade of dog racing altogether and just run casinos.

Lawmakers, mindful of the interests of deep-pocketed casino operators who don't want the unfettered competition, seem to have other ideas.

Last year, West Virginia lawmakers rejected a bill pushed by one of the state's two dog tracks to cut its licensing fees by more than half and to reduce the minimum number of race days.

Two months ago, Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad signed a bill that will shutter one of the state's two tracks by 2016.

Florida, which in 1931 was the first state to legalize wagering on greyhound racing, opted against a measure in its most recent legislative session that would have allowed tracks to keep poker and slots and ditch the racing. The plan, which proponents hope to revive in the session next year, is seen as an expansion of gambling and faces opposition from gambling opponents and other competitors.

The "decoupling" movement has created an odd alliance between racetrack casino operators, who see the races as a burden, and animal rights groups out to end greyhound racing altogether, much as they succeeded in outlawing cockfighting several years ago. The animal rights groups say the races and the training are cruel and say some dogs that were poor racers have been euthanized.

"When decoupling passes, it will lead to a slow and gradual end" of the industry, said Carey Theil, executive director of the anti-racing group Grey2K USA.

Dog racing's troubles also could be a preview of things to come for the horse racing industry, which in some states has identical laws tying it to casino gambling. Money bet at thoroughbred tracks dropped from just over \$15 billion in 2003 to less than \$11 billion in 2013, according to the Jockey Club, an industry clearinghouse.

Though stronger financially than dog racing, horse racing is also far more expensive to stage, and only a handful of the biggest tracks are profitable without casinos to support them.

Some within the horse racing industry see decoupling laws as a threat to their own sport.

"They could set a dangerous precedent for all breeds of racing," said Lonny Powell, the CEO of the Florida Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners Association, who worked for years as a regulator of dog races.

Melbourne Greyhound Park, a smaller track in central Florida, sees the biggest crowd each year during the Kentucky Derby, when around 3,000 patrons turn up to watch the simulcast screens and place bets on the horses.

Cashing in on those rare events is not enough for track operators. Promotional gimmicks such as "Doggy Dinner Theater" and races with dogs named for celebrities have not worked, said Havenick, the Miami track owner.

Reducing the number of races might help make them special events again, he suggested.

The death of dog racing would be the end of "a beautiful show," said Duke Adkinson, a longtime fan who came to Flagler — now part of Magic City Casino — with his preteen grandson Dillon to instill in him the love for the races.

"Everyone who has not seen it live needs to come at least once if they like greyhounds," Adkinson said, surrounded by empty seats and aging faces.