

Dog racing dying with spread of casino gambling

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During the 1960's and 70's, greyhound racing flourished in many states throughout the country.

Cheaper to operate than the larger horse tracks, greyhound facilities in places like Florida, Massachusetts, Arkansas, West Virginia, Alabama, Iowa, Texas, New Hampshire and Arizona were encouraged to extend their race meets to generate more tax dollars through their pari-mutuel wagering systems.



But, that was before the spread of casino gambling.

Now, casinos are feeling the impact of over-abundance while most dog tracks have been shuttered. Lack of attendance and a growing concern over the treatment and health of the animals caused most tracks to close.

In some states, the activity has been banned completely while others, where the tracks have been permitted to install slot machines, have been begging to reduce live racing.

As Isadore Havenick, son of the late Fred Havenick, whose family has operated Flagler Dog Track in Miami, Florida, for decades, said recently, "On a good day we can have 100 people on the stands, and they are mostly smokers who come out from the casino floor."

In just the last two years, wagering on greyhound racing has fallen from almost \$1 billion in 1990 to \$258 million last year in Florida. Most tracks stay open because of the income from slot machines. Where Florida had nearly two dozen dog tracks in the past, barely half that many still survive.

Massachusetts, where hundreds of thousands of dollars were wagered nightly at any of the three tracks – Wonderland in Revere, Raynham and Taunton – a half-century ago, has banned greyhound racing completely, just as some other states have done.

And, in the other seven states where greyhound racing is still conducted, efforts are underway to either reduce the number of operating days or restrict the activity to better protect the racing dogs.

Just recently, Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad signed a bill that will shutter one of the state's two tracks by 2016.

Florida is also the scene of anti-racing efforts. Lawmakers recently elected not to allow the tracks to ditch racing and just continue with their poker and slots operations. Even though the effort failed, supporters believe they will have a strong argument when the matter returns for discussion at the next legislative session.

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