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Southside Showdown

Tucson Greyhound Park thumbs its nose at a city ordinance, and officials do nothing

by [Tim Vanderpool](#)

By night, kennels at Tucson Greyhound Park are alive with clanking cages, as trainers trot their dogs out to the track. But by day, this complex of squat buildings becomes a chain-link fortress, barricaded against unwanted outsiders.

With good reason.

For nearly two years, the track has been breaking the law. And for at least one of those years, South Tucson city officials have known this, and have done nothing about it.

In 2008, the voters of South Tucson passed a measure aimed at improving the treatment of greyhounds at the track. Among other things, the Tucson Dog Protection Act forbids the dosing of female greyhounds with anabolic steroids, which contain hormones to keep them from going into heat.

But a track veterinarian—recently placed on probation by state officials for unprofessional conduct—reported that he began injections of the steroids shortly after the act was passed. Last year, he even notified state officials of his intentions.

It now appears that track officials never intended to comply with the new law. "This letter is to inform you that I will be providing testosterone shots at Tucson Greyhound Park," Dr. Joe Robinson wrote in a Jan. 12, 2009, letter to the Arizona State Veterinary Medical Examining Board.

In an interview the following October, Robinson said he had no plans to refrain from providing steroid injections. "It's licensed under the state of Arizona," he told me, "and I'm doing what I'm licensed to do."

The veterinarian's admission is only the latest in a string of questionable practices uncovered at the aging track. Last month, Robinson's license was placed on probation for, among other things, a failure to maintain adequate records of his work at the park. That made him the third track vet—along with Dr. Paul Pullen and the late Dr. Betty Menke—to be cited for unprofessional conduct for failing to maintain adequate records.

It's also in addition to fines levied against the track when inspectors from the Arizona Department of Racing uncovered syringes in one of the kennels, and on another visit found a kennel awash in dog feces and fleas.

Throughout this time, city officials have done nothing to stop the apparent flouting of the voter-approved steroid ordinance. When Robinson's actions were first uncovered by the Tucson Weekly last year, South Tucson city manager Enrique Serna cited his community's over-stretched resources as one reason for not taking action. He also questioned whether the law was actually being broken. "I'm hearing all kinds of different things legally," he said.

The latest turn of events began in December 2009, when a retired Pima County employee named Glenda Taylor filed a complaint with the state veterinary board, citing Robinson's steroid injections at the track.

Robinson certainly wasn't trying to hide his actions, which he clearly described in that January 2009 correspondence with the state medical veterinary board.

In her complaint, Glenda Taylor noted that the vet was also openly violating the South Tucson city ordinance. A state board hearing to discuss the matter was convened on Aug. 18, followed by another on Oct. 30. Though

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Glenda Taylor: "He just doesn't get it that the city of South Tucson has a new ordinance, and steroids are the issue."

Robinson failed to appear at either hearing, his correspondence with the board was combative and, at times, sarcastic.

He continued to argue that he was simply following guidelines established by the Arizona Department of Racing, which does not prohibit steroid use for greyhounds. "I am licensed to administer testosterone for therapeutic reasons," Robinson wrote on Dec. 16, 2009. "The town of South Tucson does not have the authoritative ability to regulate my practice of veterinary medicine as dictated by both state and federal authorities, and by attempting to do so usurps both state and federal dictum."

Robinson went on to mock those concerned about the welfare of racing dogs at a track that has racked up numerous violations.

In a July letter, he filed his own "complaint" against any examining-board members—which included at least two fellow vets—who conduct procedures that might cause pain to an animal, such as feline declawing or ear-docking. "My official complaint is expanded to all human medical professionals on the board, including R.N.s, for not washing their hands between patients and recording this activity, if done," Robinson wrote. "They could possibly be spreading MRSA to others. The thought of this is quite distressful to me."

While the board ultimately decided it lacked jurisdiction over steroid use, it did fault Robinson for shoddy record-keeping and for lacking a "premise license" to practice at Tucson Greyhound Park.

Dr. Robinson, who did not return a phone call from the Weekly, had his license placed on one year of probation. He was also ordered to attend continuing-education classes, and to obtain a premise license to work at the park. (He claims to hold such a license through a Nogales veterinary clinic owned by Dr. Simon Escalada. A phone call to Escalada seeking comment was also not returned.)

Not surprisingly, Glenda Taylor is a bit disappointed with Robinson's sanction. "He just doesn't get it that the city of South Tucson has a new ordinance, and steroids are the issue," she says. "He's violating the ordinance."

Meanwhile, track manager Tom Taylor has fashioned his own curious take on the South Tucson law. He now maintains that the ordinance prohibiting Tucson Greyhound Park from administering steroids doesn't apply to Robinson. "We're not doing it," Tom Taylor says. "A licensed veterinarian is doing it. The track cannot do it, and the kennel operators cannot do it."

But the city ordinance seems unambiguous. "No person," it reads, "shall give or administer anabolic steroids as defined in the United States code and relevant sections of the code of federal regulations to any dog to artificially enhance performance or to suppress estrus."

Asked about this, Tom Taylor offers Plan B: "I don't think a city ordinance can tell a veterinarian what to do."

He may be right—especially if the city in question does nothing to enforce its own law. Since Dr. Robinson first openly discussed injecting the dogs with steroids at Tucson Greyhound Park a year ago, the city of South Tucson has taken no action against him or Greyhound Park.

City Manager Serna suggests that's about to change, given Robinson's defiant admissions to the veterinary board. "If, in fact, it boils down to him flagrantly violating the ordinance and administering steroids, I'll ask the city attorney to take appropriate action," Serna says. "I can tell you we're much further down the road than back when this whole thing started."

Only time will tell.