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## The Woodlands runs its last greyhound race

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When the last greyhound crossed the finish line in Saturday's last race at The Woodlands, pari-mutuel racing in Kansas came to an end.

At least for now.

The Kansas City, Kan., track's operators are pinning their hopes on potential changes in the state's claims on gambling revenues, which might provide enough operating profit to reopen at a later date. The odds against racing's return, though, are daunting.

Anticipating the end of that racing era, a good crowd turned out Saturday for the last rounds of racing. Rather than looking empty and derelict, The Woodlands seemed bustling compared with recent months, several patrons said.

The broad parking lots were only about one-quarter full, but inside the grandstand, many of the choice seats overlooking the greyhound track were taken. Some fans were alone. Others were with husbands, wives and children, or with friends.

Betty Martin of Kansas City, watching the greyhounds, was among many who had been coming to the track since it opened, and once won \$14,000. She held out hope that the track's management would change and it would reopen. Otherwise, she will be taking her business to Council Bluffs, Iowa.

"I think it's terrible, it's horrible. I want them to stay open," Martin said.

The Woodlands' closing came after negotiations with the state collapsed last month over how to divvy up profits from 800 or more state-owned slot machines that would have transformed the property from an aging, money-losing racetrack to a "racino," with racing and modern electronic casino games.

The closure wiped out the last 180 jobs at the track, which once provided work for nearly 900 people.

The Woodlands' announcement echoed the decision in May by Wichita businessman Phil Ruffin Sr., who also walked away from a state deal for slots at his long-closed Camptown dog track in Frontenac, Kan.

Ruffin poured \$10 million into redeveloping Camptown before concluding that the state's mandatory 60 percent bite from gross revenues didn't leave enough cash flow to turn a sufficient profit.

Sedgwick County voters last year rejected slots for Ruffin's Wichita Greyhound Park, and it closed last fall.

That left The Woodlands as the state's last remaining year-round track. The track, which once throbbed with the excitement of thousands of fans, has been on borrowed time for a decade.

The track hadn't turned a profit since riverboat gambling emerged in Missouri in the mid-1990s. More-recent race-day attendance had been sparse. Slots, which saved tracks in Iowa and 10 other states, were its last and best hope.

### Long decline

When The Woodlands opened in 1989, riverboat and tribal casinos were just beginning to appear in a handful of U.S. markets.

For a few years, the measured pace of racing and the cerebral challenge of handicapping attracted a loyal audience that thrilled to the call of "Here comes Woody!" — the mechanical rabbit the racing hounds chased around the quarter-mile sand and clay oval.

Darren Flahive, owner of the Full House Racing greyhound kennel, fondly remembered those days.

"You had to get reservations two weeks in advance," he said. "There were 300 people at the door" waiting for the gates to open each day.

"You might get 10,000 out here on a Wednesday night. It was unbelievable."

In its first full year of operation in 1990, the dual dog-racing and horse-racing facility drew 1.7 million patrons who placed \$197 million in wagers.

Then Missouri riverboats came along in 1994. Almost overnight, gamblers gravitated to the bright lights of those floating

gambling parties.

Within a year, The Woodlands' betting handle was nearly halved. Just 23 months after the first Kansas City riverboat opened, the track's owners filed for bankruptcy.

"It comes down to that instant gratification" of slots, said Kevin King, the track's simulcast coordinator.

"Handicapping takes work. You have to read. You have to do a little math, and you have to get out of your chair and go to the betting window."

There just aren't enough handicappers anymore to keep the place going.

"For us, it's either slots or death," said King.

St. Joseph businessman and casino operator William M. Grace bought the track in 1998 out of bankruptcy court. For years, Grace sought unsuccessfully to persuade the Kansas Legislature to allow slots to bolster the track's crimson-hued bottom line and fatten winners' purses in hopes of wooing the sport's best talent back to The Woodlands.

Grace died in 2004. But his children carried on the lobbying cause in Topeka, finally succeeding last year with the passage of Senate Bill 66. The bill established four state-owned casinos and permitted slots at the state's three licensed tracks.

Those "destination casino resorts" will pay an effective state and local tax rate of around 27 percent. But the law earmarks 40 percent of racinos' gross gaming revenues for state taxes, plus 14 percent to supplement horse-racing and dog-racing purses, 3 percent for host local government taxes, 2 percent for a state fund to aid problem gamblers, and 1 percent for a state horse fair benefit fund.

