

State suspects dog trainers of using steroids on greyhounds

By Mary Ellen Klas
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EMILY HARRIS / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

FILE--Greyhounds race at the Flagler Dog Track in this March 20, 2008, file photo.

Steroids: They're not just for professional athletes. They're also for race dogs.

A dog trainer at the Flagler and Mardi Gras greyhound tracks has been charged with illegally possessing performance-enhancing drugs, raising the prospect that drugs are being illegally used to enhance racing results.

The Florida Division of Parimutuel Wagering charged James "Barney" O'Donnell, operator of the Florida Kennel Compound in Hialeah, with violating state laws that prohibit possession of the drugs where racing animals are kept. The facility, which houses hundreds of dogs, is jointly

owned by the tracks in Miami and Hallandale Beach.

O'Donnell, 84, runs one of the industry's largest greyhound operations. He owns and trains dogs in multiple states and runs the compound shared by the South Florida racinos.

State regulators say it is illegal to use anabolic steroids on racing dogs, but the state does not check for their presence when dogs are tested after a race.

"This calls into question the integrity of the race," said Carey Theil, executive director of [GREY2K USA](#), a Massachusetts-based greyhound protection organization that monitors animal treatment in Florida. "We don't know whether this was an attempt to prevent estrus [heat] in female greyhounds or enhance the performance in racing dogs — either of those are troubling."

Dan Adkins, owner of Mardi Gras Racetrack and Casino in Hallandale Beach, said he learned of the investigation on Thursday from a Herald/Times reporter.

"Congratulations. You beat the state," he said. "We're going to follow up on it and take whatever action is necessary."

Although the drugs were first discovered at the kennel in August, the state has not taken disciplinary action against the trainer or the tracks.

“The complaint has been sent to Office of General Counsel for their review and determination as to what, if any, appropriate administrative action should be taken,” said Tajiana Ancora-Brown, spokesman for the Department of Professional Regulation, which runs the division that regulates racing. If the allegations are confirmed, O’Donnell could be fined or lose his license to operate in Florida.

Investigators said “a hypodermic syringe, with the needle still attached, was found in the medicine cabinet” during a routine inspection of the kennel in August.

In October, investigators returned to find hypodermic needles, syringes, an empty intravenous bag in a kennel refrigerator and two Absolut vodka bottles containing anabolic steroids on a kitchen counter. The University of Florida’s racing lab tested the substances and concluded they contained testosterone, boldenone and androstenedione.

Androstenedione is the compound sports reporters spotted in the locker of baseball slugger Mark McGwire in 1998. McGwire, who retired as a player in 2001, acknowledged using the testosterone-producing pill, which at the time was legal in baseball but banned in the NFL and other sports.

Dog trainers have been known to inject female greyhounds with steroids to prevent them from going into heat, Theil said. “If a female greyhound comes into heat it’s a crisis,” he said. “Male dogs freak out and it makes the kennel unworkable.”

According to the greyhound industry handbook, the Care of the Racing and Retired Greyhound, using anabolic steroids to prevent heat in female greyhounds has numerous adverse side effects. Among them: “increased aggression which can result in fighting during trialing or racing; increased weight due to water retention; occasional loss of vigor; and virilization.”

Jack Cory, a Tallahassee lobbyist for the Florida Greyhound Racing Association, said O’Donnell is not a member of the association, which condemns use of illegal drugs and misuse of animals.

“The best practices and care and treatment of the animals is very important,” he said. “There’s always one or two guys that play on the edges of the field. Any drugs that are prohibited are prohibited for a reason, and we support that and take severe action against anyone who is convicted or accused.”

Cory said the National Greyhound Association could sanction O’Donnell if he is convicted of either abusing the dogs or giving them illegal drugs. He also blames the track owners.

“If the track had been enforcing these rules, this wouldn’t have happened,” he said. “The track is complicit in this.”

Since the state does not test for evidence of steroid use in dogs, it has rarely become an issue. In 2011, state investigators found a vial of testosterone propionate in a racing kennel at Derby Lane in Tampa. The trainer involved was “terminated from employment” and fined \$50.

“It’s entirely possible that this was an attempt to fix races,” Theil said. “I’m not sure which is worse — that this indicates he was trying to fix races, or that he’s giving female greyhounds dangerous anabolic steroids as a matter of course.”

Theil, whose organization was instrumental in persuading Massachusetts and New Hampshire to ban dog racing in those states, believes regulators should take severe action in the Florida case.

“The individual should, at a minimum, have his license suspended and be fined,” he said. “There should be zero tolerance for the use of anabolic steroids in the racing industry.”

[According to state records](#), O’Donnell has a history of being investigated and disciplined by regulators. His file includes eight complaints, including an animal welfare case. He has been reprimanded twice, and fined at least once. Attempts to reach O’Donnell for comment were unsuccessful.

Florida’s greyhound racing industry is under duress as the popularity of the sport has plummeted and profits have tanked. Only 21 dog tracks remain in the United States, 13 of them in Florida.

For almost a decade, track owners have been asking legislators to give them the ability to end live racing while also continuing their lucrative card rooms and slot machines, but dog owners, trainers and track employees have vigorously resisted the death of their sport.