

## NEW LAW REQUIRES REPORTING

# Daytona Beach kennel club leads state in greyhound deaths

**More than half of deaths came after injuries on the track**

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DAYTONA BEACH — Two-year-old racing greyhound Facebook fell during a late-evening race last May at Daytona Beach Kennel Club & Poker Room.

The fall caused a compound fracture in one of Facebook's legs, and, under the advice of the track's veterinarian, the dog was put to sleep.

Facebook was one of 15 dogs based at the kennel club who died between May 31 and Feb. 17, according to state documents. The Daytona Beach Kennel Club & Poker Room led the state's 12 other kennel clubs in deaths during that period.

Ninety-seven dogs have died statewide since May, when a law that requires tracks to notify the state of dog deaths went into effect.

“This was the first real look into the greyhound racing industry in Florida, and I think there was a lot of public shock that a greyhound is dying every three days (through the end of 2013),” said Carey Theil, executive director of Boston-based GREY2K USA Worldwide, an organization that works to end greyhound racing.

Greyhound racing is not the money-generator it once was. A 2013 study by Spectrum Gaming Group found that the amount wagered on greyhound racing in Florida fell from nearly \$934 million in 1990 to a little more than \$265 million in 2012, even though the number of races run annually only fell slightly over that period. Florida boasts more than half of the remaining 21 greyhound tracks in the nation.

Still, Florida law requires track operators to hold a minimum number of dog races per year for them to run card tables, which are much more lucrative.

Animal activists like Theil argue that by “decoupling” dog racing from card gambling, the racing industry will die a natural death and future greyhound fatalities will be averted. They also want to require tracks to report dog injuries as well as deaths.

Decoupling has supporters on both sides of the aisle in the Florida Legislature, and some tracks, including the Daytona Beach kennel club, are on board, arguing that



News-Journal/JIM TILLER

Greyhounds wipe out during a recent race at the Daytona Beach Kennel Club & Poker Room. Of the 15 deaths reported at the facility between May 31, 2013, and Feb. 17, 2014, eight died from injuries suffered while racing. None of the dogs involved in this incident died, according to kennel club officials.

decoupling will give them greater flexibility in scheduling races.

However, opponents say decoupling would in essence create 13 standalone card rooms across the state and eliminate thousands of jobs supported by the greyhound industry in Florida.

“It would be the greatest expansion of gambling in the state's history,” said Jack Cory, a spokesman for the Florida Greyhound Association. Cory maintains that implementing tougher safety standards for tracks would prevent greyhound deaths.

About 700 greyhounds are based at the Daytona Beach Kennel Club & Poker Room, said manager Dan Francati. The facility has a 550-yard track and nine kennels that are owned by the kennel club but independently operated.

### **'SEE WHAT'S GOING ON'**

At least eight of the 15 greyhound deaths recorded for the Daytona Beach kennel club occurred after the dogs suffered injuries while racing. At least four occurred while the dog was in a kennel or otherwise away from the track. Three death reports don't contain information about where or how the dog died.

Francati said safety conditions at the track are reviewed regularly, including every time a dog dies.

“Our overwhelming concern is the safety of the greyhound,” he said.

Still, some legislators and activists want to know more not only about dogs that die at racing facilities, but also those that are injured.

A pair of bills introduced in the Florida House and Senate would require race tracks to report such injuries to the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, whose Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering oversees greyhound tracks.

“Animals are being hurt in a regulated sport, and we should be able to see what's going on,” said state Rep. David Hood, R-Daytona Beach Shores, who co-sponsored the House bill to require injury reporting.

Francati said he supports injury reporting so long as the industry gets a say in what gets reported and how.

“I don't think there is a lot of opposition to that, as long as the metrics are well-defined,” he said.

Though no bills calling for a full decoupling have been introduced, a general gambling bill introduced in the Senate has provisions that require injury reporting and would lower the number of greyhound races each track is required to run each year to continue their card-gaming business.

Whether any of the bills introduced this year will be put to a vote is still up in the air. The Legislature still has nearly six weeks left in its 2014 session.

“It really is changing by the hour,” Theil said in a telephone interview Tuesday from Tallahassee, where he met with lawmakers. “But there is tremendous momentum for decoupling.”

“I think it would be a good idea to decouple,” said state Sen. John Thrasher, R-St. Augustine, who represents Flagler County and part of Volusia County. “Track owners said they'd still run if they'd decouple, but most people in the business — the greyhound tracks — feel there is more need for flexibility in ... how often they run.”

Francati is one of those people.

“We believe decoupling should come so that we don't have a fixed formula on which to run,” Francati said. “Right now, I don't have any flexibility at all.”

Decoupling came close to becoming reality in 2011 when legislation passed in both the House and Senate but withered after the bodies couldn't reconcile differences in the bills.

### **SAFETY MEASURES URGED**

The 2013 Spectrum report estimated that decoupling would lead to a 40 percent drop in the number of races held annually.

Rich Alvord, 67, and Lollie Bolander, 56, both of Edgewater, took in several races during a Thursday matinée performance at the Daytona Beach kennel club. They go to the races about once a month and sometimes take out-of-town friends to see them. Alvord said he wouldn't want to see fewer races in Daytona Beach, let alone an end to greyhound racing altogether.

“We look forward to coming out,” he said. “This is one of the area's draws, especially for the senior crowd.”

Greyhound association spokesman Cory said death reports are overblown, racing greyhounds are treated well and decoupling would kill an industry that adds \$200 million a year to the Florida economy and employs thousands.

He noted that deaths registered in 2013 constitute less than 1 percent of the approximately 8,000 dogs that race in Florida.

“Half died from accidents on the track,” Cory said of the 2013 deaths, adding that the state should have more stringent standards for track-surface maintenance and lure safety and a requirement to insulate the electrified bar that runs around tracks and powers the mechanical lure.

“That would save the vast majority of the 50 percent that died on the track,” he said. “One premature death of an animal is too many.”

Francati said his track, which was built in 2008, operates with an unusual lure system it installed about two years ago. The system was designed by the track's head of maintenance and is used at only three tracks nationwide, Francati said.

Francati said the lure at the Daytona track doesn't need to be collapsible — as Cory calls for — because it is held over the track by fiberglass, which unlike bars at other tracks, is lightweight and flexible.

Further, the bus bar that powers the lure doesn't need to be insulated because power can be cut quickly by race operators and it sits behind a metal bar that prevents dogs from sliding into it, he said.

“We don't have to insulate it because ... if we see a problem we could instantly cut the electricity,” he said.

“You've got someone who can press a button and instantaneously cut power?” Cory said incredulously upon hearing Francati's claims about the lure system. “Please. That's just magical.”

None of the Daytona Beach greyhound death reports indicate that a dog died by electrocution at the facility.