The management company would have to build, staff, equip and operate a racino from its 25 percent slice of the pie. The remaining 15 percent was to be divided by mutual agreement between the state and its racino slot manager.

It was an agreement neither The Woodlands nor Ruffin could reach.

### **Long odds**

Now racing supporters are pondering another lobbying push in Topeka next year to reduce the state's cut of slot revenues. But many are wary of reopening the contentious gambling debate in Topeka.

"It's a touchy situation, messing with the bill again," said Woodlands general manager Jayme LaRocca, a former jockey who has filled several roles at The Woodlands since 1990, including as a state racing steward. "Unfortunately, it's going to take legislative help."

In a farewell note to customers taped to the front doors of The Woodlands' clubhouse and grandstand, track president Howard T. Grace said he was "still hopeful" the track would reopen "with new gaming revenue at some point in the future."

"I'm looking at every option I can to reopen," including lobbying for lower taxes, bringing in a new partner or selling the place, he told the state's Racing and Gaming Commission last week.

The few shining years that The Woodlands was state of the art and the only gambling game in town are a faded memory.

Last year, The Woodlands had 275,000 admissions and a betting "handle" of just \$61 million. Bettors won back more than 75 percent of that sum, leaving the track with a little more than \$1 million a month to meet the payroll and pay its taxes and operating expenses.

If not for the modest drawing power of simulcast races from top tracks around the country, The Woodlands might have closed years ago.

Last year, \$37.5 million, or 61 percent, of the track's \$61 million handle came from wagers on simulcast horse and dog races. Live horse and dog racing at The Woodlands attracted just \$23.7 million in bets.

Most days recently, a few dozen regulars occupied handicappers' tables that were lined up like school desks before banks of television sets showing live races coast to coast.

Like most of the regulars, John Dickeson of Kansas City said he bet almost exclusively on horse races run elsewhere.

"The Woodlands' pools have gotten so small, they're not worth playing anymore," he said.

LaRocca said he didn't have a clue what would come next. He and a skeleton staff of a dozen or so employees will be on hand for a couple of months to close out the books with state regulators and help find new homes for hundreds of greyhounds still kenneled at the track.

"Every greyhound will be taken care of," LaRocca pledged.

All will be adopted out as pets, sent to other tracks to race or sent to breeding farms, many in Kansas.

LaRocca said he was hopeful that state lawmakers would relent on tax rates and put the track on course to reopen — with slots. If it happens, many employees vow to return.

On Saturday, LaRocca created a daylong closing party with lots of freebies. There was a time The Woodlands didn't have to give away stuff to pack the house.

"When I started working here, we were taking reservations for grandstand seating," recalled 16-year Woodlands veteran Judy Laster, the track's marketing and promotions director.

On Monday afternoon, she was selling programs in the concourse because there was nobody else around to do it.

"I haven't cried yet," Laster said. "But I feel it coming."

Jasen Mangrum of Olathe said Saturday that he had been coming to the track since he was 11. The 30-year-old businessman was sitting at a table with his laptop computer, researching the performance records of horses. He said he preferred betting on thoroughbreds to greyhounds. He said he had been coming to The Woodlands four to six times a week.

"I wanted to see it one last time," Mangrum said. "It's like losing an old friend."

### **Falling fortunes**

Here is the annual attendance and betting "handle" at The Woodlands, which closed Saturday. The track opened in fall 1989. Riverboat casinos entered the market in 1994.

#### **YEAR ATTENDANCE HANDLE**

<b>1990</b>	1.7 million	\$197 million
<b>1991</b>	1.5 million	\$170 million
<b>1992</b>	1.4 million	\$169 million
<b>1993</b>	1.2 million	\$162 million
<b>1994</b>	1.0 million	\$153 million
<b>1995</b>	580,827	\$90 million
<b>1996</b>	395,294	\$75 million
<b>1997</b>	328,659	\$65 million
<b>1998</b>	307,172	\$64.6 million
<b>1999</b>	305,489	\$65.4 million
<b>2000</b>	270,504	\$69.7 million
<b>2001</b>	231,209	\$63.1 million
<b>2002</b>	262,430	\$73.6 million
<b>2003</b>	286,024	\$74.8 million
<b>2004</b>	316,486	\$71.0 million
<b>2005</b>	321,213	\$66.5 million
<b>2006</b>	286,846	\$64.4 million
<b>2007</b>	275,560	\$61.3 million

@ Go to [KansasCity.com](http://KansasCity.com) for

a gallery of photos from

The Woodlands' final days.

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