

## Ebro sees 9.6 percent decline // PHOTO GALLERY

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EBRO — Betting on live greyhound racing at the Ebro track has taken a nosedive in the last seven years.

Revenue at Ebro fell by 70 percent during that time and 9.6 percent in the most recent fiscal year, according to numbers released by the state.

But the local track is not alone in its fiscal woes. Across Florida, live greyhound betting revenue fell by 5.8 percent last year, according to data compiled by GREY2K USA, a national nonprofit group opposed to dog racing. And across the country, the situation is no better.

“There’s no question. Nationally, greyhound racing has declined for 19 consecutive years,” said Carey Theil, executive director of GREY2K USA. “And we’ve seen a steady decline in Florida, and I think this is simply an activity that has lost interest with the public.”

In Florida, live greyhound betting fell from \$101.2 million in fiscal year 2011-12 down to \$95.4 million in fiscal year 2012-13. In Ebro, live greyhound betting fell from \$1.9 million in fiscal year 2011-12 to \$1.7 million in fiscal year 2012-13, according to state numbers.

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At the Ebro track, a reduction in racing days led to the decline in revenue, said Stockton Hess, the track’s president and general manager. Casinos in Biloxi, Miss., also continue to siphon off the Panhandle’s gaming revenue, and there’s also a waning interest in dog racing, he said.

### [PHOTO GALLERY](#)

#### **Card room decline**

One way greyhound tracks have offset their losses is with card rooms, and Ebro is no exception. In recent years, though, its card room has seen revenue decline, as well.

Back in fiscal year 2010-11, the card room revenue peaked at \$4.6 million, but in fiscal year 2012-13 it only generated \$3.5 million, a 31.8 percent decrease. (Revenue was \$4.3 million in 2011-12.)

Still, that’s a sizable haul compared with receipts from seven years ago, when the card room only generated \$1.6 million.

The reason for the spike was a change in Florida law in July 2010, Hess said. The change allowed for more hours and higher bets, and coupled with a big tourism rebound in summer 2011, card room revenues shot way up, he said.

“Now we’ve kind of leveled off to where we were,” Hess said.

And it’s likely to plateau.

“There’s always new people with new interest in poker and hopefully we’ll get some increase, but I think it’s going to level off right in there somewhere,” he said.

Hess agreed live racing in all forms is in decline, but he isn’t ready to write its epitaph. On greyhound racing, he said, it’s like classical music — fewer people want to hear it, but it’s not going anywhere.

“I don’t think it’s dying; it’s definitely decreasing across the nation, as well as thoroughbreds,” he said.

Hess and Theil did concur on one thing: Greyhound racing is a slower bet that’s been supplanted by other forms of gambling.

Sticking a coin in a slot machine is far easier than studying a racing program and learning handicapping, Hess said. “People tend to feel more comfortable with a game that’s less involved,” he said.

Hess wants to cash in on those games and has plans for a multimillion-dollar expansion in Ebro, but that will happen only if gaming is allowed to expand in the state, which could be decided in Tallahassee next spring.

### **‘Decoupling’**

Track owners and dog advocates have found common ground in one area — encouraging the Florida Legislature to eliminate “decoupling.” The tracks see it as a way to increase their revenue, while the advocates are confident it will limit races, keeping more greyhounds off the track.

Right now, Florida has a “live-racing mandate,” Theil said, which requires tracks to run a certain number of races in order to operate a card room. Many say the mandate’s only propping up the live races.

That’s why both sides want to “decouple” — or remove — live-racing requirements for card rooms.

Theil called the rule “ridiculous” and said his group will continue fighting to eliminate it.

Hess said he supports decoupling and wants the option to hold as few race days as he likes. He said it was impossible to know whether he’d take advantage of a rule change, but he wants the choice.

All eyes will be on gaming when the Florida Legislature reconvenes next year. Senate President Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, has repeatedly shown interest in passing a comprehensive gaming bill, and the Legislature has commissioned a nearly \$390,000 study to study its impacts on the state.

“When decoupling passes, you will see a slow, gradual wind down of the industry. I don’t think it will happen overnight; I don’t think it will happen in a few years. I think it will happen over a decade or more,” Theil said.

But Theil made no bones about the fact that he thinks dog racing is dying — and believes that’s a “humane change.”

“This is greyhound racing going the way of eight tracks,” he said.

Hess disagrees with the notion greyhounds are mistreated in the industry. After a 2010 incident in which 32 greyhounds died of starvation and dehydration at the hands of owner and trainer Ronald “Ronnie” Williams, track officials said they were investigating policies for off-season kennel inspections to prevent neglect.

The Washington County man was later sentenced to five years in prison for his crimes.

"I think most people understand these dogs are well taken care of, and they're the owners' bread and butter," Hess said last week. "They treat them ... as good as they can."

#### **'Treading water'**

Theil said some tracks are "treading water," such as one in the Naples area, which only saw a 1.3 percent decline in live greyhound betting, but others show "staggering" decreases. Live betting fell in Jacksonville by 12 percent, in Miami (at the Flagler track) by 20 percent, in Pensacola by 18.46 percent and in Melbourne by 28.17 percent.

"Those are precipitous declines that clearly are not sustainable in any kind of long-term way," Theil said.

Falling revenue hurts everyone, including the dogs, Theil said. His group is now more concerned than ever that there won't be enough money to properly care for the dogs.

"These numbers, to us, give us a renewed urgency to fight for greyhound decoupling and to fight for stronger (greyhound) welfare provisions," he said. "Clearly there's less money available than ever before in the Florida dog racing industry, and that means that everyone is going to suffer."