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Injuries at dog track a worry

by Billy Wolfe
Daily Mail staff

Officials with animal welfare organizations said they are deeply concerned about the number of injuries over the past six years at Mardi Gras racetrack.

More than 3,200 injuries were reported at the Nitro track from the beginning of 2005 to the end of 2010, an average of about 1.4 injuries per day, records filed with the West Virginia Racing Commission show.

At least 152 dogs suffered injuries that were so severe they had to be euthanized. At least seven died as a result of illnesses contracted in the kennels.

"In terms of the raw number of injuries, this is the largest we have seen for a single track by far," said Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit working to outlaw greyhound racing.

Ann Church, a greyhound racing specialist with the ASPCA, called the numbers "appalling." The ASPCA also opposes the dog racing industry as a whole.

"When I first heard the numbers, I assumed they were for both tracks in the state, not just the one," she said.

But injuries have dropped over the past two years. And officials at the track claim that the average number of injuries per racing start is well within the national average, a claim that could not immediately be verified.

For example, there were 25 deaths in 2010, compared to 43,440 total racing starts. That means that deaths resulted in only 0.0006 percent of total racing starts last year.

"If you compared these numbers to the NFL or even horse racing, this would be a very low percentage," said Dan Adkins, who serves as the president of Hartman Tyner, the company that owns the track.

He has said repeatedly that the health and safety of the dogs at Mardi Gras is his No. 1 concern.

But Theil is unimpressed by the comparison of injuries to the total number of racing starts. Only about 2,000 dogs race at the track each year, but they race over and over again.

Theil said that kind of number crunching is intended to make the number of injuries seem less severe.

"Injury" can mean anything from a broken leg to a broken nail. But about 750 of the injuries reflected in the records were broken bones.

More than 300 of the injuries were listed as "career-ending," meaning that the injured dog was never able to race again.

But Theil emphasized the issue is not just about numbers.

He said it is about individual dogs whose lives were cut short because of an industry based on gambling and entertainment.

"Each one of them had a name," he said.

Records give details on dogs like Freda Design, a 1-year-old black greyhound owned by Tomblin Kennels. Acting Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin's mother, Freda Tomblin, owns Tomblin Kennels.

Freda Design was put down on Halloween 2010 after she was bumped by another dog and suffered a broken leg during a race.

Another dog, a 1-year-old black greyhound named Elmer Comer died after he finished a race on April 14, 2010 and then suffered a "cardiovascular event."

On Jan. 4, 2008, a 1-year-old brindle named Moving Marla was euthanized after she fell during a race and was then run over by other dogs, breaking her legs in several places.

These instances are among dozens that Grey2K compiled in a list and sent to the Daily Mail.

Grey2K also used the data it received and cross-referenced the information with video replays on the track's website to create a short montage of some of the injuries.

To view the group's video, click here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5DOFMW05Nw/>. Some readers might be disturbed by the footage.

The numbers could be higher than what is reflected in the records. To date, there is no exact record of the number of injuries at the track for the past six years.

More than 13 months' worth of data is missing from the state's records. Racing Commission officials simply said they do not have those records on file and do not know where they are.

The Daily Mail also attempted to interview Dr. Mark D. Webster, the state-appointed veterinarian at the track. Webster's records are the ones referenced in this story.

Webster agreed only to answer questions in writing. In his response, he said that he did not know which records were not given to Grey2K and that the Racing Commission did not consult him on the records request.

Webster could not say if he believed the number of injuries at Mardi Gras was higher or lower than at other tracks. He said he has not seen data for other tracks.

But Theil said data from the missing months is referenced in some of the other documents that Grey2K received. Based on those references, he believes the state records are accurate or at least close to the total number.

"All we can do, in my view, is look at the data and try to make sense of it, and at the end of the day, arrive at what the state says," Theil said. "This is a regulatory agency that is charged with overseeing this industry."

Some discrepancies also exist between Adkins' personal records and those provided by the state.

For example, state records show there were 25 deaths in 2009, while Adkins' figures show there were 30.

Adkins said neither the ASPCA nor Grey2K is to be trusted. He has previously accused Grey2K of having ulterior motives. He reiterated that allegation and said Grey2K should not be considered a reputable source.

Instead, he suggested the Humane Society of the United States should be contacted for comment.

The Daily Mail called a spokesman for the Humane Society and first was told it is the policy of the organization to forward all media inquires regarding greyhound racing to Grey2K.

Michael Markarian, chief operating officer with the Humane Society, then contacted the newspaper to say the organization is adamantly opposed to the greyhound racing industry.

Markarian was reluctant to say whether injuries at Mardi Gras were higher or lower than elsewhere.

"Many states don't even keep records of injuries," he said.

But he said greyhound racing is declining in popularity across the nation and should be brought to an end.

"It's a dying industry," he said.

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