

Death at the dog track

Greyhounds' electrocution adds to racing controversy

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The mechanical lure that greyhounds chase around a racetrack should be safe. So why are some dogs dying in grisly collisions with this machinery and the electrical wiring that feeds it?

Perhaps these fatalities are deemed too rare -- headlines tend to refer to them as freak accidents -- to drive reforms. But news reports over the past decade indicate they've happened at several dog tracks in Florida and across the nation.

The Sarasota Kennel Club is among them, apparently.

As the Herald-Tribune's Billy Cox reported last weekend, electrocution is the presumed cause of a greyhound death that occurred during a February race there. The month before, another greyhound died during a race; the cause was not determined but electrocution was considered a possibility.

Elsewhere, news reports cite cases in which greyhounds were killed by contact with track wiring or by impact in collisions with the lures.

These deaths are disturbing, in part because they involve equipment to which greyhounds are frequently exposed during their racing careers.

Efforts to improve

Beset by complaints from anti-cruelty activists and by past cases of abuse and neglect of racing dogs, the greyhound industry has made efforts to improve its record. Spokesmen insist that dogs are responsibly treated and that retired greyhounds are now adopted out as much as possible. Yet the sport remains mired in controversy.

Its once sizable audience is dwindling as other gambling opportunities and "entertainment" options multiply.

More than half of the nation's dog tracks have closed. Those remaining get by with the addition of simulcast racing, electronic gambling and other games. In a New York Times report last year, one Florida dog track operator said, "The only time there's a large crowd of people watching dogs is when people get up from the poker tables to smoke."

Down on the track, meanwhile, dogs hurtle through their own game of chance -- a high-speed one in which serious muscle and bone injuries are not uncommon. Often these stem from dogs bumping into each other as they rush around the curves.

While such pileups may be hard to prevent, that should not be the case when it comes to electrocutions and mechanical accidents. Why wouldn't properly designed, operated and maintained equipment eliminate most of these risks?

Dying sport

We urge regulators to closely examine the issue, recommend remedies and make their findings public.

Critics have long sought an end to dog racing, a practice they decry as cruel and exploitive. While it still has its fans (and employees who depend on the paychecks), most of the audience has already departed.

That leaves a sad question lingering in the air: Which dog will be the last to die in a show that nobody's watching?

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