

# Sun Sentinel

## State sanctions at dog tracks lack real bite

By Sun Sentinel Editorial Board

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If ever there were a reason to reform Florida's dog tracks, look no further than the case of Osman Martinez, an ex-dog trainer sanctioned for abusing dogs in his care, yet who was allowed to continue working with — and abusing — greyhounds.

The state Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering has the authority to suspend or revoke occupational licenses of dog-track employees and owners who have abused greyhounds or have felony convictions. But a disturbing report by the Miami Herald and Tampa Bay Times found that when greyhounds are abused or neglected, it takes years for the state to take action or impose penalties.

In the last year, the report found that "state regulators have granted 80 occupational licenses to owners and trainers who have been convicted of a host of crimes — from cocaine, heroin and amphetamine possession, to assault and battery."

This finding comes on top of a previous Herald report that found that every three days, a racing greyhound dies in Florida.

Still, Florida lawmakers sit on their hands. They refuse to fast-track reforms in the dying sport of dog racing, which has gotten caught up in the politics of comprehensive gambling reform.

Until change happens, we'll continue to hear stories like that of Martinez, who according to state records, was charged with felony cruelty to animals in 2009. He was working at the Palm Beach Kennel Club in West Palm Beach at the time. When he accepted a plea deal, his dog-racing career should have come to an abrupt end. It didn't.

Though banned in August 2011 from working at any pari-mutuel, Martinez continued to do so. The following June, after a greyhound tested positive for the drug Flunixin, the state imposed a fine against him. Three months later, he finally surrendered his license and applied for a kennel helper's license. At last, the state turned him down.

Florida remains America's dog track epicenter. It is one of only seven states that continues to allow greyhound racing, a once popular pastime that is now outlawed in most states.

Twelve of the nation's 21 dog tracks are in Florida. Only three make money from dog races, according to the study by Spectrum Gaming Group, which found revenue from dog races had dropped 67 percent between 1990 and 2012.

Division officials insist discipline delays are necessary to provide due process to the accused. The agency contends it has reduced its caseload since reorganizing its legal office and hiring an additional attorney. Still, that's small comfort given the scope of the festering problem.

The usual response — give state regulators more resources — may be a bigger waste of taxpayers' money than provide any real benefit. The last thing Florida needs is a bigger government bureaucracy to regulate an increasingly unpopular and unprofitable sport.

A better fix is to change state law so that dog tracks are no longer required to hold a fixed number of dog races if they also want to operate more-lucrative poker rooms, which is where the real action is these days.

The change would allow track owners to curb dog abuse and let an unpopular and unprofitable pastime finally die a natural death.

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