



Greyhound Injuries May Have To Be Reported in Florida

by Kristina Ramer
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After each race at the Sanford Orlando Kennel Club, the dogs are led to a shallow pool to cool off. Kristina Ramer / WUFT News

At the Sanford Orlando Kennel Club in Longwood, eight greyhounds strain at their leashes as handlers lead them onto the track and into the starting gates. The dogs bark, but when the familiar electronic whirring starts, the dogs fall silent. They are ready to race.

The gates release, and the lure spins around the track. All eight greyhounds sprint after it for one lap and then two.

In just 30 seconds, the race is over. Greyhounds can reach up to 45 miles per hour in those 30 seconds and injuries at that speed can be deadly.

[For the third session in a row](#), the Florida Senate will consider legislation that requires greyhound injuries to be reported to the Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering.

Florida Senator Eleanor Sobel introduced the bill under [SB412 for the 2016 session](#). Sobel said she hopes legislation requiring injury reporting will help save the lives of these greyhounds.

"It's more accountability for the physical health of the greyhounds," she said.

Sobel, who serves as chair on the senate's Committee on Children, Families, and Elder Affairs, said the issue strikes a chord with Floridians.

"More people have stopped me about the greyhounds than about my changes to child welfare," she said.

Florida and Alabama are the only states that do not report injuries to the public, said Carey Theil, executive director of greyhound advocacy group GREY2K USA. Though greyhound racing has been outlawed in 39 states, there are still 21 tracks in operation in seven states across the country. Of those, Florida is home to 12 tracks.

Though a 2013 law requires racing greyhound deaths to be reported, he said injury reporting would provide the dogs with an additional level of protection.

"When we have passed this provision in other states, we've seen the numbers of greyhounds that are killed decrease," Theil said. "And we've seen the number of greyhounds adopted increase."

In the last Florida Senate session, greyhound injury reporting passed unanimously with all 40 senators co-sponsoring the bill; the bill failed to become law when time constraints prevented the House from voting.

It had trouble gaining traction in previous sessions because some officials were reluctant to legislate greyhound racing without addressing other outstanding gambling questions, Theil said.

But he said the need for the legislation is as important as ever. Earlier this year, GREY2K USA partnered with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to release the [first national report on greyhound racing injuries](#).

The report documented more than 10,000 greyhound injuries nationwide since 2008. Projecting those numbers on Florida would suggest similar injury rates, Theil said.

Though injury reporting standards vary from state to state, the proposed legislation wouldn't require new recordkeeping but would ask Florida racetracks to share the injury data they already have, Theil said.

"We feel strongly that there's a relationship between transparency in this industry and animal welfare," he said.

Mike Newlin, general manager of the Sanford Orlando Kennel Club, said injury reporting doesn't necessarily address the issue of safer racetracks.

Greyhound racing is a highly regulated activity, Newlin said.

In addition to preserving the integrity of the races, the law provides oversight for the dogs' wellbeing. A veterinarian must be on duty whenever a greyhound is on the racetrack, whether for an

actual race or for training. A state investigator visits three to four times per week to inspect the condition of the track and kennel.

The SOKC itself has three main components of creating safe racing conditions, he said.

First is the floor of the racetrack itself, which is a combination of soft sand and Florida clay to provide cushion while the dogs run. The track is graded to keep every turn at the proper angle and is re-groomed after every race.

The second safety component is a bottom safety rail around the inside of the track, which prevents the dogs from any contact with the electrical rail that runs the lure.

Lastly, the SOKC was the second track in Florida to install a breakaway lure. If a greyhound begins to go the wrong way on a track after a fall, it can be seriously injured by the quick-moving lure. With a breakaway lure, a track official uses a remote control to instantly take the lure off the racetrack. Neither the safety rail nor the breakaway lure are required under Florida law.

“We’ve taken greyhound safety and greyhound welfare very seriously,” Newlin said.

With about 640 dogs in its kennel, the racetrack has almost 40,000 starts per year. Since required reporting for greyhound deaths began in 2013, the SOKC has had 12 deaths. Eight were in 2013 when the kennel had several dogs afflicted with seizures. Three dogs were euthanized in 2014, and one has been euthanized in 2015.

While euthanasia is necessary in some cases, the kennel has a policy to try to save every dog, Newlin said. Broken legs and other major non-fatal injuries will be treated.

Each dog races about once per week in addition to training and schooling, Newlin said. When the dogs are not at the track, they live in a kennel where they are taken outside five times per day for about 40 minutes each time to relieve themselves, play with toys and socialize with other dogs.

“This is an athlete that you want to give the best food to, you want to give the best care you possibly can to so they operate and they race at a high level. If they race well, that’s how the trainers and the owners make their money,” Newlin said.

If a dog’s injuries prevent it from returning to racing or if it is simply no longer fast enough to be competitive, it goes into an adoption program. The SOKC works with five different greyhound adoption organizations, and in 2014, it contributed \$55,000 to help place 768 retired racers in new homes.

Veterinarian Robert Rill of University Animal Clinic in Bradenton spent about 18 years helping to ready retired racers for new homes through a partnership with a greyhound adoption agency. The most common injury to racing greyhounds is on the right hock, which is akin to a human ankle, he said.

“They basically take most of the force on the right hind leg as they go around the turns,” he said. “If they’re running and they get bumped by another dog, the forces just put too much stress on the outer leg.”

While good safety measures can prevent injuries, Rill said some accidents are just part of racing.

“There’s going to be injuries with any kind of performance race, whether it’s human, horse, dog, whatever,” he said. “That’s just inherent with the competition in any sport.”