

Greyhound deaths investigated at Central Florida dog tracks

Average of 1 death every 3 days

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As
a

stuffed rabbit lure on a mechanical arm began speeding around the track at Daytona Beach Kennel Club on May 31, 2013, and the starting gates opened, no one could predict that a greyhound with the unusual name of Facebook was about to make history.

[WEB EXTRA: [Death notifications from story](#) | [List of greyhound deaths](#)]

While approaching the first turn, Facebook collided with two other greyhounds, tripped, and fell on the sandy surface of the track. Less than 24 hours later, the track's operations manager informed Florida's Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering that Facebook suffered a compound fracture and needed to be euthanized. It marked the very first time in the sport's 80-year history in Florida that a greyhound's death was reported to the state under a new requirement. The rule had gone into effect 10 days before Facebook's demise.

Between May 2013 and July 2014, the deaths of 149 greyhounds have been reported at Florida's 13 dog tracks, an average of one greyhound death every three days.

"These are dogs, not racing machines. And the public has a right to know what this industry is really like," said Carla Wilson. She and her husband, Bryan, are animal rights activists who volunteer with GREY2K USA, an organization seeking to end dog racing.

"Now that we have the State of Florida requiring this reporting, it turns out we were under-guessing and not over-guessing on how deadly dog racing at the tracks really is," said Bryan Wilson.

But people involved in the dog racing industry believe those fatality numbers need to be put into perspective.

"One death, prematurely, of a racing greyhound is too many," said Jack Cory, a lobbyist for the Florida Greyhound Association, which represents dog owners. "But there are 8000 racing greyhounds in the State of Florida right now."

Cory suggests the number of fatalities at dog tracks is relatively low: less than 2 percent of the state's racing greyhound population.

Former Florida Lieutenant Governor Jeff Kottkamp, who also works as a lobbyist for the Florida Greyhound Association, points out that the many of the death notifications submitted to the state do not specify how the greyhounds died. The state only requires that the dog's name, track location, time of death, and contact information be included. Only half of the 149 reports provide any additional details about the fatality.

"It could be cancer. It could be old age. There are a lot of things that dogs die from," said Kottkamp.

Of the 75 reports that include additional information about the greyhounds' deaths, 13 percent appear to be from natural causes. In June 2013, a dog named AMF Vice Cop developed a tumor in its mouth while at the Sanford Orlando Kennel Club. A veterinarian "felt it was best to put him down to avoid it from suffering anymore," according to the death notice. Four months later, Raiders Rambo reportedly went into convulsions and died during a seizure after being let out of his pen at that same track.

However, an even larger percentage of greyhound deaths can be blamed directly on the sport of racing. Nearly 46 percent of the reports containing details about the dog's deaths suggest the fatalities occurred following an official race or during a training event. Almost 32 percent involved broken bones.

- In June 2013, a greyhound named Royal Runner was "bumped into the rail and electrocuted" by the 220 volt wire that powers the rabbit lure at the Palm Beach Kennel Club.
- JW's Ku Ku Kiada was euthanized after a "catastrophic" break to the right hind leg during a performance at the Pensacola Greyhound Track.
- Following an unofficial schooling race at the Daytona Beach Kennel Club in October 2013, a dog named NB Game Plan "completed race, collapsed, and died".
- In January 2014 at the Pensacola Greyhound Track, TL Black Diamond was "involved in a collision on the 3rd turn and was trampled, which resulted in her front leg being so severely broken" she had to be euthanized.
- Boc's Velocity died following a race at the Melbourne Greyhound Park in April 2014. The kennel operator wanted to repair the dog's serious leg fracture, writing that such surgeries were something they have done "hundreds of times before with other greyhounds." The dog was euthanized after suffering respiratory and cardiac arrest.
- In July 2014, Classy Sassy died after its leg was shattered at the Ebro Greyhound Park. Less than two weeks later, the same thing happened at the same facility to a dog named Cruizin Ann.

"These dogs should not be racing under conditions that cause them to break legs, to shatter skulls, and to become electrocuted," said Bryan Wilson. "A dog that bumps into another dog at 45 miles an hour, it would be like you or I jumping out of our vehicle as we go down a major roadway."

The Florida Greyhound Association does not blame the sport for the greyhounds' injuries and deaths. Instead, the association is urging track operators to make three specific safety improvements they claim will reduce fatalities. The association believes all tracks should be equipped with a guard that protects the dogs from the high voltage lure wire. An upgraded lure arm that can be retracted by remote control would prevent the arm from hitting a dog that may collapse on the track, according to the association. And the dog owners group is calling for track owners to improve the track surfaces on which the greyhounds run.

"It's entirely possible if two dogs are colliding, it's simply because the surface is inadequate," said Kottkamp. "We believe most of these injuries will be prevented if we simply take a few simple steps."

The Sanford Orlando Kennel Club has taken those three steps in recent years, including being only one of two Florida dog tracks with the retractable lure arm, according to general manager Mike Newlin. He points out that the facility has spent more than \$100,000 over the past two years upgrading the track surface and equipment.

Yet with 19 reported greyhound deaths, Sanford Orlando Kennel Club is among the top three tracks in the state where fatalities have occurred. Derby Lane in St. Petersburg was the location of 22 greyhound deaths. Daytona Beach Kennel Club had 20 deaths.

According to Newlin, the Sanford track would statistically have a higher number of deaths because it runs more races than most other Florida tracks, meaning more greyhounds are on their property.

Four of the greyhound deaths at Sanford Orlando Kennel Club could be classified as racing-related, according to Newlin. The rest, he said, were from natural causes.

Newlin's claim cannot be independently verified through the death notifications to the state, since most reports from Sanford Orlando Kennel Club do not include voluntary details of how the dogs died. However, those reports indicate at least two of the greyhounds perished in trucks while being transported to Sanford from another facility. Another was euthanized after a tumor was discovered in the greyhound's mouth.

"We will not put a dog down unless it is a fatal injury that surgery can't repair," insists Newlin.

He said his facility spends thousands of dollars a year helping pay for those surgeries so the greyhounds can be put up for adoption. Sanford Orlando Kennel Club and local adoption groups found homes for 728 retired greyhounds last year, according to Newlin.

Yet the dog track operator acknowledges there will be injuries.

"It's a sport," said Newlin. "Athletes get hurt."

"Human athletes have a choice in the matter whether or not to run," said Carla Wilson, the animal rights activist. "Greyhounds don't have a choice in the matter."

The Florida Greyhound Association claims the dogs do have a say in their fate.

"They absolutely have a choice," said Cory, the group's lobbyist. "If that dog doesn't want to run and they don't run, they're put in the adoption program. So they have a better choice than that football player who's trying to get out of the mean streets of a city and has no choice but to try to use his sport and athletic ability."

Bryan Wilson believes the number of fatalities should prompt the state to abolish greyhound racing.

"These are young dogs, in their prime, and they're being literally raced to death," he said.

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