

Charleston Daily Mail

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December 3, 2010

Injuries remain high at racetrack

by Billy Wolfe
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WHEELING, W.Va.--Greyhound injuries at Wheeling Island Hotel-Casino-Racetrack remained high in October, despite a large-scale construction project aimed at improving safety for the dogs.

In fact, records filed with the West Virginia Racing Commission show injuries actually increased in the weeks immediately following the track renovations.

In August, track officials announced they were shutting down to complete a \$400,000 track overhaul that would make the track safer for the dogs, which they referred to as "star athletes."

Records at the time showed that the average number of injuries jumped from 19 per month in 2009 to more than 27 per month during the first seven months of this year.

Jim Simms, president and general manager, told the Associated Press in August that the increase in injuries was an "alarm bell."

"It was approaching double the normal level," he said at the time.

The track reopened Sept. 20 after crews had finished their work.

From Sept. 18 through the end of October, there were 41 reported injuries, according to the records.

At least 22 of those injuries involved broken legs, the records show. Four dogs had injuries so severe that they had to be euthanized.

Sixteen injuries occurred in the last two weeks of September. The other 25 occurred in October.

One dog was put down in September. The other three were euthanized in October.

Repeated phone calls to Simms' office were not returned. Phone calls to the track's manager of gaming operations and marketing director also were not returned.

Lori Bohenko is the state veterinarian at the Wheeling track. She said the uptick in injuries in October and late September was expected, but that the figures for November show promise that injuries are now on the decline.

Bohenko, who has extensive experience treating both greyhounds and racing horses, said the dogs faced a "period of adaptation," after the new track was installed.

"We initially had a spike in injuries," she said.

She compared the situation to human athletes who sometimes struggle with a change from

natural grass fields to artificial turf.

And she said that some of the injuries recorded in late September and October might have been the result of cumulative injuries the dogs accrued from months of running on the low-grade track.

"It happens with horses and it happens with dogs," she said.

Bohenko has not yet finished her analysis of the November figures, meaning that they have yet to be filed with the Racing Commission. But she is encouraged by what she has reviewed so far.

Prior to the upgrades, Bohenko said Wheeling's greyhounds were experiencing an injury rate of 1.99 per 100 races. Her preliminary analysis of the November figures shows that injuries have fallen to 1.88 per 100 races.

The track runs at least 134 races per week, each with eight dogs, according to past reports.

But a national group working to outlaw greyhound racing believes the figures show that catastrophic injuries simply are inherent to the industry.

"Track owners have tried to reassure the public by suggesting that this problem has gone away," said Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA. "That clearly is not the case."

He said that most greyhound tracks do not invest the time and money in making track improvements. Therefore, there is much debate about what specific kinds of changes actually help dogs and which ones make the situation worse.

Theil said he was glad to see the track invested so much money in the safety of its dogs. But he said the industry itself is the root of the problem.

"Injuries are a part of the dog racing industry and it's certainly a good thing that the track was resurfaced," he said. "But dogs are still dying.

"As long as we have dogs racing so that gamblers can gamble on them, there are going to be serious injuries," he said.

The track was built in 1976. Prior to the overhaul, the track was last refurbished in the 1980s, according to AP.

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