

Dog Racing Controversy: New Allegations Against Greyhound Trainer

February 3, 2014 11:20 PM

MIAMI (CBSMiami) – James “Barney” O’Donnell is one of the legendary dog men of Florida. For nearly 60 years he has owned, trained, and raced greyhounds.

“Anytime you’re dealing with animals it’s a great life,” O’Donnell told CBS4’s News back in 2011.

In its heyday, O’Donnell Kennels housed more than 400 dogs and raced on tracks across the country.

But like the industry he’s been a part of for decades, O’Donnell’s future is very much in doubt. Last year, during unannounced inspections, state investigators found syringes in his kennel which they said tested positive for a variety of anabolic steroids, including testosterone, boldenone, and androstenedione.

The steroid allegations inside O’Donnell’s kennel were first reported by The Miami Herald.

In an interview with CBS4 investigator Jim DeFede, O’Donnell denied any wrongdoing.

“They found some syringes in your kennel,” DeFede noted.

“That’s what they say they found, I don’t know nothing about that,” the 84-year-old O’Donnell replied.

Investigators also claimed they found an unknown substance inside two Absolut vodka bottles. Although clearly suspicious, investigators from the state’s Department of Business and Professional Regulation never bothered to have the contents analyzed.

A spokeswoman for the agency said because the case is still under investigation she couldn’t explain why the unknown substance wasn’t tested.

O’Donnell said the bottles contained worm medicine for the animals.

“We worm our dogs quite frequently,” he said, adding he prefers keeping the medicine in glass bottles than the plastic ones they come in.

Initially O’Donnell denied using steroids on his animals, but he then admitted to giving testosterone to his female dogs to prevent them from going into heat.

“We use testosterone on our females, yes,” he said. “It keeps them from coming in heat – and if they come in heat, we can’t race them.”

O’Donnell doesn’t view the testosterone as a performance enhancing drug – it merely keeps them from female dogs from their monthly cycles. He described it as a common practice throughout greyhound

racine because when a female dog is in heat, it will agitate the male dogs and make the kennels impossible to manage.

"We've been using it for years and years and years," he said.

Animal rights activists say prolonged use of testosterone in female dogs is dangerous to the animals. But it is not prohibited – if it is administered and overseen by a veterinarian. The problem for O'Donnell is the steroid-laced syringes were just lying about.

And that leads to another question: Who were O'Donnell's veterinarians?

CBS4 News has obtained new records from the state of Florida detailing how in late 2010 and all of 2011 O'Donnell's dogs were routinely vaccinated by a Miami veterinarian, Dr. Emilio Vega.

The problem: Emilio Vega died in 2010.

"That's another problem," O'Donnell acknowledged.

O'Donnell said Vega's assistant assumed care of the dogs.

"After Dr. Vega died [the assistant] said, I'm taking over,' I said, 'Alright.' And he came and vaccinated the dogs."

And did the assistant sign Vega's name to the state forms?

"No, I don't know if he signed them," O'Donnell said. "I can't remember, I think he probably had a stamp. He had a stamp I'm pretty sure."

O'Donnell said in recent weeks he began looking for the assistant now that questions are being raised.

"Right now I'm trying to find the man and I can't find him," he said. "I'm trying to find him to see if he is still alive too."

O'Donnell said he just assumed the man was legitimate.

"He used to come with Vega and then sometimes he'd come alone, if we had vaccinations sometimes he'd show up by himself," O'Donnell said.

Was he a licensed vet himself?

"I can't answer that, I never asked him," O'Donnell admitted. "I never asked to see his credentials."

O'Donnell said in hindsight that was a mistake.

"Well I probably should have, I probably made a mistake there," O'Donnell said.

O'Donnell said he parted ways with Vega's assistant in 2012. His current veterinarian is licensed and all of his animals have their vaccinations, he maintained.

Nevertheless, the state considers the infractions serious enough that it is seeking to revoke his license to race greyhounds. He said he plans on fighting the complaints filed against him by the state.

“I guess I got to get a lawyer,” he said.

But it may be too late. Mardi Gras dog track in Broward has cancelled his contract and will no longer allow him to race his dogs. And late Monday, The Miami Herald reported that the Orange Park Kennel Club in Jacksonville had also cancelled his contract.

O’Donnell admits this may be the end of his greyhound career. In his prime, he raced more than 400 dogs at tracks across the country. Now he says he’s down to about 30 to 40 dogs racing at a handful of tracks in Florida and West Virginia.

A decent man widely respected by those that know him, O’Donnell in many ways now embodies the state of greyhound racing – a once storied sport that has fallen from grace.

In recent years race track owners have been trying to jettison greyhound racing – where they lose millions of dollars every year – so they can concentrate instead on their casino operations. But under state law, they can only have their casinos if they continue operating the dog tracks.

Those race track/casino owners will once again push a bill in the Florida Legislature this year to “de-couple” greyhound racing from casinos, so the track owners can phase out the dog tracks.

The latest story surrounding O’Donnell will allow the race track/casino owners – as well as animal rights activists – to highlight the sordid side of greyhound racing and place additional pressure on the Legislature to act.

Whether O’Donnell is guilty of improperly caring for his dogs or is being used by the race track/casino owners for their own agenda, O’Donnell says he knows he faces an uncertain future.

“I work seven days a week, I haven’t had a day off and I’ll be 85 in April,” he said. “I love my dogs. I love the animals, that’s what has kept me alive.”